

SURVIVING FEAR

NARRATIVES OF LOSS AND RECOVERY ON INDIAN PARTITION¹

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Abstract. Surviving Fear. Narratives of Loss and Recovery on Indian Partition

The essay explores the traumatic events of Indian Partition through the reading of some novels and short stories by Indian and Pakistani writers in English like Kushwant Singh, Sadaat Manto, Anita Desai and Amitav Ghosh.

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For the Indian subcontinent, 1947 represents the shift from the historical period of Imperialism to another epoch in which two newborn countries made their entrance on the international community of nations: India and Pakistan. Between 1945 and 1947 episodes of an incredible violence spread over the Indian territories: the end of the Second World War led to radical changes in the Raj positions towards India. There was an urgent need to transfer government structures to local powers, the British Crown could no longer afford its political dominion over this vast territory and the Congress Leadership, once released from the several imprisonments, contributed to increase the

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number of rebellions and insurgencies that broke out either in the rural areas and in the cities, in order to call new elections very rapidly.

Since the first decades of the 20th century, the political debate in India had been focused on national liberation, but in the 1930' and 1940's, the Muslim League had advanced on the idea of an independent state for all the Muslims of India, a territory which was given the name of Pakistan, "the pure land", located in the North-Western part of the subcontinent. The slogan "Pakistan for Independence" started to represent a call for a free state on the borders of the new Hindu nation that was going to be politically constructed.

Gyanendra Pandey clearly sums up in the following quotation the complexity of Muslim demands and the tensions between Jinnah's league and the Congress' politics, mostly dominated by Hindus and Sikhs.

The goal of Pakistan (the "Pure Land") was seen as the "Muslim" answer to "Hindu oppression" and "Hindu capitalism". In the climatic years of 1946 and 1947, the League campaigned energetically against the "*banja*" (trading, money landing, interest-gathering and, in that sense, fundamentally un-Islamic) Congress and its *banja* leader (Gandhi)²

Jinnah firmly believed that, together with the coming of Independence, Muslim population would have been given a subaltern position in relation to the Hindu majority; therefore, it became necessary to speak about a distinguished Muslim nation, with its own territory, religion, cultural and social structures.

In the 1940's, there was a lack of influence of the Gandhian vision on politics and society which had been mainly caused by the rising conflicts between Muslims and Hindu nationalist projects. Gandhi's idea of "indianness" as a pluralist and plural identity and his faith in everyday

²G. Pandey, *Remembering Partition. Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 28.

tolerance among people was being discredited by the increasing violence and nevertheless by the politics of “divide and rule” that still characterized the actions of the British Raj.

Gandhi never separated religion and politics and he called for a kind of patriotism which was not linked to Hindu nationalism, but to a pan-Indian sensibility aimed at creating a self-producing and strongly moralizing community. “Both India and Pakistan are my country” – Gandhi insisted as Partition approached. “I’m not going to take a passport for going to Pakistan”.

Despite the Mahatma and Nehru’s unifying visions, it became impossible to contain the first signs of separation in 1946, when an important agreement, which had been so hard to reach, between the Congress and the Muslim League, was broken and, from that moment onward, a series of violent attacks, killings and blood riots spread in different parts of the subcontinent. Pandey writes that in July 1947 the Pakistan Times reported on its front page the following statement “Unfair Partition will breed civil war”.

The events of August provided the final, deadly push. The confusion and violence of that long-awaited month and the growing (and, for many, sudden) realisation that Pakistan was not going to be the panacea for all the ills of the Muslims – indeed that those Muslims who lived far away from the new Muslim state were now in greater danger than before – led to something like a civil war³.

The celebrations for Independence from the British Rule were followed by the emigration of entire communities and villages from one area to another across the subcontinent. Muslims had to move to the north-western territories, whereas Hindu and Sikhs had to leave the land that was now called Pakistan, in which they had lived for centuries.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

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People used or were forced to use the trains for such painful and often nightmarish journeys. Train has become, in the course of time, the symbol of those ferocious and violent “passages”, either within the subcontinent and in the heart of society, provoking a deep sorrow that does not seem to have healed, even nowadays.

Partition marked a profound redefinition of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus: all these communities have been, in turn, considered as “unfaithful, murderous, anti-national, fascist and since 1947, men, women, children of different religions, castes, cultural and linguistic backgrounds have been defined on the basis of their Hindu-ness, Muslim-ness, Sikh-ness.

It is now evident that the violence of Partition caused the death of almost two millions of people and historians do not hesitate to define it in terms of a genocide. So, the two nations of India and Pakistan emerged onto the world scene carrying the shame of an extremely painful birth, characterized by death and horror, and those who have narrated the first years of national life of the independent states have often chosen to affront such a burning issue, in order to keep the memory alive and to make people remember the horror of a very recent past.

