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Sukeshi Kamra

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### Abstract

In 1994, the editors of the *Indian Review of Books* lamented: 'it would seem that the great writing that a cataclysmic event like the Partition should have produced is yet to come in full measure, and offer the catharsis that only literature perhaps can' (1). In the same year, Alok Bhalla, the editor of one of the first Englishlanguage collections of Partition literature reportedly stated in an interview: 'there is not just a lack of great literature, there is, more seriously, a lack of history' (qtd. in Ravikant 160).<sup>1</sup> This lament has taken on the force of tradition with Professor Jaidev commenting, in 1996, that Partition literature 'is not a gallery of well-wrought urns' (2) and Ian Talbot, in 1997, stating that the 'stereotypes and stylised emotional responses' typical of 'lesser novelists' is 'pervasive in much of the literature of partition, whether it has been produced by contemporaries or those distanced from the actual events' (105-106). As recently as 2001, an otherwise valuable collection of fiction and critical analysis of Partition, *Translating Partition*, opens with: 'The best of the literature that emerged in the wake of Partition' (Ravikant and Saint xi), reminding us that there is much literary production that is ignored because it has been found aesthetically wanting.

SUKESHI KAMRA

## Ruptured Histories: Literature on the Partition (India, 1947)

In 1994, the editors of the *Indian Review of Books* lamented: ‘it would seem that the great writing that a cataclysmic event like the Partition should have produced is yet to come in full measure, and offer the catharsis that only literature perhaps can’ (1). In the same year, Alok Bhalla, the editor of one of the first English-language collections of Partition literature reportedly stated in an interview: ‘there is not just a lack of great literature, there is, more seriously, a lack of history’ (qtd. in Ravikant 160).<sup>1</sup> This lament has taken on the force of tradition with Professor Jaidev commenting, in 1996, that Partition literature ‘is not a gallery of well-wrought urns’ (2) and Ian Talbot, in 1997, stating that the ‘stereotypes and stylised emotional responses’ typical of ‘lesser novelists’ is ‘pervasive in much of the literature of partition, whether it has been produced by contemporaries or those distanced from the actual events’ (105–106). As recently as 2001, an otherwise valuable collection of fiction and critical analysis of Partition, *Translating Partition*, opens with: ‘The best of the literature that emerged in the wake of Partition’ (Ravikant and Saint xi), reminding us that there is much literary production that is ignored because it has been found aesthetically wanting.<sup>2</sup>

Although I am not sure what exactly constitutes ‘great’ literature nor am I sure that there would be cross-cultural (within India) agreement about it, I suspect the disappointment voiced by many in the academic community, and the scant discussion of such literature, has something to do with the faithful observance of the literal we find in this literature as much as with the seemingly stereotypical treatment of Partition experience — close to identical plots, characters, descriptions of violence, attempts at rationalising, slippages even (in general privileging one religious community over another).

Such a dismissal, regrettable for its own sake, is also regrettable because Partition literature has the potential to act as an intervention in Indian historiography — by forcing attention to Indian social practice, which continues to be rendered uncomfortable by what Partition, the darker side of Independence, made visible. In other words, such a dismissal prevents us from extending consideration to such literature for what it is — a response to a dominant historiography that has made Partition the ‘other’ of Independence, as Ravikant states: ‘The nation has grown up, ritually counting and celebrating birthdays ... while systematically consigning the Partition to oblivion’ (160). To take the point further, as he does in the article, the remembering of ‘Independence’ appears to

have *required* a forgetting of 'Partition'. It is not accidental. We have, that is, inherited and are perpetuating a cathected history. Partition, the event and experience, is thus 'remembered' only in and through the remembering of an event (happier) associated with it, Independence.

Considering whether and how Partition literature has engaged with, resisted or challenged dominant historiography since 1947 requires an interrogation of the surface of such literature, an interrogation that is invited if we notice the regular appearance of structural and narrative choices signifying an intention on the part of writers to challenge attempts to surround their experience with the contours of uniformity (for instance, their deliberate and strategic choice of fictional autobiography, that stresses the subjectivity of experience).<sup>3</sup> A few others have also drawn attention to the inadequacy of response to Partition literature. Ravikant and Saint, for instance, suggest the need to notice destabilising literary tropes when they comment that literary critics have ignored 'the use of irony and parody as modes of undermining stereotypes in literary discourse' (xxv). In 'Partition Narratives: Some Observations', Arjun Mahey treats a few short stories on Partition in terms of 'structural focus' and 'epiphany', the first of which, he claims, is universal to the literature (143) and the second, given his identification of it with 'the event itself' must be equally universal ('All Partition stories have such an epiphany' [144]).

It is in the interest of opening up enquiry into Partition literature as a literature of response that I direct attention to an apparently invisible, because naturalised, dimension of literary text, the spatial.<sup>4</sup> As Henri Lefebvre has pointed out, this is a dimension that is not so much a naturally occurring phenomenon as it is produced by social relations, that it in turn reproduces, maintains, transforms as well as mediates. Literary text is permeated with spatial representation of social forms, practices and ideas — as Lefebvre himself points out and as Mikhail Bakhtin has addressed in his discussion of the 'chronotope' in the novel — and can be considered to produce views of the complex, contestatory social, political, cultural, economic matrix of a given society — its social order, so to speak.<sup>5</sup> By reading Partition literature not only in terms of 'things in space' (Lefebvre 37), that trains attention on characters and plot — that, in turn, apparently leads to disappointment in the instance of Partition literature — but also in terms of its 'actual production of space' (Lefebvre 37), perhaps we will arrive at a different sense of the attempt on the part of survivors to articulate the crisis that permeates their writing.

