IOSR Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IOSR -JMR)
ISSN: 3048-7439 Volume 2, Issue 4, Series 2, (Jul. – Aug 2025), PP 22-25
www.iosrjournals.org

Revisiting Partition: Intergenerational Trauma in Contemporary Indian Novels

Dr. Parul Rastogi
Assistant professor, Department of English,
D.R.A. Govt. P.G. College Bisauli Budaun

Abstract
The 1947 Partition of British India into India and Pakistan remains one of the most significant collective traumas of the twentieth century, a political rupture that left deep psychosocial fissures across families, regions, and communities. Contemporary Indian novels revisit this event not merely as historical record but as a palimpsest of wounds that resurface across generations, refracted through memory, silence, and inherited affect. Drawing on trauma studies and memory studies, this paper examines how selected Anglophone and translated Indian works stage intergenerational trauma through narrative strategies such as child narrators, genealogical storytelling, and counter-archives embedded in domestic objects, recipes, letters, and family lore. Taken together, these novels show that Partition is never only an event situated in 1947; it is an ongoing structure that continually reorganizes kinship, gendered vulnerability, and the ethics of belonging.
Methodologically, the paper undertakes a qualitative, interpretive analysis of key novels frequently taught and discussed in South Asian literary studies—Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines, Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India (also published as Ice-Candy-Man), Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters, and Shauna Singh Baldwin's What the Body Remembers—with occasional reference to oral-history and critical works that inform their horizon of reception. Concepts from Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as the "confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge" guide the close readings, while Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" frames the novels' preoccupation with the generation after—those who "remember" the event only through stories, images, and behaviors they grow up among.
The findings indicate that contemporary Indian Partition fiction performs two interconnected labors: first, it archives experiences historically marginalized by statist narratives—especially the gendered and subaltern—and second, it models ethical modes of working-through, what Dominick LaCapra distinguishes from compulsive "acting-out," by placing characters within dialogic, reparative scenes that risk vulnerability and cultivate recognition. By staging memory's transmissions and blockages in intergenerational households, these novels foreground the politics of listening and the fragile but necessary work of cross-generational care.

Keywords
Partition literature; intergenerational trauma; postmemory; memory studies; gender and violence; South Asian fiction; Amitav Ghosh; Bapsi Sidhwa; Manju Kapur; Shauna Singh Baldwin.

I. Introduction

In the last four decades, South Asian Anglophone and translated literatures have persistently returned to Partition as a site of narrative excavation. The unprecedented scale of displacement and violence—twelve million uprooted, nearly one million dead, and tens of thousands of women abducted or raped—cannot be captured by numbers alone; yet these numbers do index the event's magnitude and ethical demand. As Urvashi Butalia writes in a succinct summation of the catastrophe, "Twelve million people were displaced as a result of Partition. Nearly one million died. Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted…"; the shockwaves of these ruptures continue to reverberate in family systems, communal relations, and national imaginations across the subcontinent and its diasporas. Contemporary Indian novels frequently take up this aftermath, staging living rooms and courtyards as the primary theaters where history is re-narrated or disavowed, wounds are named or sealed over, and descendants wrestle with the legacies they inherit.

At stake is not only the representation of past violence but also the form of narrative that can hold such violence. Trauma's belatedness, its tendency to return in dreams, bodily symptoms, or compulsive repetitions, presses on novelistic technique: fractured chronologies, polyphonic perspectives, and interleaved personal-public archives become tools to rearrange time and voice. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, for instance, deconstructs the disciplined line of the border by exposing its dependence on the imagination—"a place does not merely exist, it has to be invented in one's imagination"—and in doing so discovers the psychological borders that persist within families and communities long after the political line is drawn.

Moreover, the turn to intergenerational frames in contemporary fiction recognizes that the Partition story is never exhausted by survivor testimony alone. Children and grandchildren inherit an affective economy—shame, silence, nostalgia, rage—that both connects and estranges them from their elders. Hirsch's conceptualization of "postmemory" precisely names this relation: the next generation "remembers" through transmitted stories and images that "seem to constitute memories in their own right," blurring the lines between lived experience and received knowledge. Novels that dramatize these transmissions (and their failures) ask readers to consider not simply what happened in 1947 but how the happening is made present again in the everyday life of the home.

II. Literature Review

Criticism on Partition literature has moved from early documentary impulses toward nuanced theorization of memory, gender, and everyday life. Foundational work by historians and oral-historians such as Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence*) and Gyanendra Pandey (*Remembering Partition*) demonstrates how official historiographies marginalize domestic and gendered experiences while privileging elite national narratives. Literary scholars have extended these insights to argue that the novel form—capacious, dialogic, ethically charged—can register intimacy and ambivalence in ways conventional political histories cannot. The result is a critical consensus that Partition is not a single catastrophe but a long afterlife that unfolds in kitchens, bedrooms, and neighborhood squares, precisely the spaces contemporary fiction returns to with stubborn attention.