Individuals, families, communities have had to struggle for overcoming the fears, for gradually reconstructing hope and faith in new stories, in new memories. Narrating the facts of Partition has produced the awareness of how Indian and Pakistani identities have been reshaped after Independence. Although the novels written in English before 1947 by Indian writers are focused mostly on tragic events, on the riots between the colonial police and the villagers in the country side (let us only think, for example, of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*), what emerges, in any case, is a profound dynamism and an attitude towards hope in the future, in the freedom for India. On the contrary, the so-called “Partition

Novels”, the literary trend emerging during 1950’s and 1960’s, are narratives that inevitably convey a dark aura of terror, of inhuman ferocity, madness, betrayals in such effective and disturbing ways that no space is left for illusions and optimism in national life.

Some remarkable examples exploring these issues are to be found in the novels by Khushwant Singh, *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, published in 1961, and the short stories by Sadat Hasaan Manto, of which the one entitled “Toba Tek Singh” stands out as a true literary masterpiece. In all these works, the passage of trains, the dispersion of people and the loss of parents and relatives are sometimes presented in a schematic and blood-curdling imagery, with the aim of expressing the total sense of loss and degeneration, of the reign of terror that prevailed over those years.

The very beginning of Khushwant Singh’s novel, just like a history book, openly defines the serious situation of the time:

The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins. Some of them had good reasons to feel that they had sinned . (...) Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. (..) By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in fight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding. The only remaining oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra⁴.

⁴K. Singh, *Train to Pakistan*, New York, Grove Press, 1956, pp. 1-2.

Mano Majra is a symbolic place representing a possible oasis of “untouchability” in relation to the troubles of Partition. However, it soon becomes involved in the tragedy of History and sadly transforms into a fragmented community, another victim of division and self-destruction. The trains going back and forth from Pakistan are full of corpses, they cross a border which was established artificially and so continually is soiled with blood and death; it is a border that horrifies those who often cannot even cross it and are stopped halfway by police or terrorist groups.

If the balances of an entire village are broken, this is the consequence of the fragmentation of single families, in which the members have to decide whether to move or not to another country, often meaning the destruction of the family’s unity.

In fact, the literary critic Harish Trivedi analyses Attia Hosain’s novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Colum*, using the expression “fragmenting nations and lives”, in order to identify the strict relation between the imagined community of political structures, official borders and territory with its inhabitants, those who have to deal with the changes that can condition their lives forever. Hosain uses autobiographical material to narrate the life of an extended family in Lucknow from the Gandhian movement in the 1930’s until the post-independence period. Laila is the protagonist of the story; she is a Muslim who refuses to emigrate to Pakistan with her family and, therefore, has to deal with the situation of finding herself in a minority group within India in those crucial years. As Harish Trivedi puts it: “She survives the terrible years of Partition, when the family is divided much the way the country was, so in that retrospect Hosain is

able to offer a hope for sanity that is particularly relevant to the troubled relations between India and Pakistan today”⁵.

The problem of identity clearly emerges and can be considered as one of the most relevant issues that writers have explored in the works about Partition and post-independent India. The place in which one chooses to stay is linked to the identity that people want to preserve and the complexity of a choice of this kind is related to the difficult realization of cultural politics of belonging. The hope for sanity that emerges from Laila’s story cannot be found in the striking short story written by Manto, “Toba Tek Singh”, which opens with an account of a displacement and a search for identity:

A couple of years after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India. Whether this was reasonable or an unreasonable idea is difficult to say. One thing, however, is clear. It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to this decision⁶.

In an atmosphere in which irony, tragedy and grotesque merge, Bishan Singh, one of the lunatics who have to be moved to India, is determined to know where his native village is located, Toba Tek Singh. Nobody can give him an answer, the village may be on the border between India and Pakistan, but Singh keeps insisting so much that

⁵H. Trivedi, *Fragmenting Nations and Lives: “Sunlight on a Broken Column”*, in H. Trivedi, , R. Allen, (eds), *Literature and Nation. Britain and India 1800-1990*, cit. pp. 121-138.

⁶S. H. Manto, *Toba Tek Singh*, in Id., *Mottled Dawn. Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1997 (translated from Urdu by Khalin Hasan), p.1. Another important collection of stories on Partition is Bhalla, A., (ed.by), *Stories about the Partition of India*, Delhi, HarperCollins, 1994.