As might be expected, this generally naturalised dimension (assuming that the geo-social 'context' in a text is merely that — inert and functioning as the delimiter of geographical and temporal limits for the drama in the text) is not an overt concern in all Partition literature. Yet it certainly is in some Partition literature, in which it rivals event for its ability to 'speak' the crisis. Such an active and self-conscious production of space in literary responses to a catastrophic experience is not in itself surprising; a collective crisis such as Partition tends to

make social order more visible than it otherwise is, especially if it, or a critical part of it, is 'blamed' for the catastrophe.<sup>6</sup>

An article affords only a very limited scope for a discussion of a multitude of texts (especially if the texts are not well known and require summarising, as is the case with much Partition literature), and here I restrict discussion to some short stories that appear overtly concerned with thematising social order itself.<sup>7</sup> The stories I consider have, in the main, been translated into English, were written between the 1970s and 1990s, and have been written by individuals geographically, socially and culturally dislocated as a result of the partition in the Punjab.<sup>8</sup>

## I

In a number of short stories, the historical moment — which is always remembered as Partition, not Independence or the end of 'the Raj' — is thematised as a seismic, catastrophic shift of the ground beneath one's feet. In this, the constructed historical moment of the texts — moving from an indefinite period before Partition, to Partition and to an equally indeterminate period post-Partition — borrows from the rhetoric that prevailed in 1947, at least if speeches made by leaders and the media are any indication. In an attempt to reassure the population, particularly that of Punjab and Bengal, leaders and the media described the shaky historical moment as a temporary confusion in an otherwise secured, established trajectory of history.<sup>9</sup> Far from miming this rhetoric, such literature turns it on its head, so to speak, by emphasising the liminal as a violent and catastrophic break and altering the causal chain so as to locate Partition as an originary moment, with the force of 'dating' history backwards and forwards. (In the dominant culture 'Independence' remains the event with this same signifiatory power, but in not quite as absolute a manner as Partition for survivors). Hence time and history turn into a 'pre' and a 'post', with many of the usual implications of such a construction of individual and collective identity. Narratives 'chart' the historical moment by performing 'the shift' with Partition at its centre.

Texts I have chosen to discuss (and many more) fracture the history they problematise in different places. Some trace a trajectory that originates in a seemingly indeterminate pre-Partition and concludes with Partition. Others trace a trajectory that takes post-Partition as its starting point and ends with a return of Partition. Yet others confine consideration to the liminal phase of Partition itself. Given the different locations of fracture, we encounter an emphasis on different facets of what was a shared experience of social, cultural, geographical, political and psychological dislocation.

Texts in which the narrativising of Partition ends in the liminal space itself, suggesting the prevalence of an eschatological imagination, a memorialising of a (privileged) social order appears to be an imperative. Not surprisingly, there are a number of such stories and they have contributed to a culture of nostalgia.

In this too, the cultural imagination borrows from a very specific and entrenched notion of community, quite the opposite of the one advanced by the Nehruvian Congress (modern nation state). Pre-Partition social economy is read into some indefinite, but not quite 'mythic' past, for it contains disruptive and violent historical interventions in the form of invasions that led to the mixed cultural and religious reality to which all texts allude by virtue of the very reference to its multi-religious nature. It is hence not imagined as lying outside of material relations. This suggests, theoretically at least, that the textualising of the social order in literary form is not driven by a desire to idealise a uniform harmony, but to give expression to existing states of amalgamation and tensions.<sup>10</sup> Partha Chatterjee has described this pre-Partition formation, the Hindustani term for which is 'mohalla', as a 'fuzzy' one. The term, he suggests, describes a community that does not 'claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of selfhood of its members', and that 'though definable with precision for all practical purposes of social interaction', does not 'require its members to ask how many of them there were in the world' (223). In a similar vein, Assaad Azzi comments:

it is unlikely that individuals in these societies represented themselves as members of coherent and unified cultural entities; rather, they probably saw themselves as belonging to one locale in a constellation of locales (villages, towns, regions) which were self-governing but which had informal networks of trade, exchange, and social relationships which made boundaries between them fuzzy at best. (122)<sup>11</sup>

I would add to these attempts at articulating pre or non-enumerative notions of identity two further comments: typically the mohalla existed more as practice (than idea) and tended to function as the smallest unit of identity, a view expressed also by Prakash Tandon who comments that the best description of the mohalla is

as a multi-unit society, in which each caste had its functional place without oppression by a high caste. The different castes were united into biradaris, literally meaning brotherhoods.... These biradaris were loose and undefined, but in time of need they formed themselves into close-knit groups. They gave you certain rights and expected some duties. (46)

As the description provided by Tandon suggests, the practice was primarily social and most clearly expressed in ritualised and formalised rights and duties. Finally, Karl Marx's description of pre-capitalist societies is helpful. It suggests the foundational logic of many such societies is custom itself and points to the multivalent and multilineal forms of exchange typical, indeed, of the mohalla.<sup>12</sup>

Read as practice, the mohalla was indeed complex — maintaining distinctions of biradiri, observing collective ritualised practice of cultural and religious hybridity, managing the seemingly infinite gradations of sameness and difference without imploding along religious, caste, gender, and economic class lines, to name only a few of its functions. However, in much Partition literature, community as practice is reductively and obsessively concerned with making one point only

— communal co-existence. Consider Ashfaq Ahmad's 'The Shepherd', a first-person account of an individual's rite of passage into adulthood, in which Partition figures prominently. The fictional autobiography begins with an image, of childhood, by which its writer is able to lay a claim on behalf of his inherited community to its (what I can only call) rhizomic structure — he is woken rudely in the middle of the night by his (Hindu) teacher and forced to work at translating (presumably) Punjabi into Persian, an apparently typical occurrence. This initial scene of the community's past casually locates several givens, all problematised and destroyed by Partition (in the text and historically): the Muslim speaker has a Hindu teacher; he is living in the latter's house — in itself a claim of the affiliative, extended familial network of the community across religious lines; his teacher is fluent in Persian despite being Hindu; and finally, the scene points to the level of trust and association amongst individuals with different religious affiliations — the narrator does not differentiate between his biological family and this family in which his belonging is affiliative. As the narrator describes it, then, his psycho-social, cultural life was lived somewhere between the home of his (biological) Muslim family and the home of his Hindu teacher. The image is perpetuated in the narrator's reaching into the even more remote past of the community, to the time of his teacher's youth — spent also in the same community — by way of a conversation in which his teacher informs him that he himself, a shepherd, was able to acquire an education because of his (Muslim) 'master' who taught him because he 'was fond of teaching' (20). What he is taught, Hindu and Persian texts, emphasises a tradition of inter-cultural learning.

