

ISSN: 0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

BI-MONTHLY REFEREED AND INDEXED, OPEN ACCESS E-JOURNAL

*The Criterion*



October 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-5

*5th Year of Open Access*



Editor-In-Chief  
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor  
Mrs. Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

## “Your History Comes in the Way of My Memory”: An Inside Memory; Outside History Counter-Narrative of Partition

Manjinder Kaur Wratch

### Abstract:

This article endeavours at recovering a syncretic national past vis-a-vis Partition's oral and fictional narratives, with each of the selected narratives reinventing the nation in its own way. And though memory, at one level, involves mourning and fantasising the lost world, in these narratives, the return to past is firmly grounded in the desire to give meaning to the present. Mourning which, seeks healing the bruised self and nation, is not mourning without possibilities. This article will also discuss how Partition narratives bear witness to the tremendous sufferings of common people, unravel reasons for the fratricidal hates and find explanations for the untoward communal incidents of the present. These narratives draw our attention to the need of rethinking about the continued aftermath of partition that categorises and separates us till today.

**Keywords:** Partition, Oral-Narratives, Underside History/ History from below, Sectarian Forces, Collective Unconscious, Self- Consciously Accommodating Communities.

### I

Historians and anthropologists have stated the impossibility of writing objectively the history of an event involving genocidal violence. Partition of British India in 1947 was such a moment of rupture and genocidal violence. The historians' history is limited to Partition being a new constitutional and political arrangement which left undistorted the broad contours of the history of the Indian subcontinent. Official history has denied the barbaric violence of its eventfulness, the history of Partition is seen as something of an intrusion, an aberration and a deviation from the triumphal narratives of independence in an erstwhile colonised nation. Historians' history rather than producing the truth of the traumatic genocidal violence of Partition, elides it. Certainly there is a chasm between historians' history of Partition and the survivors' accounts of Partition. The survivors' accounts appear to manifest this event as an event “that amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history” (Pandey 7). But the survivors' records of Partition are fragmentary, incomprehensible and laden with silences. Memories may be in fragments, but even as fragments the tellings coming from the margins are revealing because in these narratives lie the voices from the margins, from the people who suffered, staggered and yet stood up to live life. And, as Urvashi Butalia asserts in *The Other Side of Silence*, “there is an underside of the history of Partition, which can be dug out through individual and collective memories- not of the big players like the political leaders, but of the smaller, often invisible players: ordinary people” (Butalia 9).

As the ‘small voice of underside history’ hidden in these narratives is now in greater danger than ever before of being swept away by amnesia, or forgetting at one hand and globalisation and its attendant disciplines on another (Pandey 203). This article aims to address how oral narratives and fiction on Partition initiates the cycle of nation's freedom from communal violence and religious ghettoisation by filling in the gap of love lost in the margins of history and memory.

These Partition narratives reveal the efforts of ordinary citizens to bring to a close the cycle of retaliation and vengeance. As Butalia says that it is essential to remember the Partition because “unlocking memory and remembering is an essential part of beginning the

process of resolving” (Butalia 358). It is an attempt to put different bits of truth together through selection and distancing, selection brings in view cloaked precedents of unsung and uncelebrated bonding shared by the apparently antagonistic and warring communities. While distancing helps in purging off the immediacy and frenzy associated with violent mishaps. Together they function towards searching the lost one-ness of the nation.

Historians have often argued that if history was the subject, why is there a need of approaching the Partition of the Indian sub-continent through creative writing and oral narratives. Literature is writing about what remains otherwise unexpressed ; the agony, the pain, the collective unconscious, the desolate realities, the hidden woes and the indelible imprints of tragic events on human life. Literature acts by questioning the irrevocability of history through re-interpretation.

Literature, an imaginative investment and a form of art can work as a means to break the barriers created by a painful past and give voice to the silences. Partition literature has been more effective at capturing the tragedy of the event than any historian’s account. In his anthology of Partition-related writings, *Inventing Boundaries*, Mushirul Hasan echoes this formulation in his introduction:

...literary narratives, whether in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali or Punjabi, are an eloquent witness to ‘an unspeakable and inarticulatable history.’ Evoking the sufferings of the innocent, whose pain is more universal and ultimately a vehicle of more honest reconciliation than political discourse, they provide a framework for developing an alternative discourse on inter-community relations. (Hasan 40)

Krishna Sobti in an article, “Some Thoughts on Writing, Partition and *Zindaginama*,” insinuates that a writer must know the difference between official history and ‘history from below.’ She doesn’t negate the ideological function of history but fears the so-called ‘purification of history’ at the hands of political parties to meet their own agendas:

