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Erased, Not Divided: Sindhi Partition, Statelessness, and the Imagined Homeland in Nandita Bhavnani's *The Making of Exile*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Nandita Bhavnani's *The Making of Exile*: Sindhi Hindus and the Partition of India (2014) as a landmark work that repositions the Sindhi Partition experience within the broader discourse of Indian English Partition literature. Unlike the dominant Punjabi-centric narratives that construct 1947 as a story of territorial division, Bhavnani's text reveals a qualitatively different trauma, one of total civilizational erasure. Sindhi Hindus did not lose half a homeland; they lost an entire world. Drawing on postcolonial theory, trauma studies, diaspora theory, and memory studies, specifically the frameworks of Avtar Brah, Cathy Caruth, Pierre Nora, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this paper argues that *The Making of Exile* constructs Sindhi displacement as a threefold loss: loss of territory, loss of language, and loss of cultural memory. The paper further argues that Nandita Bhavnani's use of oral testimonies functions as a form of counter-memory that challenges the historical and literary marginalization of Sindhi voices in Indian English scholarship. By highlighting themes such as statelessness, language loss, and the construction of an imagined homeland, *The Making of Exile* emerges as a foundational text for understanding Partition, displacement, and diasporic identity in Indian English literature.

Keywords: Sindhi Partition, displacement, Indian English literature, trauma, diaspora, imagined homeland, statelessness, oral testimony (Bhavnani 2014).

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Introduction: Rewriting The Unwritten Partition

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most extensively studied events in South Asian literary and historical scholarship. From Saadat Hasan Manto's searing short stories to Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas,* from Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking* India to Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the literary imagination of Partition has produced a rich and varied canon in Indian English and regional language literature. However, this canon, for all its richness, harbours a profound silence. The story of the Sindhi Hindu community, approximately 1.5 million people who fled Sindh in 1947, remains largely absent from dominant Partition scholarship. This absence is not insignificant, rather, it reflects a deeper structural erasure that echoes, within literary and critical discourse, the very displacement experienced by Sindhi Hindus (Bhavnani).

Nandita Bhavnani's *The Making of Exile: Sindhi Hindus and the Partition of India* (2014) represent the most sustained and scholarly attempt in Indian English writing to address this erasure. Drawing on over two hundred oral testimonies, colonial archives, and regional historical records, Bhavnani constructs a narrative of Sindhi displacement that is fundamentally different from the Punjabi paradigm that dominates the field. The Sindhi experience was not one of a divided land there was no 'Indian Sindh' created on the other side of the border. It was the experience of total loss: the loss of a homeland with no possibility of return, no physical territory to mourn over, and no geographic anchor for identity or memory. This paper argues that *The Making of Exile* constructs Sindhi displacement as a threefold catastrophe territorial erasure, language death, and the dissolution of cultural memory and that Bhavnani's recovery of oral testimonies constitutes an urgent act of literary and historical counter-memory.

The theoretical framework of this paper draws on four major bodies of scholarship. Avtar Brah's concept of 'homing desire' (Brah 1996) and 'diaspora space' from Cartographies of Diaspora

(1996) provides a lens for understanding how Sindhi communities negotiate belonging without a retrievable homeland. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory (Caruth 1996), particularly her formulation of trauma as an experience that resists full integration into narrative, illuminates the fractures and silences in Bhavnani's oral testimonies. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") explains how Sindhi communities actively preserve their diasporic identity through compensatory cultural and linguistic practices (Nora). Finally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988) frames the broader political stakes of Bhavnani's project, the recovery of voices that postcolonial Indian nationhood rendered inaudible.

Historical Context: The Sindhi Exodus of 1947

To understand the literary and cultural dimensions of Bhavnani's work, it is essential to grasp the distinctive historical circumstances of the Sindhi Partition. When the British announced the partition of the Indian subcontinent in June 1947, the province of Sindh, geographically contiguous and historically unified, was allocated entirely to Pakistan. Unlike Punjab, which the British physically divided along the Radcliffe Line, allocating portions to both India and Pakistan, they left Sindh territorially intact and assigned it entirely to Pakistan. There was no Indian Sindh. For the large Hindu minority living there ,merchants, professionals, artisans, and farmers who had inhabited the region for centuries, this meant that the new political geography offered them no home. (Bhavnani 2014).