This verbal reconstruction of pre-Partition community is clearly a pre-occupation, taking up most of the narrative and offering typical social practices, but it appears to be largely in the interest of describing the same complex interweaving of cultural, language and social interests, and drawing to our attention tensions existing along more universally 'expected' lines of, say, tradition and modernity ('I never did approve of the manner in which he treated me. I still don't. Perhaps, I don't approve of it because I am now a learned man with modern ideas, while he was a man full of old fashioned learning' [14]), embattled familial relations (the narrator spends a considerable amount of time and energy describing Dauji's wife as the cause of much violent disruption in the former's household), and class (he points to the presence of rich landowners and the disenfranchised).

The narrative concludes with the violent entry of Partition's economy into the mohalla, described, not surprisingly, more as a violation at the symbolic than at the literal level (though it is certainly that too): Dauji is dragged through the streets by 'outsiders' (but by the new definition of nation and community 'one's own'), forced to recite the Kalma (which he knows only too well and is able to recite faultlessly), and physically and verbally abused and divested of the symbol of his Brahmin identity — his 'bodi'. The closing sentence of this truncated narrative is: 'Bareheaded, Dauji begun to walk behind the goats as if he was an angel with long and flowing hair' (40). The narrative ends, then, with

the desecralisation of community space by a concept of enumeration, one which local troublemakers are able to employ to devastating effect. The direction of our attention to the excessive, overdetermined image of the revered teacher, however, suggests that Partition's more devastating impact is far less subject to articulation than is the horrific physical violence and has to do with subjectivity. In re-reading the figure of the teacher such that he is removed to the iconic, the fictional writer removes his own inability at the time to act — an inability he addresses when he states 'Scared, I ran to the other side of the crowd' (40). Destruction of the community, then, is to be read as an inability on the part of its members to know how to act in the face of shifting notions of agency, a momentary stasis which, I would suggest, is located in the only conventional terms available to describe the response of the self in such a moment — 'fear'. (Fear, after all, speaks of a sense of one's entrapment in and by inadequacy; that is, by the sense that one is incapable of acting).

Post-Partition community has its origins, then, this text suggests, in a kind of reorganising of social space all of which occurred — took effect — rather suddenly and violently during Partition: Partition rendered visible the fact of social space itself, something that possibly explains the enumerative terms so present in these texts (naming characters in terms of their religious inheritance or practice, for instance). Partition also legislated the appearance of 'foreigners' and equally legislated the disappearance of 'one's own'. Finally it reduced an entire community to a kind of ontological uncertainty — ontological certainty until then apparently being indistinguishable from collective social practice.

A variation on the same reading of the Partition experience is to be found in Ismat Chughtai's 'Roots'. This narrative too indicates its historical engagement with Partition in the opening: the children play 'as if nothing had happened on 15th August' (9), (note the significance of this date) — a 'happening' that is described as a botched-up operation performed by an inept surgeon:

the British had left, and ... before leaving, they had wounded us so deeply that it would take years for our wounds to heal. The operation on India had been performed by such incompetent hands and with such blunt instruments that generations had been destroyed. Rivers of blood flowed everywhere. And no one had the courage to even stitch the open wounds. (9)

The engagement is even more keen than may appear at first, for Chughtai draws on a discourse of 'Western medicine' that was a favourite of political cartoons and editorial columns in 1947 when commenting on the (proposed) vivisection of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Pre-Partition Mewar is described in terms of the kind of affiliation also described in Ahmed's 'The Shepherd': the intricacies and intermeshed existence of a Hindu and a Muslim family form the domestic economy. The narrator establishes neighbourliness as an affiliation bordering on filiation. That is, s/he mixes two oppositional discourses (filiation/affiliation) to undermine this very



opposition and locate pre-Partition social practice in such a non-distinction. Comments such as the following proliferate: 'When Abba had a paralytic stroke, Roopchandji had retired from the hospital and his entire practice was restricted to our family and his' (13), and 'After Abba's death, Doctor Sahib not only continued to love the family, but also became aware of his responsibilities towards it' (13). Note the narrator's assumption that what we would refer to as affiliative bonds are most fully realised in notions of duty we would consider restricted to the nuclear family. Note also the insistence that bonds of duty are not manufactured but 'real' (here we recognise the governing presence of the customary).

This narrative too marks the moment of 'crisis' or fall in terms of an alteration of the very social architecture of Mewar, once it is invaded (offered as an inevitability) by the same sentiments as obtain in the world beyond: 'for the last few days the atmosphere ... had become so foul that all the Muslims had gone into hiding' (9). This reference to a shift in community organisation points to a rupturing of the affiliative basis of the social structure. Forced spatial reorganisation of Mewar acts to contextualise the emotional and psychological as well as physical rupture of the Muslim family (the focus of the narrative). While some of the family readily, and not so readily, adopt the new enumerative thinking, others resist (including the narrator). The difference concretises as opposing views on what was indeed the question of the day: should one move to Pakistan (or India as the case may have been) or not? The narrator's position is made clear in the disapproval marking the moment of disruption — the arrival of a family member who convinces the family to leave: 'Things changed, however, the moment my elder brother arrived from Ajmer [Rajasthan]. He incited everyone, aroused their anger, made them lose their sense of reason' (10). All except one member, the matriarch, agree to leave. Her resistance to the new, enumerative thinking is expressed as a vow of silence, or so the narrator suggests: 'She ... refused to speak, since the day the tri-colour had been unfurled over Doctor Sahib's house and the League's flag over ours' (14).