There is a history that is preserved in the archives and there is also a history from below. That too is history which is located through the people who have lived through the passage of times, in the era that official history talks of. The archival papers, accounts and official reports are official establishment versions of the happenings but sources beyond these are also immensely valuable. The common people who live through a certain age are also witness to the passage of history. This is what is meant by the history from below. A historian can record the collective memory and consciousness of these people. (Jain 25)

Sobti has a word of caution for our politicians, and political parties. She warns them not to exaggerate and overplay the hatred and violence as it is not going to benefit the mankind on the whole. True that there are cases of constant violence, conflicts and tensions from moment to moment in the world but our common heritage of plurality and oneness, irrespective of different religions, beliefs and faiths engages us in an unending endeavour to live in peace and prosperity (25).

Alok Bhalla makes a plea in the preface to his book, *Partition Dialogues* that Partition fictional narratives should be read, not as raw materials for the writing of history but should be placed beside historical accounts, political documents, police reports, religious pamphlets, or personal memoirs:

Rarely do fictional texts and oral-histories concerned with India’s Partition speak about abstract entities called Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs whose economic and social rights needed to be legally and politically defined, and whose religiously informed identities needed, as if they were some endangered species, special enclaves of protection from other religious predators....Instead, Partition narratives give a human shape and a human voice....They are important witnesses to and chronicles of a sad time when a stable



of a long duration of shared songs, stories and rituals. Paddling off the “the porcelain waves” of hatred with hearts full of love and compassion is strong enough to sustain all such disturbances that sometimes threaten the peace of every civil society. It is important to note that there is enough love, hope and bonhomie in the personal experiences of life in pre-Partition India and thereafter recorded by the novelists and oral-historians, rendering bare the reality that, by and large, people lived and want to live in viable, integrated, and meaning-making communities questioning the grand narratives of history and challenging the sectarian forces at work. A secure and viable culture is not dependent, as Jerome Butler tells us in his work, *Acts of Meaning*, on arriving at a consensus or achieving reconciliation among conflicting versions of reality. An integrated society, self-consciously asserts that different claims of truth demand our attentive consideration and not our scorn and rejection. It can prevent our particular beliefs from hardening into sectarian certainties making space for peace to prevail (qtd.in Bhalla 44).

## II

In an attempt to study the personal rather than the political memory of 1947 that lies buried in the hearts of people whose lives were disrupted in the name of an abstract boundary, the present study will focus on the book, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* authored by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin. The chosen work provides the testimonies and memories of women caught in the turmoil of the times of Partition of 1947. Interviews with women – survivors, social workers, government functionaries form the crux of the book. The directness of experience is the subject of ‘oral history,’ a branch of historical research that relies not on the usual written accounts but exclusively on memories extracted orally from people. As discussed earlier, the historical picture that emerges from these recollections and anecdotes is a “history of the everyday” or “history from below.” In an important chapter titled ‘Belonging,’ Menon states how for a vast majority of people country is always thought of as a place “where they were born and where they would like to die” (229). She further elaborates how during the vivisection of the Indian subcontinent, suddenly one’s place of birth was horribly at odds with one’s nationality. After being uprooted and relocated, how people felt no attachment to the new place now called country. A poignant extract from Ismat Chughtai’s masterpiece “Roots” bears allegiance to the above sentiments: Own country? Of what feather is that bird? And tell me, good people, where does one find it? The place one is born in? That soil which has nurtured us, if that is not our country, can an abode of a few days hope to be it? And then, who knows we could be pushed out of there, too, and told to find a new home, a new country. I’m at the end of my life. One last flutter and there’ll be no more quarrelling about Countries. And then, all this uprooting and resettling doesn’t even amuse any more. Time was, the Mughals left their country and came to create a new one here. Now you want to pick up and start again. Is it a country or an uncomfortable shoe? If it pinches, exchange it for another! (*Borders and Boundaries* 228)

Menon further states how a large number of people chose fidelity to place rather than to religious community: they converted and remained where they were. Taran, a Sikh woman interviewed on the above issue was of the view that during such causalities, “we must oppose with violence if necessary” but reiterated firmly that if women were to write history “men would realise how important it is to be peaceful” (230).

