Seventy-five Years After Indian Partition, Who Owns the Narrative?

Literature once filled in archival gaps by saying the unsayable. Now a younger generation is devising new modes of telling the story and finding new stories to tell.

By Parul Sehgal December 26, 2022

The moral power of Partition writing has come from its sustained confrontations with violence, especially against women.Illustration by Anagh Banerjee

Before it was an edict, and a death sentence, it was a rumor. To many, it must have seemed improbable; I imagine my grandmother, buying her vegetables at the market, settling her baby on her hip, craning to hear the news—a border, where? Two borders, to be exact. On the eve of their departure, in 1947, after more than three hundred years on the subcontinent, the British sliced the land into a Hindu-majority India flanked by a Muslim-majority West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), a thousand miles apart. The boundaries were drawn up in five weeks by an English

barrister who had famously never before been east of Paris; he flew home directly afterward and burned his papers. The slash of his pen is known as Partition.

A tidy word, "Partition." Amid what the Punjabis call the *raula*—the "uproar"—the region convulsed with violence, Hindus and Sikhs on one side, Muslims on the other. Entire villages were massacred. Neighbors turned on each other. It's estimated that a million people were killed, and that seventy-five thousand women and girls were abducted and raped, a third of them under the age of twelve. Millions of refugees fled in one of the largest and most rapid migrations in history. "Blood trains" crisscrossed the fresh border, carrying silent cargo—passengers slaughtered during the journey. Cities transformed into open-air refugee camps, like the one in Delhi to which my grandmother escaped in the night, alone with her children, feeding the baby opium, the story goes, so he would not cry. Bhisham Sahni's "Tamas," a 1973 Hindi novel set in that period, brings such a camp to life. The exhausted refugees are greeted by a functionary of the Relief Committee with the unpropitious nickname Statistics Babu. "I want figures, only figures, nothing but figures," he instructs. The refugees mill around him, unhearing. They weep, stare blankly. They repeat, in exasperating detail, every step of their journeys. "Why don't you understand?" Statistics Babu pleads. "I am not here to listen to the whole 'Ramayana.' Give me figures—how many dead, how many

wounded, how much loss of property and goods. That is all."

Is that where the story lies? What do "figures, only figures" convey of the full horror and absurdity of 1947? Of a border that cut through forests, families, and shrines, that saw wild animals apportioned between the two countries and historical artifacts snapped in half? In "Tamas," the testimonies of the survivors reveal all that records omit and conceal. A refugee is desperate to recover his wife's gold bangles: won't Statistics Babu help him? Those bangles still circle his wife's wrists, however, and she lies at the bottom of a well. It is a detail perhaps lifted from the case of the real-life village of Thoa Khalsa, now in Pakistan, where almost a hundred Sikh women drowned themselves and their children. We don't have the figures for women killed by their own families or forced to kill themselves in the name of protecting their honor. There are no records of those who died of heartbreak. My family migrated from an area not far from Thoa Khalsa. Only my great-uncle remained; he lay beheaded in the courtyard of his home. Three months later, his wife died—of grief, some say. Their children were scattered. There are no firm figures available for orphaned children, or for children abandoned along the journey because they were too small to walk quickly enough.

This past year has marked seventy-five years of Partition, a process of fracturing that continues in the imagination and in

memory. Each generation has posed new questions, searching for places where the stories can be found—in statistics, in stubborn reticence, in a pair of gold bangles. A sturdy consensus long held that the fullest account of 1947 could be found not in facts and figures—not in nonfiction at all—but in texts like "Tamas," in literature. We were steered strenuously away from the scholarship and toward fiction and poetry—often by the scholars themselves. "Creative writers have captured the human dimensions of Partition far more effectively than have historians," the scholar Ayesha Jalal has written. Novels were said to surpass even survivor testimonies for vividness and accuracy. Two decades ago, Akash Kapur, writing in the *Times* about a landmark work of Partition oral history, directed the reader back to "the excellent fiction" of Partition, such as Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" (1956), which "does a far better job of evoking the terror, the bewilderment and the remorse that still shadow so many lives on the subcontinent."