The narrative concludes with what I consider to be an imagining of two resolutions to the narrative of individual and collective rupture that would normally be alternatives. The final scene, so to speak, opens with a description of the matriarch, apparently delirious: 'All of a sudden the entire house came alive; all the ghosts of the house, it seemed to that unhappy woman, had decided to gather around her' [19]). There is sufficient ambiguity attending the concluding scene to leave us uncertain about the status of the ending: does the family return or is it indeed a fantasy (as 'ghosts' suggest)? If the family has been returned (due in no small part to the determination of their Hindu neighbour), Chughtai has exercised the right to employ *deus ex machine* to remove an horrific and destructive ending to the realm of the bearable by writing a redemptive end. Given the Hindu neighbour's instrumental role, such an ending affirms the affiliative.

In addition to performing this historical shift from within the perspective afforded by the mohalla, the narrator theorises the historical moment in an intriguing manner, one that suggests not only the forced interruption by categories of enumeration (that we know was an historical reality) but posits the same intervention as a simplification and reduction of identity itself to the most superficial of levels. The narrator states: 'but in the Mewar Hindus and Muslims had become so intermingled' (9) that 'it was difficult to tell them apart from their names, features or clothes' (9). These were, of course, the very unstable signs, on whose 'correct' or incorrect reading one's survival hinged. The chances of an incorrect reading were staggeringly large, for reasons suggested by the narrator's comment: Hindus and Muslims alike wear saris and salwar kameezes, Hindu and Muslims share names, Hindus and Muslims can recite the Kalma or from the Hindu epics and so on. Such a theorising clearly speaks to Chughtai's involvement with the very 'illogicality' of Partition and by extension, definition of national identity that is based on the assumption of religious and cultural exclusivity (to the extent that reciting the kalma is supposed proof that one is a Muslim, for instance).

This is a pattern one encounters often in Partition literature. Narratives direct attention to a social practice that, because it is offered as the 'everyday', we are required to read as the (much valued) norm. By ending in or invoking Partition as desecralised liminality, these narratives paradoxically read teleology into a past concretised for us as space/mohalla which is expressive of non-enumerative living, but also suggest an attempt is being made to articulate a notion that society and space are co-constituting. Hence, in so many stories, Partition marks the end of a social practice and the (space itself) mohalla (although the term continues to be used to describe localities in north India). You might say they date the entry into a dominantly temporal economy from a dominantly spatial one.

There are many other conclusions these texts, in their concern with historical moment as social order, encourage, particularly about community as practice lost to Partition. As suggested earlier, we can read such stories as emphasising one aspect of the Partition experience — its bringing to an end a notion of community. We can even speculate about the reasons for such an insistent and narrowed reading of community as practice: there is a need to challenge the dominant culture's laying of the violence of Partition at its feet by insisting on 'communalism'. We can also read the same focus differently: as consciously suggesting or allowing us to consider the mohalla and the social order it signified as the only space of resistance to geo- and socio-political colonial architecture. Here proof lies not so much in what is present — the shape of the social order in these texts — but what is not. The mohalla is offered in these texts as a completely separate, autonomous unit, without even the shadow of colonial presence — there are no signs of colonial administration or its many apparatuses (most notably

the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Police Service), not even the Indian urban elite. Partition, then, marks the violent entry of colonial reason, in the form of the categories of enumeration and a rendering of the mohalla into the type of community required by the same, at the very moment that supposedly signalled its dismantling. It marks the very delayed entry of colonialism in the psyche of inhabitants of the mohalla.

There are, however, some texts that act as partial intervention in the kind of reading Partition offered by Chughtai and Ahmad. For example, Suraiya Qasim's 'Where Did She Belong?' questions the notion that Partition erased social practice of pre-Partition communities, thereby suggesting that the relatively benign (if not quite idealised) reading provided in a majority of texts is achieved at the expense of the othered in these communities. Such a narrative does not deny that space and social practice are co-constituting, but it does question or challenge the readings provided by Chughtai, Ahmad and others of social space. 'Where Did She Belong?' traces the same trajectory as the stories discussed earlier, but shifts the locale to the literal and metaphoric outskirts of pre-Partition society — the red light district — thereby offering a comment on the seemingly universal culture of the pre-Partition mohalla by virtue of its vexed but established relationship with the latter.

The narrative suggests an authorial uncertainty or a split focus. It is unsure whether to make the story a social critique of pre-Partition formations — as it is critically concerned with the exploitation of prostitutes — or to make the illegality of Partition its focus. That is to say, the narrative appears to be more concerned with exploring the interrogatory potential of the particular form of social othering when it comes to considering the same question as we find informing the narratives discussed earlier: was communalism always already a reality in mohallas in the Punjab. At the centre of the text is a much valued prostitute, Munni Bai, who is uncertain of her religious identity. The brothel owner, Ma, informs her that she was found (abandoned at birth) 'equidistant from a mosque and a temple' (110). The point this narrative makes is that in pre-Partition India religion was only one indicator of identity. Munni Bai would also like to know who her parents were, what her mother was like, what her father did for a living, and whether Munni Bai was the name given to her at birth. These, we are told, 'were the questions Munni Bai never tired of asking herself' (109). The text comments obliquely, on the illogical fact of religion becoming *the* demarcator of identity by textualising the historical moment as one in which even prostitutes, who are most likely to remain 'untouched' because 'in the world in which she lived, parentage did not matter; looks and youth alone did' (109), are forced to relocate. Here is where the story reflects critically and differently on the historical moment: relocation is literally only an exchange of one geographic location for another, not even a cultural let alone a social one. The short story concludes with Munni Bai and her co-workers occupying an established red-light district that even looks the same, abandoned by a group of

Muslim prostitutes who, presumably, will settle into one of the abandoned quarters in cities across the border. The final irony is that here, as in Lahore, they are patronised by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh clients.