Bhavnani documents the resulting mass exodus in meticulous detail. Within months of Partition, the vast majority of Sindhi Hindus abandoned their ancestral homes, their businesses, their temples, and their social worlds and it crossed into India, a country that received them as citizens but had made no provision for them as a community. Unlike Punjabi refugees, the Indian state did not resettle Sindhi Hindus in a geographically proximate region of familiar language,

culture, and landscape. The government dispersed them across the length and breadth of India, to Bombay, Calcutta, Hyderabad (Deccan), Ajmer, and eventually to cities across the world. As Bhavnani demonstrates in *The Making of Exile*, this dispersal was not merely geographic. It was the dispersal of a civilisation.

The political consequences of this displacement were significant. Unlike Punjabis, who eventually secured a Punjabi Suba, a state carved along linguistic lines, the Sindhis received no such territorial recognition in India. They remain, to this day, the only major linguistic and cultural community in India without a home state. This statelessness within the nation has produced a peculiar condition that Bhavnani's work illuminates: a community that is Indian by citizenship but Sindhi by identity, with no piece of Indian territory to call its own. It is this condition, this radical rootlessness within the nation, that gives the Sindhi literary and cultural imagination its distinctive texture of longing, improvisation, and resilience. (Bhavnani 2014).

Beyond Division: Total Erasure and the Limits of Partition Discourse

The dominant paradigm of Partition scholarship, shaped overwhelmingly by the Punjab experience, tends to construct 1947 as an event of division. The partition divides the land in two and separates communities. The drawing of new borders tears families apart. The violence, the grief, and the longing are all organised around this central metaphor of division: the cut, the line, the boundary. This framework produces a particular kind of mourning, the mourning for a half that is gone, but which still exists somewhere, on the other side, visible and tangible even if unreachable. (Bhavnani 2014).

The Sindhi experience does not fit this paradigm, and Bhavnani's *The Making of Exile* is valuable precisely because it forces a rethinking of the conceptual vocabulary of Partition studies. For Sindhi Hindus, there was no division there was deletion. Sindh did not divide into two

territories, rather, it became inaccessible and foreign, and, for much of the community, remained unreachable for decades. The grief that Bhavnani's testimonies reveal is not the grief of division but the grief of disappearance. Sindhi survivors do not mourn a homeland on the other side of a line; they mourn a world that, from their perspective, has ceased to exist. (Bhavnani 2014).

This distinction has profound implications for how we read Sindhi literary and cultural production. Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire", the desire for a place called home, which is not necessarily the place of origin, is illuminating here. Brah distinguishes between 'home' as a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination and 'home' as the lived experience of socio-cultural location. For Sindhi Hindus, Sindh, their original homeland, quickly became a mythic rather than a material place. The homing desire that Bhavnani documents in her testimonies is therefore not the desire to return to an existing place across a border, but the desire for a place that exists now only in memory, imagination, and cultural practice. This form of displacement is fundamentally different, and it produces a distinct literary and cultural response. (Bhavnani 2014).

The structural invisibility of this difference in mainstream Partition scholarship is itself a symptom of what might be called the Punjabization of Partition discourse. When Saadat Hasan Manto is positioned as the paradigmatic Partition writer, and the violence of the Radcliffe Line as the defining Partition event, the Sindhi experience becomes not merely marginal but conceptually incommensurable with the dominant framework. Bhavnani's work performs an important corrective function by insisting on the particularity of the Sindhi experience and by demonstrating that a fuller understanding of Partition requires frameworks capacious enough to include both the divided and the deleted. (Bhavnani 2014).

Memory, Nostalgia, and the Imagined Homeland

One of the most compelling aspects of *The Making of Exile* lies in its detailed documentation of how Sindhi Hindus preserve their sense of homeland through memory, cultural practices, and linguistic traditions. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory"), which emerge when a community is cut off from its *milieu de mémoire*, or living environment of memory, is particularly relevant here. For Nora, sites of memory are the compensatory structures that communities create when they can no longer inhabit their history naturally and spontaneously. The Sindhi community's relationship to Sindh has precisely this character, elaborate, self-conscious, and artful, because the community cannot inhabit it in lived reality. (Bhavnani 2014).