Partition literature fills a long shelf. There is early fiction by survivors and spectators: realist narratives (Singh's "Train to Pakistan"), feminist epics (Yashpal's "This Is Not That Dawn"), stripped-down, nightmarish short stories (Saadat Hasan Manto's "Black Margins"). In the nineteen-eighties came a new flourishing, with now canonical novels by Salman Rushdie ("Midnight's Children"), Amitav Ghosh ("Shadow Lines"), and Bapsi Sidhwa ("Ice Candy Man").

Certain tropes and tendencies repeat. There is a reliance on coming-of-age stories, in which the loss of the nation's innocence maps neatly onto a character's; twins illustrate a conjoined fate; a dead woman personifies the fractured motherland. (These tropes are so alluring that a recent American young-adult novel about Partition, Veera Hiranandani's "The Night Diary," combined all of them, in a coming-of-age story about a twin born to a mother who dies in childbirth.)

But the unity, and moral power, of the genre derives from its sustained confrontations with the violence of Partition. The official narrative of independence was one of celebration. "Before the birth of freedom we have endured all the pains of labor and our hearts are heavy with the memory of this sorrow," Jawaharlal Nehru announced on August 14, 1947, as independence and Partition were imminent. "Nevertheless, the past is over and it is the future that beckons to us." The killings were portrayed as a spasm of collective madness, a regrettable development on the path to progress. In fact, it was the efficiency and organization of the attacks that came to distinguish the episode, and its stamp was the targeting and torture of women.

What we call Partition fiction might be more pointedly described as one of the most extensive bodies of literature committed to cataloguing rape and sexual terrorism—the

frenzy that left corpses riddled with bite marks, pregnant women slit open, and religious slogans branded upon faces and genitals. What Nehru dismissed as labor pains, what films dealt with obliquely, and some families not at all, is bluntly documented in the novels—the grisly discovery in "Ice Candy Man," for example, of a bag stuffed with severed breasts. Novels filled in the extensive gaps in the archives. "There were no trials for perpetrators of violence, the authorities took no statements, and very little data was gathered," the historian Manan Ahmed has written. "Even the trains, which ran covered in blood across the Punjab border, were scrubbed clean. . . . In fact, the only physical traces left are the people themselves. And they too shucked their old identities for fear of more violence."

If it seems crude to treat literature as testimony, we cannot ignore the fact that some writers conceived of themselves as eyewitnesses. They shared a commitment to preserve not only what went unsaid but what felt unsayable—that the violence of Partition was not necessarily an aberration in the lives of women, for one. The upheaval could be liberation—the domestic spaces to which women were confined could protect but also imprison, as Daisy Rockwell notes in the afterword to her translation of Khadija Mastur's 1962 novel, "The Woman's Courtyard." As early as 1950, Amrita Pritam's novel "Pinjar" examined the refusal of families to take back women and girls who had been abducted and

“contaminated.” The sexual violation of men during that period remains a taboo subject; I find mention of castrations in “Train to Pakistan” and almost nowhere else.

This is the work of the novel: to notice, knit, remember, record. The novel confers wholeness and unity to a story of division. The novel—it cannot help itself—reconciles. But it was only by taking a truncheon to the form that some of the greatest Partition fiction was created. Out of the rubble of the cities and the scorched fields emerged Saadat Hasan Manto’s glittering, razored shards. A recent collection, “The Dog of Tithwal,” gathers classics by the Urdu master of the short story. Born in 1912 to a Kashmiri family in the northern state of Punjab, Manto fell under the spell of Gorky and Poe, not to mention the rotgut that would kill him at the age of forty-two. Fluent in almost every genre, he wrote while sitting on the family sofa, his daughters climbing over him as he churned out polemics, screenplays, and twenty-two volumes of short stories marked by a warm, coarse, and occasionally menacing sexuality that so agitated the censors. He was tried for (and acquitted of) obscenity six times; his story “Khol Do” was condemned as an incitement to rape. Partition tore him from Mumbai, his home and muse. Marooned in Lahore, he began writing furiously about what he had seen. The most famous of these stories, “Toba Tek Singh,” tells the tale—based in fact—of India and Pakistan dividing up patients of mental institutions according to their

religion. One Sikh inmate cannot figure out which country his village belongs to; he roots himself between the barbed-wire fences of each border, and dies on a patch of unclaimed earth.