Clearly, Partition is offered as an historical event that changes the fortunes of some: outsiders continue to be outsiders — commodified in both social spaces, they experience little difficulty in ‘settling’, or in understanding how the ‘new’ social geography works. In both places and systems — pre-Partition social economy of Lahore and post-Partition social economy of Delhi — the red-light district legitimises the notion of the family. If the whorehouse offers an interesting twist to racial anxiety in colonial discourse, in the Partition era it offers an equally interesting twist to communal anxiety and distinctions. Set against texts that choose to locate inter-cultural permeability in the essentialised concept of community expressed in the term *mohalla*, this text more harshly locates it in the politics of sexual change. Yet this text too appears interested in rehearsing the historical moment of Partition primarily to think through the issue of vivisection of the country and the reasons for such Partition that have become part of the commonsense of the nation — the ‘commonsense’ of which is questioned.

Features of the Partition experience that dominate texts where the only chronotope present is the one associated with liminality and crisis — that is, texts that begin and end in Partition — are significantly different. In such texts, Partition is its own self-defining, self-constituting space and time. It appears consonant with Bakhtin’s description of the chronotope of the ‘threshold’. Here time is, as Bakhtin suggests, ‘essentially simultaneous — it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time’ (248), and space is liminal — manifesting in literary texts as settings of corridors, stairways, and the like. In this type of Partition literature, we find more culturally and historically specific images that speak of liminality and locate it in the gothic. Spatial locations of refugee camps, trains and foot-columns proliferate and they are almost always violated or violent spaces, suggesting that the Partition/Independence economy is properly located in violence. That is to say, in such texts Partition is offered as an experience of primarily spatial proportions — as an experience of spatial dissolution. In its emphasis on the spatial, such literature resists the dominant culture’s reading of the Partition as a political and historical ‘event’ — that is, a primarily temporal experience — focussed on a political centre and its fractious, ideological debates. In a formulation shared by much non-fictional testimonial, then, such literature offers Partition as a literal and metaphoric space that is polluted by a history that the dominant culture consistently buries in the positive trope of independence.

Probably one of the better known stories set in Partition, Sadat Hasan Manto’s ‘Cold Meat’, takes place in a hotel room — a quintessentially liminal space — and stages the pollution of the domestic economy by an infinitely-extending violence outside the hotel. Violence-laced sexual passion, sexual jealousy and

hints of the violence committed by Ishwar Singh (the protagonist) while ‘out’ are described at length in the story only to converge on a single image — the dagger — which is used to perform an act of violence within, as Kulwant Kaur (his wife/mistress) stabs him in a fit of jealousy. The remainder of the story focuses our attention on a linguistic event: Ishwar Singh describes his participation in group rape, which serves to ‘explain’ his comment that he has received his ‘just’ desserts: Kulwant has killed him with the same dagger he had used to kill ‘six men’ (95). The text, quite literally identifies Ishwar Singh as simultaneously both subject and object in this liminal space of Partition through the image of the dagger: it is at once that with which he exercised his ‘new’ power (a result of suddenly being enfranchised as an ‘Indian’), and that with which he is rendered the other/object by his wife in the politics of the domestic. One would be justified in concluding that in this narrative Manto suggests Partition was ‘horrific’ not only for the ‘events’ that transpired, here both in the ‘home’ and the ‘world’, but for its simultaneous location of an individual perpetrator in a sort of surrealistic space, where a confusing of undirected violence and directed violence is possible.

‘Open It’, also by Manto, and also a story which invokes Partition as a self-constituting, liminal space, is grounded in the unstable geography of the refugee camp, another metonymic space that points to both the conceptual and material space of Partition. The plot is minimal and representative. The text opens with a reference to the train, locating the text’s relationship with the history of and to which it speaks: ‘The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon and reached Mughalpura eight hours later. Many of the passengers were killed on the way, many were injured and a few were missing’ (69). Attention moves from this large canvas to one figure, a Muslim (Sirajuddin) who finds himself in the safe confines of a refugee camp. The rest of the narrative relays his frantic search for the (presumably) only other member of his family to have survived, his daughter, Sakina. He approaches some ‘self-appointed social workers’ (70) to extend the search outside the camp. The reader (but not the father) is witness to her discovery through the oblique comment of the narrator: ‘The eight young men were very kind to Sakina’ (71). The narrator thus lulls the reader into a sense of security and safety. The narrative shifts our attention back to the camp, the passage of time being referred to obliquely: ‘Many days passed — Sirajuddin received no news about Sakina’ (71). Sakina is returned to the camp, unconscious. The doctor arrives to examine her and casually requests someone to ‘open [the window]’, a request to which Sakina responds by untying her salwar — an action that suggests an expectation that she is about to be sexually assaulted. At this sign of life, the father ‘shout[s] with joy, “She is alive. My daughter is alive”’ (72).

By focussing on the father’s reaction, the narrative encourages us to ‘question’ the supposed safety offered by the new definitions. We are aware, even if the father is not, that it is his broaching of the subject of his daughter in this supposedly safe place that has led to Sakina’s being singled out by social workers in the first place. Further, the place where this betrayal occurs — the refugee

camp — throws into question the dominant culture's attempt at the time to 'manage' the liminal. Inextricably related, is the text's concern with the dominant culture's refusal to consider the very devastating experience of ontological confusion and its potential in explaining the horrific violence that devastated much of the Punjab. In other words, it too encourages us to speculate about the impact of the liminal on the uncertain identity of some twelve to fifteen million people: this was a time in which 'acting' (occupying the subject position) even in places supposedly made 'safe' by the new definitions, was potentially life-threatening, as these could be the very places in which one was helpless — 'acted upon'.