The three real stories selected for the present paper are titled as “No going back,” “Where is my country?” and “The Lucknow Sisters: ‘Insecure, yes. Unsettled, no,’” speak about how women in these real stories namely Kamila, Taran and the unnamed Lucknow sisters respectively relearn their roles in a “new” country. (Not their real names, names withheld by the authors at their request)



Kamila of “No going back,” never thought that she was a Hindu or a Sikh returning to a Muslim husband in Pakistan. She just thought she was a wife returning to her husband. Fidelity to a relation was more important than fidelity to a religion. In a similar vein, Kamila’s Muslim ayah chose to stay back in India because she had married a Hindu cook here. When Pakistan was created in 1947, Kamila was determined to return back to her husband in Pakistan with her three months old baby. Getting back to Lahore was a Herculean task in those days of turmoil; there were heavy bookings on trains and planes, with as many as fourteen thousand people waiting to get onto flights to Pakistan. Kamila shares how at the airport she was stopped by many Sikhs, who even removed their turbans and placed them at her feet requesting her not to venture into Pakistan as they had heard about mass scale killing of Hindus in Pakistan (233).

Things were not rosy even when she joined her husband in Pakistan. Kamila narrates an incident how everyday her husband was visited by an army major who nearly threatened him to hand over his Hindu –Indian wife to Pakistan army : “my husband never told me this, he would just walk-up and down with this major outside the house saying, why don’t you kill me instead of my wife ? By God, everyday this happened” (234). Kamila’s account further states how she blames Hindu orthodoxy for their intolerant attitude towards Muslims which created divisions even inside India. The politicians and the Britishers are not spared too and she holds them responsible for the divisions, for the hatred: “there is resentment among Hindus and Muslims because of Partition, loss of property and so on, otherwise where is the resentment? When Hindus and Muslims meet each other abroad, in England or America, they instantly become the best of friends, even today” (237).

Taran, a Sikh woman of the real story, “Where is my country?” shows her unhappiness even with the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Such is the trauma experienced by the innocent people that their anger is routed at all and sundry: At midnight we heard the gun salute- and for a moment I thought there was going to be trouble again. But it was the sound of celebration! Our joy was so much greater than our suffering. We are unhappy about Partition, of course, but we thought it was inevitable, unavoidable because of the attitude of Jinnah and Gandhi. Yes, even Gandhiji. If he had really been against it, it would never have taken place. The way he handled things, it led to Partition. May be he didn’t want it but he accepted it. They used to sing songs, saying Gandhiji had won freedom without blood, without swords – didn’t they see how much blood was spilt? How many people died? How many women were killed, burnt alive? (243)

Taran’s account bears witness to the fact that how many members of the Sikh community felt that there was Partition once again amongst them in 1984. For about one week after Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984, Sikhs in many north Indian cities were deliberately targeted for arson, looting and killing. More than two thousand were killed in Delhi alone. Terrifying and benumbing for those who passed through it in 1947. Taran frowns at her plight and those of other Sikhs like her:

But what happened in 1984 in Kanpur was very different – it happened in our own homes, our own country. 1984 was such a big shock. It was only then that I asked, “Is this the freedom we gave up everything for?” When the Hindu mobs shouted, “Traitors get out!” I asked myself, “Traitors? Is this what I sang songs of independence for? Was handcuffed at the age of six for? Which is our home now?” I tell you, I felt a great sense of detachment from everything. Nothing mattered any more – home, possessions, people, had no meaning. 1947 was no shock, the shock is now. They have branded us by calling us traitors. I tell you truly, now even the Indian flag does not seem to belong to me. (246)

The third real story: “The Lucknow Sisters: ‘Insecure, yes. Unsettled, no’” celebrates the presence of Lucknow’s syncretic culture, its abiding faith in India’s unique experience in multi-religious living. The theme has been the backdrop of many a Partition novels namely Joginder Paul’s Urdu novel *Khwabrau* (1991) translated in English as *Sleepwalkers* (2006) and Qurratulain Hyder’s Urdu novel, *Aag Ka Darya* (1959) transcreated as *River of Fire* (1999). Hindus and Muslims of Qurratulain’s Lucknow sing the *marsiyas* of Anees with the same ease as they chant Christian hymns, recite couplets from the *Ramayana*, and quote from the Buddhist proverbs to create a richly intermingled culture. In her documentary on the same theme, Hyder talks about the fact that in Lucknow even today it is a Muslim singer who recites the *Ramayana* at the local Ramlila performances (Bhalla 57). In *Sleepwalkers* the characters are utterly grief-stricken by their exodus from Lucknow to Karachi that brick by brick, lane by lane they seek to rebuild the city Lucknow, they had left behind, in their new habitat, Karachi: “And here too, as soon as they regained some balance, they raised the old chowk of Ameenabad....When not an inch of the space remained in Ameenabad, the mohajirs spread themselves around it. And, in this way, all of Lucknow in Karachi was peopled” (*Sleepwalkers* 7-8).