Trauma theory has provided another lexicon for understanding this afterlife. Caruth's insistence that trauma is marked by belatedness and incomprehensibility and LaCapra's distinction between "acting-out" and "working-through" have been mobilized to read Partition novels as laboratories of ethical relation. "Acting-out" names compulsive repetition, melancholic fixation, and foreclosure; "working-through" names critical remembrance that does not reduce loss to possession but seeks dialogic acknowledgment and limited repair. These frameworks, when carefully historicized, help critics identify how narrative techniques—repetition, silence, nonlinearity—index psychic economies and social climates in the text.

Finally, memory studies and visual culture have inspired attention to household artifacts in fiction: family albums, dowry trunks, embroidery patterns, hand-written recipes, and letters operate as counter-archives that both reveal and conceal the past. Hirsch's "postmemory" has been decisive here, emphasizing how the "generation after" inhabits affective atmospheres created by such objects. Critics trace how contemporary Indian novels turn to these artifacts as narrative devices that summon ghosts, structure plot, and demand ethical listening. In this way, literary scholarship increasingly understands these works not just as stories about Partition but as experiments in how to inherit catastrophe without repeating its violences.

III. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close reading, intertextual comparison, and historically informed theory. The corpus centers on four widely taught and researched novels that collectively span multiple communities (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsi), regions (Bengal and Punjab), and narrative strategies (child narration, multi-generational sagas, fragmented chronologies): Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991), Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998), and Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999). The selection is not exhaustive; rather, it is strategic, aiming to illuminate formal and thematic patterns central to intergenerational trauma in the contemporary canon.

Analytic attention focuses on three clusters: (1) narrative temporality and point of view (memory's falterings, repetitions, and silences); (2) the domestic archive (objects, bodily habits, and kinship rituals as carriers of memory); and (3) ethics and repair (how texts stage acknowledgment, apology, caregiving, or refusal). To avoid overgeneralization, each reading situates formal choices in particular socio-historical contexts—Calcutta and Dhaka riots and migrations in *The Shadow Lines*; Lahore's communal fracturing and the vulnerability of working-class women in *Cracking India*; the entanglement of nationalist politics and female education in *Difficult Daughters*; and the gendered stakes of honor, desire, and survival in *What the Body Remembers*.

The study understands theory as heuristic rather than prescriptive. Caruth, Hirsch, and LaCapra are brought into conversation with South Asian feminist histories (e.g., Butalia) to prevent abstract universalization of trauma from eclipsing local forms of suffering and resistance. Quotations are used sparingly to honor copyright limits and to foreground the novels' own rhetorical force. Where possible, short, well-known lines are cited to anchor interpretive claims—for instance, Ghosh's suggestion that place must be "invented in one's imagination," a formulation that helps us read borders as psychic and narrative constructions as much as geopolitical lines.

IV. Postmemory and the Family Archive in Contemporary Indian Novels

Postmemory is not only a theoretical chain of transmission; in fiction it is a sensory atmosphere. In *The Shadow Lines*, the unnamed narrator's understanding of Partition is mediated by familial anecdotes, maps, and stories that travel between Kolkata and Dhaka. The novel's central conceit—that borders are sustained by collective imaginaries—suggests that the narrator inherits both the fear and longing those imaginaries engender. The domestic archive in this text is dialogic: stories told at the dining table become counter-maps that contest cartographic certainties. This "invention" of place in imagination is not escapist; it is a technique of survival against political abstractions that threaten to erase lived attachments.

Cracking India dramatizes postmemory through its child narrator, Lenny, whose sensory descriptions offer a fractured but potent record of Lahore's communal unravelling. The child's vantage point exposes how ordinary gestures—visiting parks, sharing sweets, body language among adults—become saturated with danger. Scholars have noted that the child's point of view "historicize[s] the loss of innocence by reconstructing the past through memory," thereby staging how trauma enters a family's everyday speech and silence. The novel's recurrent attention to Ayah's body as a contested site reveals how the domestic worker's vulnerability becomes a grim index of national violence, linking the child's education in desire and danger to the city's political combustion.

In *Difficult Daughters*, postmemory takes the shape of a daughter's belated quest to understand her mother Virmati's transgressive choices during the 1930s and 1940s. The daughter's archival labor—piecing together letters, stories, and hearsay—produces a narrative that is as much about the daughter's identity as it is about the mother's. The family archive here is stubbornly incomplete, and the novel asks whether the "truth" of the past is ever recoverable without re-injuring those who endured it. By staging the limits of knowing, Kapur's text insists that the ethics of inheritance requires humility: to approach the past with the knowledge that one's desire for coherence may conflict with others' need for privacy and survival.

V. Gendered Bodies, Silence, and Repair

Partition's violence was disproportionately borne by women's bodies, whose abduction, forced conversion, and sexual assault became the obscene stage for communal honor. As Butalia's research underscores, the numbers are staggering not for their statistical neatness but for the breadth of suffering they gesture toward: "Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted…"—violence that ripples through marriages, reputations, and daughters' futures. Contemporary Indian novels unflinchingly register this gendered calculus, yet they also document women's agency: their tactical silences, clandestine solidarities, and small acts of refusal.

Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* is exemplary in staging a feminist phenomenology of trauma. "I know, because my body remembers without benefit of words," declares one of its voices, insisting that pain endures not only as narrative but as somatic memory—gesture, startle, sleeplessness. The novel's attention to embodied memory contradicts masculinist accounts that reduce Partition to diplomatic failure or military strategy. By tracing desire, jealousy, and care among women who must navigate patriarchal and communal pressures, the text proposes that repair, if possible, begins in practices of everyday care—feeding, bathing, tending to the sick—rather than in the courtroom or parliament.

Silence, too, is double-edged in these novels: it can collude with erasure, but it can also shield the vulnerable. *Cracking India*'s representation of the "fallen women" camps, the uncertain fates of abducted women, and the ambivalent rescues dramatize the moral complexity that both states and families preferred not to face directly. Lenny's partial comprehension, framed by adult evasions, is itself an ethical lesson in reading silences: what can be said, by whom, at what cost. The novels therefore train readers in a practice of listening that does not force confession but makes space for testimony when and if it comes—an essential precondition for intergenerational repair.

VI. Discussion and Analysis

Across these texts, intergenerational trauma appears not as a singular inherited wound but as an ecology of affects that circulate unevenly: fear that lodges in a grandparent's admonitions about certain neighborhoods; shame that hardens into family secrets; nostalgia that idealizes a pre-Partition past while pathologizing present attachments. The novels' formal strategies—nonlinear time in *The Shadow Lines*, child focalization in *Cracking India*, genealogical reconstruction in *Difficult Daughters*, and embodied interiority in *What the Body Remembers*—render these affects legible and challenge readers to consider how they are reproduced or interrupted at home. In this sense, fiction performs documentary and ethical labor simultaneously: it records private histories and experiments with reparative forms of relation.

Theoretical frames sharpen what the novels already intimate. Caruth helps us see why narration falters at crucial moments: the trauma refuses full symbolic capture; it returns belatedly, sometimes in the descendant's symptoms. Hirsch's postmemory explains why the daughter in *Difficult Daughters* treats fragments as if they

were her own memories; the past "was transmitted… so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in [their] own right." LaCapra's working-through offers a vocabulary for the novels' tentative closures—letters shared, graves visited, stories told—acts that do not erase the past but allow characters to inhabit it without perpetual re-injury. In short, the novels neither monumentalize nor trivialize Partition; they teach readers practices of remembrance that are at once critical and tender.

Finally, these works critique the fiction of sovereign, impermeable borders by revealing how lines drawn on maps slice through families and psyches. Ghosh's meditational insight—"a place does not merely exist, it has to be invented in one's imagination"—exposes the imaginary labor that sustains border-thinking and urges readers to invent forms of belonging that refuse communal hatred. At the same time, the novels resist romantic reconciliations: trauma is not overcome by ideology but metabolized through sustained care, honest speech, and a willingness to face what has been disavowed. That these lessons emerge from kitchens and courtyards rather than parliaments is the point; it is in the mundane intimacies of family life that nations are made and unmade.

VII. Conclusion

Contemporary Indian novels reanimate Partition as a living, intergenerational question rather than a finished chapter. By centering the afterlives of 1947—its lingering fears, its silences made of love and shame, its fragile gestures of repair—these works insist that national catastrophe is inseparable from domestic life. They reframe history as a care practice, one that requires readers to honor testimony, heed silence, and protect those who risk telling. In doing so, they challenge the triumphalist narratives of nation-building that cannot accommodate vulnerability without misnaming it as weakness.

If literature cannot legislate justice, it can teach the habits that justice requires. The novels examined here model a vigilant imagination—one that invents places that are hospitable to plural attachments rather than hostile to difference. Their intergenerational framing underscores that repair is a relay, not a sprint: the work of one generation seeds possibilities for the next. In this respect, Partition literature is not only about South Asia; it offers a transnational pedagogy in how societies might inherit catastrophe without reproducing it.

Future research might bring newer texts—including Dalit, Adivasi, and Northeast perspectives; queer and trans re-tellings; and graphic narratives—into the conversation, and place South Asian Partition novels in comparative frames with Holocaust, Balkan, or Rwandan genocide literatures. Such work would extend the argument made here: that literature is an irreplaceable laboratory for ethical listening and intergenerational care, especially where political institutions have faltered.

References

[1]. Baldwin, S. S. (1999). *What the Body Remembers*. New Delhi: Rupa.
[2]. Butalia, U. (1998). *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
[3]. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
[4]. Ghosh, A. (1988). *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal.
[5]. Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Kapur, M. (1998). *Difficult Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin.
[6]. LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
[7]. Sidhwa, B. (1991). *Cracking India* (U.S. title of *Ice-Candy-Man*). Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed.
[8]. Doley, D. K. (2020). Partition trauma, nostalgia, and rootlessness: A reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. *Drishti: The Sight*.
[9]. Gautam, R. S. (2021). Child as narrator in *Cracking India*. *IJELLH*.
[10]. Hutchison, E. (2016). Trauma and political community. In *Affective Communities in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. .
[11]. Litcharts Editors. (n.d.). *The Shadow Lines* quotes.
[12]. ResearchGate entries on Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (various).
[13]. Yad Vashem. (1998). "Acting-Out and Working-Through Trauma."