Narratives that are written from within the space of Partition, then, articulate the 'separateness' of those in the frontlines most clearly. They suggest that a divide exists between those who were its victims and the dominant culture, because the former were compromised in a way the latter was not. In fact, it is from the place of this very compromise — the attempt to explain the sense of pollution — that such texts emerge. Here, people (social workers for instance) are both enabling and disabling, or (as in the case of the Babu) inspire fear in others and are subject to fear themselves. Surely this is an attempt to locate 'perpetration' within the chaos *caused* by a reorganisation of social space in accordance with notions of identity proper to the nation-state. Equally, stories locate inaction (due to fear) in a similar confusion. Many are reduced to inaction because of their inability to think through the shift in quite the way the social workers in these stories do. Consequences of action and inaction appear similar too: inaction haunts as much as action (there are a number of narratives in which fictional perpetrators are framed in terms of a globalising guilt). Then there are narratives that approach the issue of agency in terms of the other significant aspect of Partition — survival itself. Many stories and testimonials locate 'loss' — social, cultural and psychological — in the exercise of agency that itself derives from a mistaken belief in the inviolateness of one's subject position: individuals lose lives and family because they insufficiently 'understand' the confusion and act as if they occupy a subject position — either in terms of the inherited (mohalla) or in terms of the new (nationhood). Hence the number of narratives and testimonials about individuals who refused to leave because of their trust in the mohalla, and suffered or lost their lives as a result, and the equally significant number of testimonials and narratives that attest to those who left, feeling they trusted more in the newly articulated associations, also only to lose their lives or family members. It would appear that the more 'appropriate' understanding of one's status, judging by such historical and fictional accounts, would have been to be confused about one's 'actantial position' (Van Alphen 28).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, I turn to a consideration of some stories that begin post-Partition and also appear to be self-consciously concerned with speaking the crisis that Partition represents to the authors by making the social order itself a subject. In these, and others like them, post-Partition social order approaches the kind of social space

LeFebvre considers to be the abstract conceptualised space typical of a capitalist mode of production. The nuclear family appears in place of community, the boundaries of the house replace the village space, and when the public space of community is evoked, it is severely fractured. It appears to be subject to classification, and rationalising. A discourse that commonly appears to function metonymically in signalling this new social order is that of law: stories about individuals attempting to turn their past life into the figures and statistics required (of them) to claim 'compensation' in the new country proliferate, as do stories about the legality of second marriages (and the legitimacy, and the national status of children of such marriages) conducted in the belief that the first one was no longer valid given the disappearance or separation of partners and/or belief that the partner was a victim of Partition. Two stories I have chosen to consider here, however, while articulating post-Partition reality in these terms, choose not to focus so much on thematising it but on offering a space of resistance, not capable of transforming the culture that surrounds it but residing within it nonetheless. Resistance in both stories lies in the redefinition of the institution of family by individuals who have lost family to the Partition. In other words, in these stories, post-Partition is not without its compensations (or the promise of compensations). What prevents this promise from being realised is its violent disruption by an entry of the past, the seemingly free-floating synchronic moment of Partition itself.

Ramlal's 'Visitor from Pakistan' opens with a rather serene domestic scene, without any suggestion that there is a horrific history attached to it. In fact, we are lulled into believing that this is 'natural' family with the expected history attached to it. The story opens with a typical domestic scene: 'Munni and Meesha were playing in the sunlit courtyard. Saraswati quickly collected some hot water, a towel, soap and some clothes so as to give them a bath' (179). This routine scene is interrupted early in the narrative with the appearance of the past in the form of a 'stranger', Saraswati's former husband, Baldev, who is presumed dead. The narrative traces the attempt of all to deal with competing claims, the various positions being articulated by various characters. Saraswati's mother, for instance, responds to this return of the past by re-reading her daughter's second marriage and post-Partition life as one that brings dishonour to the family (now that her first husband has returned) and she does so by referring to Hindu epics that make women the repository of familial honour: 'My daughter's life is ruined. Her reputation lies in mud.... She has two husbands now. Hai, hai.... Why don't you kill yourself, Saraswati? Why doesn't the earth open up and swallow you? You escaped from Pakistan with your honour intact. But now death is the only solution left' (182). The lack of logic in her response does not appear to be apparent to her. Sunderdas, Saraswati's second husband, is determined to stake his legal claim to her and informs Baldev that if he wishes to contest the claim, he can 'appeal to the court' (185). Saraswati's father advances the claim of the second husband on the grounds of indebtedness and makes the speech in the

hearing of Baldev and the local people who appear to function as an informal court: 'He saved us, shared our sufferings in the refugee camp through winter and summer. He helped us sort out our problems regarding our claims and the property we had left behind. This lion-hearted man saw us through our trials and enabled us to resettle here' (185). Finally, Baldev asks Saraswati to choose, but on the grounds of institutionalised morality (presumably) since he employs the discourse of legal justice to advance his moral claim. He too speaks within the hearing of the ad hoc crowd and family members: 'I shall ... knock at the door of another court, at this very moment, now. I have full faith in that court and know that I shall be dealt with justly' (186). In all this, Saraswati is herself absent and her response, when it comes, signals only the impossibility of choice: 'Suddenly there was a loud scream from the room. Saraswati broke down and wept' (186). While the narrative appears to be concerned with describing a situation that is impossible for all concerned, as culturally inherited codes of purity clash with the challenge to these very codes Partition encouraged, Baldev is singled out more than the others and it is with his announcement of intended return to Pakistan that the narrative ends.

Here too, then, we note that Partition appears in its long-term and seemingly ubiquitous challenge to agency — the right to act — by throwing the individual back into an actantial confusion. Individuals no longer know 'how to be'. Each chooses a different individual feature of the amorphous cultural inheritance to justify the position s/he 'automatically' settles on in the face of such confusion, all except the central figure: the mother chooses Hindu texts that proscribe the behaviour of a dishonoured woman (whether or not the dishonour has anything to do with her is immaterial); the father chooses the code of honour that dictates repayment of favour (the daughter being the gift that repays the debt); the second husband chooses the fact of civil law; and the first husband chooses the fact of an unspecified moral law. Post-Partition social practice is revealed to be threatening because not only does it reveal the continued hold of texts that dictate familial practice and female behaviour but, by not acknowledging the disruption — that has occurred — of such powerful dictates, does not allow for the construction of a social order that might accommodate shifting material practices.