The oral testimonies that Bhavnani collects and analyses are themselves sites of memory in Nora's sense. They are not simply records of what happened, they are performances of identity, acts of cultural preservation, and interventions against forgetting. Many of the witnesses Bhavnani interviews describe Sindh in extraordinarily vivid detail, the specific textures of the soil, the smell of particular rivers, the architecture of ancestral homes, the rhythms of daily life before Partition. This vividness is not simply the product of strong memory, it results from the repeated, deliberate acts of remembering that characterize diasporic consciousness. Sindhi communities remember Sindh so carefully because they cannot visit, touch, or inhabit it. (Bhavnani 2014).

The language of nostalgia that permeates Bhavnani's testimonies is inseparable from the question of the Sindhi language itself. Sindhi, written in a Perso-Arabic script in Pakistan and in a Devanagari-influenced script in India, is a language without a territory. It is spoken in scattered diasporic communities from Ulhasnagar to London to Hong Kong, but it has no institutional base in any Indian state, no government that uses it as an official language, and no public sphere to sustain it. *The Making of Exile* documents the slow atrophy of the language across generations of

the diaspora, a process that the community experiences as a second Partition, the Partition of the self from its own cultural inheritance. The loss of the Sindhi language, in this sense, constitutes the loss of the imagined homeland itself, since it is primarily through language, in songs, poetry, and the devotional literature centered on Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's *Shah Jo Risalo*, that the homeland is preserved. (Bhavnani 2014).

Trauma, Testimony, And the Ethics of Recovery

Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as an experience that the subject does not fully assimilate at the moment of its occurrence, and that therefore returns, intrusively and incompletely, in subsequent moments, helps explain the particular texture of the testimonies that Bhavnani collects. Many of the witnesses in *The Making of Exile* describe their experiences of flight and displacement in fragmented, non-linear ways. There are silences, repetitions, and sudden affective eruptions that break the surface of the narrative. These are not signs of poor memory or inadequate narration; they are, as Caruth's framework suggests, the formal properties of traumatic testimony, how an experience that exceeded the capacity for full comprehension continues to exceed the capacity for full representation. (Bhavnani 2014).

Bhavnani's methodology as a historian and writer is notably sensitive to these dimensions of testimony. She does not treat the gaps and silences in her witnesses' accounts as problems to be resolve it through archival supplementation, but as meaningful elements of the testimony itself. This sensitivity places *The Making of Exile* in productive dialogue with the broader field of testimony studies, including Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's foundational work on Holocaust testimony, Paul Gilroy's analysis of the "changing same" in diasporic memory, and recent postcolonial scholarship on the ethics of recovering subaltern voices. (Bhavnani 2014).

The gendered dimensions of the testimonies Bhavnani records deserve particular attention. Women's experiences of partition and its aftermath were shaped by distinct vulnerabilities and social imperatives that differed significantly from those of men. Bhavnani documents experiences of sexual violence, forced conversion, and abduction during the Partition period itself, as well as the less visible but equally significant experiences of women who bore primary responsibility for maintaining cultural traditions, household economies, and community bonds in the difficult years of resettlement. The testimonies of women in *The Making of Exile* are not merely supplementary to the narrative of displacement; rather, they are central to understanding how the community survived and rebuilt itself. (Bhavnani 2014).

Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates with particular force in relation to these women's testimonies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument is not that subaltern subjects are literally incapable of speech, but that the conditions of their speech, the frameworks within which it is heard, recorded, and interpreted, systematically distort or silence what they say. Bhavnani's project of recovery seeks to create conditions in which the speech of Sindhi women, doubly subaltern, as members of a marginalized community and as women within a patriarchal social structure, can find expression. *The Making of Exile* does not fully resolve the paradoxes that Spivak identifies, but its very existence as a published, widely circulated, and critically engaged work represents a meaningful intervention in the politics of who gets to speak and whose speech gets recorded. (Bhavnani 2014).