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people start calling him by the village's name. In some way, that is the place where the man wants to go back to, the Pakistani Punjab that he won't be able to see ever again. In the end, he hotly refuses to be taken away and when the assistants try to make him cross the border, Singh opposes with all his strength and is left alone in that symbolic no man's land.

There, behind barbed wire, on the side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh⁷.

The border becomes a physical space that is the expression of historical contradictions and arbitrary decisions. To inhabit it is to create a hybrid, suspended identity that is the product of the postcolonial chaos of our contemporary times. The madness of the lunatics seems to contrast with the real insanity of those who have decided the transfers of people and have killed in the name of national purity and ethnic separations. Anyway, the nations confronting each other on the border line, with Bishan Singh at the centre, reflect the impossibility of a total partition, because the newly created borders clash with the millenary tradition of exchanges and cultural relations that cannot be erased from history in such a short time. Therefore, historical facts need to be recorded and the recent past comes to be vital in the telling of stories, especially in the understanding and elaboration of a present that is still defining itself.

As Anita Desai writes in the introduction to Hosain's novel:

In India the past never disappears. It does not even become transformed into a ghost. Concrete, physical, palpable – it is present everywhere.

⁷*Ibidem*, p. 10.

Ruins, monuments, litter the streets, hold up the traffic, create strange islands in the modernity of cities⁸.

This reflection could lead us to consider many other interesting works that, especially in the 1980's, went back to that recent past and chose Memory as the instrument for investigating a sort of national entity which is made up of different ideas of *indianness*. As P.S.Ravi comments: «the writers of the eighties show that suffering did not end with the coming of freedom. The new novel with its innovativeness enables the post-Independence generation to imaginatively re-live that horrendous experience»⁹.

Writers like Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upamanju Chatterjee and many others find it necessary to make “haunting returns” to explore problematics related to the end of Imperialism, the crisis of colonial power, both from a national and public perspective and a more private, personal one. One remarkable example that we would like to cite before concluding this paper is the much acclaimed novel by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, written in 1988. The narrator-protagonist recall his family's story from the years before Independence until the early 1980's and the story is suspended between India, Bangladesh and England. His grandmother's Hindu family had moved from Dhaka to Calcutta in order to reach safety before Partition, but some members of the family had decided to stay and the Partition, of course, like in Attia Hosain's novel, caused a painful family separation. When his aunt and cousin, in the 1960's went back to Dhaka to visit an old uncle, they tried to persuade him to go to India with them, especially because he was not well and could not take care for himself. However, the man firmly said:

⁸A. Desai, *Introduction*, in Hosain, A., *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, London, Penguin Books, 1985, p. 1.

⁹ P.S. Ravi, *Modern Indian Fiction*, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 2003, p. 41.

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I know everything. I understand everything. Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? No one will have you anywhere. As for me, I was born here, and I'll die here¹⁰.

Remembering Partition, trains appear again as symbols of loss and fear and the abandoning of one's native place. The uncle reminds us of Toba Tek Singh and India-Shindia can be associated with those places in which the events of History have created so much upheaval. As with Manto's character, the narrator's uncle does not believe that there can be another safe place to go, he has his own sense of "locatedness" and does not want to lose it at all.

Ghosh presents in the novel a microcosm of people who continually cross the shadow lines of frontiers, identities and memory, in order to reassemble the pieces of a past that can provide explanations for many unresolved questions of the present. His search for the truth of his cousin's death in Dhaka in the riots of 1964, brings him to London and the lines of memory give him the opportunity to uncover his family's history since the time of Partition.

In London, the narrator does not perceive a sense of liberty, and this is because his identity, which has been constructed with difficulty, is subject to another re-definition in the British metropolis: he is circumscribed within the parameters of a peripheral, displaced, non-western subject. India had been remapped and renamed both by the Raj dominion and after Independence and Partition, when it was necessary to produce a "locatedness" that has given rise, instead, to geopolitical

¹⁰A. Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, London, Bloomsbury, 1988, p. 211.

disasters. In London, the protagonist affirms that he will consider himself free only when the imagination of every Indian is able to act without impositions and cross-cultural, political and linguistic frontiers maintaining his/her strong cultural roots and traditions.