Similarly, Mohan Rakesh's 'The Owner of Rubble' stages post-Partition Amritsar as a city in which former Muslim residents (visitors now from Pakistan) and some of its Hindu and Sikh residents can and do attempt to piece together the life and place which continues to signal 'home' to them. Once again, the text's engagement with historical process — that it is not just any time and any place, but a time and places metonymically linked with Partition — is indicated in the very first line: 'They had returned to Amritsar from Lahore after seven-and-a-half years' (67). The visiting Muslims, who walk down streets that 'now belonged to strangers' (67) 'reminded each other of the past' (67) and 'Most people who met the visitors assailed them with a variety of questions — 'What is Lahore like these days?' (68). Even the perspective that informs the articulation



of identity (belonging) is informed by a sensibility that belongs to the other side of Partition, pre-Partition (in post-Partition India, it is the Muslims who are 'strangers' and the houses are not 'their' houses). The reader is lulled by this lapse of the 'group' into nostalgia, in spite of more than a few references to the post-Partition social order as one based in enumeration. More specifically, Amritsar is indeed translated and is literally a product of, and reproduces itself as, an 'Indian city'. For example, the narrator states: 'There were, of course, some who were still so suspicious of the Muslims that they turned away when they saw them on the road' (68). This is largely because of the narrator's own participation in a re-remembering of the qualitatively different past, shared then by members of the cities that most speak the rupture of Partition — Lahore and Amritsar, a mere forty miles apart and separated by the border. The narrator states: 'These questions were asked with such sincerity and concern that it seemed as if Lahore wasn't merely a city, but a person who was related to thousands of people who were anxious about its well-being' (68).

The security is fundamentally challenged when the story of Partition, as it unravelled in a locality of Amritsar, is progressively revisited when an elderly Muslim of this visiting group confronts the pile of rubble that was his home and in which members of his family were murdered and, unwittingly, forgives the 'goonda' responsible for the murder of his son and son's family. ('What happened was fated, Rakkhiya' [75].) Partition has not shaken his faith in the (notion of) mohalla. He innocently asks: 'Tell me, Rakkha, how did it happen?' 'You were friends. You loved each other like brothers. Couldn't he have hidden in your house?' (74). The narrator, however, is determined that readers are made familiar with the story that apparently everyone else in the local area but Gani, the old Muslim, knows. (As in the former story the local people act as a sort of impromptu folk court and wait eagerly for Rakha to receive his just desserts, which he does not). Not only does this figure suggest the inability of the new definitions to erase the mohalla but also the lack of such bonds in the new economy.

These two narratives, then, offer post-Partition reality as a post-eschatological one, forever haunted by the 'end' and unsure of how to imagine or live beyond its boundaries. Here too, time and history cannot sever, nor recreate, the bonds with the past. Quite literally, the characters disappear into the past: as we end with the devastation of the present, we can only assume the disappearance of the characters (forcible in many cases) into the past, reclaimed by this past, to which a revitalising future cannot be attached.

## II

The importance of findings such as the following — that those who were most polluted by the process of Partition, most compromised by it, offer a fundamental confusion almost always contiguous with descriptions of scenes of violence and violation — is that they act in an interventionist fashion in dominant historiography and culture's attempts to explain a violence that left over a million

dead. It makes one think twice about unfortunate comments that Punjabis are a violent people or that violence gets imprinted in the psyche of the colonised because of colonialism's dependence on violence for its own maintenance, that communalism was always already there, or a construct successfully habituated to the culture. Given the absence of a colonial apparatus and/or a strictly political one, I conclude that these narratives are as insistently anti-statist in their reading of the historical moment as Indian historiography has been statist. Further, they serve to point out the dominant culture's emphasising of Independence/Partition as a temporal event — after all, it is primarily remembered and revitalised in annual celebrations that mark the date of independence, a fact that reinforces our collective reading of it as a primarily temporal event. This, in turn, further discourages a consideration of the historical process as an experience, and Partition, in the words of Ashis Nandy, continues to be 'the unwritten epic, getting more tattered everyday in the minds of the survivors, perpetrators, onlookers, and chroniclers' (306). If postcolonial literature treats India of the last half of the twentieth century in terms of its colonial legacy, Partition literature offers a much-required corrective, or at the very least, an interrogation of the assumption that issues of identity are wrapped up in the rhetoric and logic of colonialism. Even from a reading of the few texts I have discussed here, it is clear that there is a determination to claim agency, even if it leads only irrevocably to facing a difficult fact — of individual and collective participation in violence. As for a comprehension of what it is that actually happened, the answer even today appears to be the one made by the narrator in Manto's most famous narrative on Partition, 'Toba Tek Singh'. Speaking from within the collective consciousness of the asylum, the narrator states:

Where was Pakistan? What were its boundaries? They did not know. For this very reason all the inmates who were altogether mad, found themselves in a quandary; they could not figure out whether they were in Pakistan or India, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in India when they had not moved from the asylum at all?' (2)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Other published collections are: S. Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal, *When the British Left: Stories on the Partitoning of India*; S. Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal, *Orphans of the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India*; Mushirul Hasan, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*.
- <sup>2</sup> Other considerations of Partition literature can be found in the following: Susie Tharu, 'Rendering Account of the Nation: Narratives and Other Genres of Passive Revolution'; Aijaz Ahmad, 'Some Reflections on Urdu'; Leslie Flemming, *Another Lonely Voice: The Urdu Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto*; a special issue of *Ariel* (1998) vol 29; Alok Rai, 'The Trauma of Independence: Some Aspects of Progressive Hindi Literature, 1945–47' and N.K. Jain, 'The Partition Theme in Indo-Anglian Novels'.
- <sup>3</sup> Take, for instance, Bhalla's brief comments on some of the short stories included in his collection, comments that focus on 'theme'. One which I deal with here, Sadat