Manto established his distinctive form in the book “Black Margins” (1948): thirty-two sketches of compressed power, some no more than a few sentences long, which brought to life the obscene logic of the new world. In “The Advantage of Ignorance,” a sniper takes aim at a child. His companion objects, but not for the expected reason. “You are out of bullets,” he exclaims. In “Double Cross,” a character complains about being sold bad petrol—it won’t set fire to any shops. The stories are not just expressions of shock; they are modes of refusal—a response to facts that will not, ought not, be easily assimilated into a narrative. The ink feels fresh, wet. Manto remains our eternal contemporary, his capacity to unnerve undiminished.

Even his admirers can be caught trying to tame him—pushing him into earnest ethical stances. In the introduction to the recent collection, the poet Vijay Seshadri describes Manto’s Urdu as firm, spare, and “easily accessible to translation.” In truth, Manto frightens his translators. The rehabilitation mission starts with them. Khalid Hasan begins his translation by defanging the title of “Khol Do,” which Manto is said to have considered his best work. Hasan

names it “The Return,” instead of the literal translation, “Open It”—the command issued in the story’s chilling climax. As it begins, a Muslim girl has clearly been abducted by a Hindu mob. Men from her community go in search of her. When her father spots them accompanying a body, the reader understands that the girl, Sakina, has been attacked again, by the very men who promised to rescue her. She is brought to a hospital, seemingly lifeless. A doctor enters the small, stifling room, and gestures to a window: “Open it.” There is a jerk of movement; Sakina’s hands move to untie the drawstring of her pants and lower them down her thighs. Her father exults—“She is alive”—and the doctor breaks into a cold sweat.

There’s a crucial line in the story. In Urdu, it reads, “*Sakina ke murda jism mein jumbish hui.*” Hasan has variously translated it as “The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly” and “Sakina’s body stirred.” A more faithful translation would be something like “There was a movement in Sakina’s corpse.” It was Hasan who respectfully refers to Sakina as “the young woman,” Hasan who wants her still to be Sakina. Manto refers to her corpse. He is interested in the threshold that she has crossed, what the doctor notices and the father cannot—the threshold we keep encountering in his stories about Partition.

Manto’s fiction routinely blurs the line between life and

death, sanity and madness. Characters merge with their weapons. (In "The Last Salute," a platoon leader "felt as though he had turned into a rifle, but one whose trigger was jammed.") Weapons act as agents in their own right. (From "Mishtake": "Ripping the belly cleanly, the knife moved in a straight line down the midriff, in the process slashing the cord which held the man's pajamas in place.") These transformations occur beyond the characters' awareness. *You will cross the threshold without knowing*, Manto seems to say. *You will not be able to see what you have become*. There is no self-knowledge or remorse, no greater sense of justice than there was in 1947. Nor does the author permit himself the reprieve of moralizing. There are only loops of retribution. "Bitter Harvest" begins with a Muslim father screaming the name of his young daughter, who has been raped and murdered: "Sharifan! Sharifan!" The story ends with him seizing, raping, and strangling a Hindu girl, leaving her father to find the body and scream her name: "Bimla, my daughter, Bimla."

In the past generation, though, Partition "shimmered away as a suitable subject" for fiction, in the words of the literary critic Nilanjana Roy. The mantle was taken up by oral historians. Recurrent eruptions of violence reawakened memories of the killings of 1947—its unfinished business, the rot in the wound. The 2002 Gujarat riots, in particular, shared the grammar of Partition violence: the frenzy masking

careful coördination, the targeting of women, the impunity. The feminist writer and publisher Urvashi Butalia's "The Other Side of Silence" (1998) had been sparked by the Sikh massacres of 1984, which led her to think more deeply about her family's history. Through interviews with survivors, Butalia traced a story of Partition as its meaning was shaped (and evaded) in private life, in families. This was Partition seen from the perspective of women, children, Dalits, all those left out of the grand political narratives, and told with the kind of feeling and detail that, as the scholar Deepti Misri writes, could never have made it into Statistics Babu's ledger. The testimonies compiled by Butalia—as well as by Ashis Nandy, Veena Das, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin—rippled with complexities and contradiction. Memories of loss exist, sometimes queasily, alongside memories of gain—the birth of nations, the pride of survival, the unexpected opportunities created in the upheaval. I was weaned on stories of my family's Partition: my beheaded kinsman; my grandmother wheedling extra rations for her children in the camps; the two young girls, sisters, who went missing. Beneath these stories pulsed the uncomfortable knowledge that the very tumult of Partition allowed some families like mine, living under the boot of brutal feudal hierarchy, their first opportunity to prise themselves free.