Thus, Tridib's character, in the words of Someshwar Sati, represents, "an ideal form of existence, a world beyond nation", and "interrogates the processes through which a sense of national identity is constructed. The construction of the sense of a national identity is the result of a dual dynamics – one which is homogenising and the other which is differentiating"¹¹. Ghosh is strongly interested in the exploration of such dynamics, but the vision of a socially and politically fragmented India appeared to him even more clearly after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the event that inspired the writing of *The Shadow Lines*. Moreover, the narrator's non-linear movement across time and space not only constitutes a narrative strategy, but, as Sheila Mani argues: "It serves to emphasize a central theme of the novel – that the line dividing past and present is only a shadow, that the past lives in the present and that the present is shaped by the past or, as the novel puts it, "the past is concurrent with the present"¹². Those lines, which should have set

¹¹S. Sati, *Interrogating the Nation, Growing Global, in The Shadow Lines*", in Chowdary, A., (ed. by), *Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines*, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, p. 52. In the volume edited by Chowdary, Alka Kumar's essay, *Nation as Identity in "The Shadow Lines"*, investigates the way Ghosh's novel expresses the representation and discussion of the nation's question. In particular, Kumar concentrates around the character of Tha'mma, and the manifestations of "communalism" in post-independence India. All the contradictions related to the term "nation" are projected into the novel's complex structure. Kumar concludes: «*The Shadow Lines* interrogates complex themes like political conflict, national identity, and cultural dislocation – through the use of memory, nostalgia, multiple subjectivities and overlapping stories. As for the historical contradictions that must of necessity mark the biography of the nation, they are projected through the highly nuanced and multi-layered metaphor of the shadow lines», p. 69.

¹²K. R. S Mani, *Chronology, Character and Point of View in "The Shadow Lines"*, in Bhatt, I., Nityanandam, I. (eds), *The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*, New Delhi, Creative Books, 2001, p. 74.

people free, have turned into ambiguous and uncertain borders whose official character seems to be confused, subject to various re-definitions.

The shadow lines are also the border zones between reality and imagination, memory and history, because, as Silvia Albertazzi sustains: «since reality is not only a matter of physicality and chronology, in the same way imagination can – and must – deal with everyday things and historical deeds»¹³.

John Thieme adds another important consideration to this question, writing that the shadow lines are something more than the simple borders instituted by politicians: “they are the lines of demarcation that separate colonized and colonizer, present and past, self and image. Ultimately, they are the signifying acts that construct notions of discrete identity and it is one of the triumphs of Ghosh’s brilliant novel that it is able to locate the experience of Partition as a very specific Bengali problem, as a more general South Asian phenomenon *and* as an aspect of human linguistic and psychological experience more generally”¹⁴.

In his essay Thieme reminds us the way in which the novel expresses the impossibility to come to a self-definition, to the so-called “oneness”, and uses the metaphor of the looking-glass border to express this concept more clearly. The narrator, standing in front of the mirror, realizes that every time he does so, he cannot be the same person as before and this has to do with something much present within Indian identity: in India sudden terrible events can upset people’s lives in a short time, generating fear, changes, divisions and conflicts. Since he was child, the narrator has witnessed episodes of communalism that have deeply

¹³S. Albertazzi, *Crossing the Shadow Lines*, in Haskell, D., e Shapiro R., *Interactions. Essays on the Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific Region*, Perth, University of Western Australia Press, 2000, p. 136.

¹⁴J. Thieme, , *Passages to England*, in D’haen, T., and Bertens, H., *Liminal Postmodernisms. The Postmodern, the (Post-) Colonial, and the (Post-) Feminist*, Amsterdam - Atlanta, Rodopi, 1994, pp.65-66.

influenced his life and India's postcolonial condition. As he affirms, thinking of those frightening moments:

It is a fear that comes of the knowledge that normalcy is utterly contingent, that the spaces that surround one, the streets that one inhabits, can become, suddenly and without warning as hostile as a desert in a flash flood. It is this that sets apart the thousand million of people who inhabit the subcontinent from the rest of the world – not language, not food, not music – it is the special quality of loneliness that grows out of the fear of the war between oneself and one's image in the mirror¹⁵.

As far as this is concerned, Ghosh proposes a way of surviving fear that concentrates around the construction of a “human cosmopolitanism”, a concept that emerges from all his outstanding fiction and non fiction works. He seems to have considered an important statement made by Edward Said:

Moving beyond nativism does not mean abandoning nationality, but it does not mean thinking of local identity as not exhaustive, and therefore not being anxious to confine oneself to one's own sphere, with its ceremonies of belonging, its built-in chauvinism, and its limiting sense of security¹⁶.

While travelling throughout the East, from Egypt to Malaysia, moving the centre in relation to the Western world, he has surprisingly narrated people's stories and lives trying to find connections and cultural relations between them, in order to made us think of the world as a network of

¹⁵A. Ghosh, *The Shadow cit.*, p. 200.

¹⁶E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, A. Knopf, 1993, p.277.

human beings with their defined identities, but open to a confrontation of their emotions, desires and traditions.

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