- Hasan Manto's 'Open It', he suggests is about 'ordinary people, in whose restraint and decency others had placed their faith, become ruthless killers' (xxi). This is, indeed, part of the point the story makes, but if one follows the logic of the text, which leads to the response of a father to signs that his raped daughter is not dead (as he had feared), the story makes a more subtle comment on Partition (discussed in the body of the article). Such a focussing on theme has also led Bhalla, and others, to create what Ravikant and Saint correctly label 'restrictive typologies' (xxv).
- 4 When it is noted, it is done so casually, in observations about the nature of pre-Partition communities. Alok Bhalla, for instance, comments that Partition brought 'a long and communally shared history' (vii) to an end. This history he describes in terms of a social order: 'The experience of a life lived together was sufficiently secure and rooted to enable the communities to have evolved mechanisms for containing tensions and even outrage. So that even if there were disruptions, the rich heterogeneity of the life of the two communities was never seriously threatened' (viii).
  - 5 I am drawing here on Ed Soja's definition of the term: 'the social order of being-in-the world can be seen as revolving around the constitution of society, the production and reproduction of social relations, institutions and practices' (qtd. in Dear 66).
  - 6 'Communalism' was offered by Congress leaders as the reason for their reluctant consent in June 1947 to the vivisection of the country. In 'Prose of Otherness', Pandey comments: 'Historians have argued that it was this explosion of violence, amounting to civil war, which convinced many who were until then strongly opposed to Partition that any other course would be even more fatal: that it led not only the Congress leadership but large numbers of ordinary 'non-political' Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs to accept Partition as inevitable' (206). Communalism, in Pandey's well-known formulation, has a very specific connotation in the Indian context. He writes, 'In its common Indian usage the word "communalism" refers to a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities' (1990 6). He adds that the term takes on the connotation of a sectarian approach at the constitutional level. The term denotes, 'movements that make sectional demands on state policy for a given share in jobs, education and legislative positions, leading on in some instances to demands for the creation of new provinces and states' (6).
  - 7 The large production of Partition literature in the form of the short story has been noticed by some academics. Aijaz Ahmad, for instance, comments on the centrality of the short story: 'In India, as in Pakistan, the principal genre that served as a virtual chronicle of the Partition was the short story' (27). Tejwant Singh Gill suggests the possible reason: 'So traumatising was this event that Punjabi writers were forced to employ all genres for its portrayal. Since its traumatic aspect outweighed its dramatic and poetic facets, the short story came most naturally to be employed for the purpose' (85).
  - 8 Ashis Nandy quotes Suketu Mehta as suggesting that Partition itself turned a generation into writers because of the nature of their experience. Mehta: 'There are millions of Partition stories throughout the subcontinent, a body of lore that is infrequently recorded in print or on tape, and rarely passed on to the next generation. All over the map of the subcontinent, there is an entire generation of people who have been made poets, philosophers, and storytellers by their experience during the Partition' (qtd in Nandy 306).
  - 9 Press statements by leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Gandhi assuring the populace (particularly of the Punjab and Bengal) that they would not be forced to relocate, that both nations would have a secular constitution, proliferate in the first half of 1947. One of the many texts in which the assurance liberally dispensed by leaders in 1947 is referred to, obliquely, is in Bhisham Sahni's

‘The Train Has Reached Amritsar’ where the narrator states: ‘Given the history, everyone felt that after Independence the riots would automatically stop’ (148). Of course, that is when they started in earnest and continued unabated till the middle of October 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Here I disagree with Nandy, who suggests that memories of community pre-Partition are idealistic. He writes: ‘One remarkable and consistent part of the memories is the fondness and affection with which survivors remember their multi-ethnic, multi-religious villages ... it would appear that, over the years, all struggle, suffering and conflicts have been painstakingly erased from the village of the mind. Above all, there is no communal tension in the remembered pre-Partition villages. Along with an easy life, prosperity (which usually means the availability of cheap foodstuff and articles of daily use) and cultural riches, the village as a pastoral paradise offers a perfect community life’ (322). As my discussion of some texts suggests, such a global comment needs correction.

<sup>11</sup> This comment occurs in a note (109), where Azzi argues that in pre-nationalist societies ‘identification’ did not ‘necessarily involve legal, formal, and explicit definitions of categorical boundaries’ (122). In yet another helpful formulation, Georges Gusdorf, who identifies Indian society in general as a non-individualist one, notes that in such societies, ‘lives are so entangled that each of them has its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere’ (29–30). Hence narratives that ‘show’ an enmeshed living of individuals, the point of enmeshed living, however, being made through the seemingly paradoxical gesture of identifying characters in terms of their religious, affiliation, locatedness or inheritance — Hindu, Muslim and Sikh (mainly). This employment suggests that the overriding concern with combating the notion of communalism required such a labelling: how else is communal harmony to be described without identifying individuals in terms of differences?

<sup>12</sup> Although Marx’s description of the social order of pre-capitalist, agricultural economies — and he comments on India every now and again — in *Grundrisse* by no means privileges such economies, his attempt to describe the complexity of this social order is apropos. I quote from the section relevant to a consideration of the level of settled economy that approximates that of the mohalla in the early twentieth century.

This naturally arisen clan community ... is the first presupposition — the communality ... of blood, language, customs — for the *appropriation of the objective conditions* of their life, and of their life’s reproducing and objectifying activity.... The earth is the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labour, as well as the seat, the *base* of the community. They relate naively to it as the *property of the community*, of the community producing and reproducing itself in living labour. Each individual conducts himself only as a link, as a member of their community, as *proprietor or possessor*. (472 [italics in original])

He adds that such a reading of individual agency is not compromised by the presence of economic and social inequality in such formations: ‘it is not in the least a contradiction to it that, as in most of the *Asiatic* landforms, the *comprehensive unity* standing above all these little communities appears as the higher *proprietor* or as the *sole proprietor*’ ([italics in original]472).

<sup>13</sup> In a chapter on the press in *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj* (forthcoming), I discuss the employment of the discourse of medicine in political cartoons appearing in english-language newspapers of the nationalist press.

<sup>14</sup> Van Alphen suggests that traumatic experience results in a confusion about ‘actantial position: one is neither subject nor object of the events, or one is both at the same time’ (28).

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