As Mark Tully quotes in his non-fiction, *No Full Stops in India*: “the Lakhnavis have such a ‘lively sense’ of their own identity crafted out of a long history of intimate dialogue with the Hindus that all they long for is a renewal and continuation of that relationship” (11). The real account of the Lucknow sisters’ is the narrative of a Muslim family who decides to stay back in Lucknow, their home in India, even though their closest relatives left for Pakistan after the Partition. One of the sisters explains how Lucknow remained untouched by the bloodshed and destruction during the times of Partition too: “We were fortunate in Lucknow because nothing happened here, people were extremely cultured...Relations between Hindus and Muslims were so good. Oh, don’t ask... from the time of Wajid Ali Shah the relations were very close. Our grandfather’s mazhar is here, he was a favourite of Akbar’s- he gave him Lucknow and the neighbouring areas as an award. Since then the friendships have been strong” (238).

Home is a place built through a long process of living together, Indian Muslims had no longing for a place other than the one in which they lived. Indeed, the historical evidence supports the fact that apart from a few, the migrants had no divine perceptions of a new country, a promise or a hope. The Lucknow sisters’ father once went to Pakistan in 1952-53 at the time of death of his uncle and stayed there for three months. The family couldn’t live away from Lucknow; they became home sick in Pakistan as their roots were here in India: People say Muslims belong in Pakistan but this is the greatest insult, a terrible accusation. What have we to do with Pakistan? It’s like any other neighbouring country but that we should be loyal to it that is unthinkable. We belong here, this is our nationality. To suspect us, to doubt us is a grave offence. When there are riots and the government does nothing then we do feel desperate, but that passes in a little while, it’s over. And people have learnt to live with riots. Those who went away have never felt settled. This didn’t happen to us, we have never had the feeling of being unsettled. Insecure, yes, unsettled, no. We’re in our own place...we’re in our own home... (240)

Although Claude Markovits in his article, “The Partition of India,” states that “the Punjab was cleansed of its minorities: the Pakistani Western Punjab became almost exclusively Muslim (...), and the Indian Eastern Punjab became utterly Hindu-Sikh” (76), Partition did not determine a clear cut ethnic division: out of ninety-five million Muslims, thirty-five million stayed in India, where today one hundred twenty million of them still live. Indian Muslims were scattered across three nations, cite worthy here is the sad judgment of historian Mushirul Hasan that “never before in South Asian history did so few divide so

many, so needlessly” (Bhalla 12). Echoing the same sentiments, one of the Lucknow sisters states: “Still, Partition caste a shroud of silence on our entire family...Why? We’re all scattered, nothing remains- no Ids, no marriages, no celebrations, no happiness (240).

Kamila of “No Going Back,” in her quest to belong didn’t mind being ‘a convert in a rapidly Islamising Pakistan’ (249). Her choice in a way smoothed her path, her children were given Muslim names and she changed hers too as she didn’t want to be confused about who they were. She takes solace in narrating Galsworthy’s “White Monkey” which recites the tale of an Englishman surrounded by fanatic Muslims insisting him to utter “La Ilah” at the gun-point. To resist being murdered at their hands, the Englishman bowed before their demand with the words: “if it matters so much to you I’ll say it, because it matters nothing to me...” ( *Borders and Boundaries* 236). It is apparent from the above accounts that most of the ordinary people were more concerned with the problems of survival in their daily lives than with their religious identities.

Kamila on the contrary condemns *Sanatani* Hindus’ orthodox practice of reconverting Muslims into Hindus in the garb of the ritual of ‘*shuddhi*’. She describes ‘*shuddhi*’ as a terrible word because it applies that the Muslims were *napak*, *ashuddh* and they become *paak* through conversion. She holds this attitude of Hindu orthodoxy responsible for the creation of Pakistan. Taran too holds untouchability practiced by Hindus and Sikhs towards Muslims responsible for Partition: “Untouchability was the main reason for Partition - the Muslims hated us for it. They were so frustrated and it was this frustration which took the form of massacres at Partition, of the ruthlessness with which they forced Hindus to eat beef...” (247).