Counter Memory and the Politics of Invisibility

The argument of this paper is not simply that *The Making of Exile* is an important work of historical documentation. The work performs a critical literary and political function by constituting what may be called a counter-memory, a systematic challenge to the official and

unofficial narratives through which the Indian nation has remembered and, at times, forgotten its own formation. The structural invisibility of the Sindhi Partition in mainstream Indian English literature is not accidental. This condition emerges from specific historical and political factors, the absence of a territorial homeland for Sindhis in India, the community's relative economic success in the postcolonial period, which often rendered their suffering less visible, and the dominance of the Punjabi literary tradition in shaping the cultural memory of Partition. In the Foucauldian sense, counter-memory does not merely recover forgotten histories, rather, it actively contests the frameworks through which history is organized and the past is made meaningful. Bhavnani's work is counter-memorial in this sense because it does not simply add the Sindhi story to the existing archive of Partition narratives, it challenges the conceptual frameworks, division, border, and return, through which those narratives have been organised. In doing so, it opens space for a more capacious and more honest reckoning with the full complexity of 1947. (Bhavnani 2014).

For Indian English literary studies, the implications of this challenge are significant. The canon of Partition literature has been shaped, implicitly and explicitly, by the Punjabi experience. To take the Sindhi experience seriously as Bhavnani's work demands is not merely to add a new text to the curriculum. It is to ask what other erasures the existing canon has performed, what other communities' experiences have been rendered conceptually incommensurable with the dominant framework, and what it would mean to construct a genuinely pluralistic account of Partition and its literary afterlives. (Bhavnani 2014).

Conclusion

Bhavnani's work is counter-memorial in this sense, as it does not merely add the Sindhi experience to the existing archive of Partition narratives; rather, it challenges the very conceptual

frameworks, division, border, and return, through which those narratives have been structured. This paper has argued that the work constructs Sindhi displacement as a threefold catastrophe territorial erasure, language death, and the dissolution of cultural memory , and that it does so through a methodology of recovery that is sensitive to the formal properties of traumatic testimony and the gendered dimensions of displacement. (Bhavnani 2014).

The theoretical frameworks deployed in this paper, Brah's diaspora theory, Caruth's trauma studies, Nora's memory studies, and Spivak's postcolonial feminism, illuminate different facets of Bhavnani's achievement. Together, they suggest that *The Making of Exile* is not merely a historical document but a literary and critical intervention that challenges the dominant paradigms of Partition studies and demands a more capacious account of the human cost of 1947. The Sindhi story is not a footnote to the Partition; it is a distinct and irreplaceable chapter in the story of how the Indian subcontinent became what it is today. (Bhavnani 2014).

For scholars of Indian English literature, Bhavnani's work issues an urgent invitation: to expand the canon of Partition writing, to develop theoretical frameworks adequate to the diversity of displacement experiences that 1947 produced, and to attend more carefully to the silences structural, political, and affective that continue to shape what we know and what we have allowed ourselves to forget. The making of exile, as Bhavnani shows us, is never complete. It continues in every generation that must learn to live without a homeland, in every language that loses its speakers, and in every act of memory that reaches across an unbridgeable distance toward a world that no longer exists. (Bhavnani 2014).

Endnotes:

1. The term 'Indian English literature' is used here in its broad sense to include literary and scholarly works written in English by authors of Indian origin or dealing with the Indian subcontinent, regardless of their current nationality or place of residence. (Bhavnani 2014).
2. The figure of 1.5 million displaced Sindhi Hindus is drawn from Bhavnani's own historical research it is consistent with the estimates provided by other scholars of the period, including Rita Kothari and Papiya Ghosh. (Bhavnani 2014).
3. For a detailed account of the Punjabi Suba movement and its implications for the politics of linguistic recognition in postcolonial India, see Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (1974).
4. The concept of 'Punjabization' is used analytically, not pejoratively. It refers to the historical and institutional processes by which the Punjabi experience came to serve as the paradigmatic case in Partition scholarship, rather than to any deliberate exclusion of other communities. (Bhavnani 2014).
5. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689–1752) is widely considered the greatest poet in the Sindhi literary tradition. His collection of poetry, the *Shah Jo Risalo*, occupies a place in Sindhi culture analogous to that of the Bible or the Quran in their respective traditions.

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