Cartoon by Mort Gerberg

In the past few decades, popular chroniclers influenced both by fiction and by oral history have taken up polyphonic approaches. Yasmin Khan's "The Great Partition" and Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar's "The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia," both published in 2007, at the sixtieth anniversary of the event, synthesized Statistics Babu's facts and figures with the testimonies of survivors. More expansive histories of Partition began to be told, attending to the links between 1947 and the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971, the migration of Dalits, and the effects of Partition on tribal communities, on Kashmir, on the diaspora.

At its seventy-fifth anniversary, Partition has found still more eclectic forms. The new generation coming to the story—midnight's grandchildren—are not scholars, for the most part. They typically have no specialized credentials. Theirs is a different qualification: this is their inheritance. They include the New York rapper Heems, who describes himself as a "product of Partition"; the installation artist Pritika Chowdhry, who constructs "anti-memorials"; Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, an Oscar-winning filmmaker and the founder of the Citizen Archive of Pakistan (*CAP*); and Guneeta Singh Bhalla, a physicist who has established a crowdsourced library of testimonies. It's no longer enough for fiction to fill the silences. These self-taught archivists search for whatever evidence they can find; they build on the work of oral historians like Butalia, finding the archives in the last

remaining survivors.

Their ranks are thinning. That young woman, so startled by the rumors, who fled with her children—my grandmother—died in 2006. Her eldest child, the child who could walk—my aunt—died last year. Organizations like Obaid-Chinoy's *CAP* and Bhalla's 1947 Partition Archive gather testimonies with fresh urgency. Online communities invite survivors to upload their stories or find childhood friends. Project Dastaan, an organization formed by students at Oxford, not only collects testimonies but also offers refugees a chance to "visit" their homeland using virtual-reality headsets.

This cohort of oral historians has confronted a reticence born not only of suffering but also of shame, arising from complicity, intimate betrayals—Manto's thresholds. "The true horror is not what your neighbors did to you," the historian Faisal Devji notes, "but what your own family members might have done out of force of necessity: Leave somebody behind who was handicapped, who was unable to walk or flee."

In "Remnants of Partition" (2019), Aanchal Malhotra, a Delhi-based artist turned oral historian, devised a method to sidestep the silences. Her grandparents, Punjabi migrants from Pakistan, were skillful at thwarting her questions about their journey, but conversations suddenly bloomed when she asked what they carried with them. Her great-uncle produced a *ghara*, a metallic vessel for churning yogurt, and

a *gaz*, a yardstick from the family tailoring business. He absently handled the objects as he spoke; they stimulated memories of a rich, associative, unexpected kind, full of longing. Malhotra took the same question to her grandmother, and to other survivors. Her book is a history of Partition told in twenty-one possessions: a string of pearls, a sword. These objects are not relics; many are pointedly, movingly, still in use. Her grandmother travelled across the border with a small folding knife given to her by her family, who told her to use it against attackers or on herself. The same blade, "swallowed by rust," now accompanies Malhotra's grandmother on her morning walks, as she slices leaves from an aloe plant—the weapon transformed into an agent of healing.

The music video opens in a train station—the archetypal setting of Partition horror. The windows are shattered; debris lies scattered on the floor. The waiting area fills with passengers, looking at one another warily. A man sitting alone on a bench begins to sing a ghazal by the Pakistani poet (and Partition migrant) Saifuddin Saif: "This moonlit night has been a long time coming / The words I want to say have been a long time coming." The mood warms. A traveller darns another's torn clothing; a woman admires another's baby.

"Chandni Raat," an Urdu single from the Pakistani American

singer Ali Sethi, was released in 2019, just days before fighting broke out between India and Pakistan. Once again, war seemed imminent. The YouTube comment section of the accompanying music video became a gathering place much like the train station's waiting area. Strangers congregated, invoking the song's message of unity. "It became kind of an anthem," Sethi says. "It felt genuinely miraculous."