Krishna Sobti, author of the Partition novel, *Zindaginama*, in a way similar to Kamila and Taran, the two victims of Partition, tries to examine in her novel the root cause of Partition. In the novel there is a villager who watches the *shahlog* (the zamindars) and wonders: “I don’t understand one thing. God distributed the sun and the air equally. Why is there such unequal distribution of wealth?” Shahji replies in a typical Hindu way: “it’s the law of the Almighty that those who work with their minds are paid better than those who work with their hands” (146). Shahji’s reply fails to calm the peasant’s simple mind questioning class differences. In an interview to Alok Bhalla, Sobti further states that how an economical conflict turned into a religious one: “Remember that if a poor Muslim student wanted a seat in a medical college, he couldn’t get one.... Indeed, only the children of the Muslim aristocracy could get an education” (147). She too suspects that social tensions increased once Punjab came under the influence of Arya Samaj (148).

The common thread between the accounts of Taran, a Sikh woman and Kamila (originally Hindu) as well as the writer Krishna Sobti is the fact that being non-Muslims too, they could justify reasons of the Muslims for demanding Pakistan : “They were the working class, we were the exploiters....And they knew they could never get the better of Hindus on the bargaining table, they were just too clever...we treated them badly – practiced untouchability, considered them lowly” (240).Khwaja Ahmad Abbas targets the graceless conduct of all such communally charged sectarian thinkers in his autobiography, *I am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography*:

India was killed by Britain.... But not by the British alone. India was killed by fanatical Muslim Leaguers. India was killed by the fanatical Hindus, The Hindu fascists and Hindu imperialists, the dreamers of the Hindu empire, the crusaders of Hindu Sangathan.... India was killed by the Communist Party of India.... India was killed, stabbed in the heart by every Hindu who killed a Muslim, by every Muslim who killed a Hindu... The wonder and the tragedy is that India should have been killed by the children of India. (Hasan 235-36)

The three real stories discussed above reveal that no doubt Partition made for realignment of borders and of national and community identities, but not necessarily of



loyalties. Many ordinary people on both sides of the border courageously demonstrated great compassion and empathy, affirming the humanistic belief that individuals and communities, despite adversity, have the strength and the will to put aside violence in favour of tolerance and respect. A study of these real stories strengthens our belief that in the present circumstances also, an ethical and humane future is possible, and building a new, division free Indian nation is not a far off possibility.

As Gyanendra Pandey, an academia and a founder member of the Subaltern Studies group in India, feels that the reconstruction of communities and of local sociality depends on particular reconstructions of the past. So while recovering memories, sensitivity has to be maintained which aims at projection and preservation of 'gestures of kindness' reflected by all the communities towards each other during the tumultuous times also. As Alam puts it, "for every instance of killing we hear of, we also hear of somebody's attempt to help, to rescue, somebody giving a shoulder to lean on"(Pandey 61). Societies conceive images of themselves, and maintain their identity through the generations by fashioning a culture out of memory. Cultures rediscover their past while developing, producing, and constructing a future. Social constrictions and pressures always lead us in the direction of uniformity, simplification and one-dimensionality. Memories offer access to a different world, facilitating detachment from the absolutism of the present 'given reality.' The ultimate aim is to expose how these memories can sublimate, express and give language to a subject that evades expression. Keeping politics apart, these narratives reflect how common people up held values of love and brotherhood even under the threat of hatred, terror and violence.

In the present difficult times, recalling such instances from the national past and recognising communalism as the most important obstacle to be overcome will act towards building more "self-consciously accommodating communities," (Pandey 205) directed towards the evolution of India as a just, progressive and modern society in the subcontinent. Picturing my own utopian vision of India, a division free India where religion no longer categorises us, I conclude by taking aid from one of the speeches of Maulana Azad: "what would it mean to imagine India as a society in which the Muslim does not figure as a 'minority', but as Bengali or Malayali, labourer or professional, literate or non- literate, young or old, man or woman?"(205).

### Works Cited:

- Bhalla, Alok. *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1998.
- Hasan, Mushirul ed. *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Jain, Jasbir ed. *Reading Partition/ Living Partition*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, 2007.
- Markovits, Claude. "The Partition of India." *Transeuropeennes* 19/20 (Winter 2000/2001): 65-79.
- Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.
- Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Paul, Joginder. *Sleepwalkers*. New Delhi: Katha, 1998. Trans. Of Khwabrau by Sunil Trivedi and Sukrita Paul Kumar, 1990.
- Shahid, Aga. *The Country Without a Post Office*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013.