The son of prominent journalists, Sethi grew up in Lahore—"a haunted city," he calls it. The old part of the city was full of signs of the people who fled, some sixty per cent of the population; home alcoves once reserved for shrines now held a refrigerator or an electric fan. "For me, turning to Hindustani music was the only way I could unpartition myself—go back to a place that was not only pre-Partition but pre-colonial," he says. Hindustani music, as he describes it, is sacred and secular, a mongrel of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim traditions. He was taught by two renowned singers, both Partition migrants, and during the *COVID* lockdown he used social media to bring together musicians from across the border to collaborate. He cites a teacher of his who taught him that metaphors "help us to dialogue across distances." Song, he says, is a space we can live inside. Just as the little knife of Malhotra's grandmother was repurposed, the train station in the "Chandni Raat" video has been, too—a place of death reconceived as a place of reconciliation.

Violence has long felt emblematic of the story of Partition—it was what lurked in Manto's "black margins"—and that history of violence is now deployed as a political weapon, stoking suspicion, retribution. Anam Zakaria, who works on cross-cultural exchange between India and Pakistan, describes younger generations—who have grown up in the shadow of war—as even more hostile toward one another than the generation who survived Partition. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, recently declared August 14th to be Partition Horrors Remembrance Day. By choosing the date of Pakistan's independence day (India celebrates August 15th as its day of independence), and by carefully referring to those denied "cremation," Modi framed it as an occasion to mourn only Hindu and Sikh victims, and to single out Muslims as aggressors. A younger generation struggles not just to devise new modes of accessing and telling the story of Partition but also to prevent it from being used to justify further bloodletting. They want to return the event to survivors and their families—and to highlight memories and emotions that have been occluded by the fixation on carnage. Malhotra asks, "Why do we immediately think of the trains? Why don't we think of the friendship left behind or the love affairs that may have gotten cut?" Kavita Puri, a BBC journalist, similarly wants to see beyond the brutalities: "Partition, though filled with horror in so many ways, is also a story about love." Can the story of Partition be told in a different genre? Will love stories keep the blood at bay?

In “Tomb of Sand,” the winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, Geetanjali Shree pays homage to Partition fiction, imagining the great novelists gathering near the border. “The group of Partition writers has come to sit in a row, and every person has a name card at their place like at a formal banquet. Bhisham Sahni. Balwant Singh. Joginder Pal. Manto. Rahi Masoom Raza. Shaani. Intizar Hussain. Krishna Sobti. Khushwant Singh. Ramanand Sagar. Manzoor Ehtesham. Rajinder Singh Bedi.” Yet Shree also explores the possibility of writing one’s own story of Partition. Ma, the central figure in the novel, an eighty-year-old widow, spends more than a hundred pages of the book lying in bed, her back to the reader, before finally, heroically, reclaiming her life, by going back across the border to Pakistan and falling in love.

“A border,” she proposes,

> does not enclose, it opens out. It creates a shape—it adorns an edge. This side of the edging blossoms, as does that. Embroider the border with a shimmering vine. Stud it with precious stones. What is a border? It enhances a personality. It gives strength. It doesn’t tear apart. A border increases recognition. Where two sides meet and both flourish. A border ornaments their meeting.

Partition stories offer few consolations; one wants to hold

this one tightly in hand, like Grandmother's little knife. But what is that folded blade but sheathed violence? Has it completed its work? How does one begin to tell a tale so turbulently in progress? "It will jump, it will cross over, the story will not end," Shree writes. Manto's shards, unblunted by any urge toward narrative neatness, find their mark for a reason.

There's a quiet detail in "The Dog of Tithwal," one planted delicately, as if designed to be lost amid the gaudy violence. The Pakistani Army and the Indian Army gather on two hills, facing each other. Between bursts of gunfire, the soldiers sing. Only the reader can know that they are both singing a folk song of romance and longing. The reader experiences, at first, a frisson of recognition—*ah, to be so alike, on either side of a divide*. But how little it matters, once the action of the story is under way. Both sides send a dog back and forth, frightening and torturing it to death. The dog cannot hear the singing; he cannot name the song. Sing whatever you like while you can, the writer seems to say. The black margins are closing in. ♦