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Texts in Turmoil: The Role of Literature in Understanding Partition

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Around 77 years ago, the partition took place. It resulted in the relocation of 15 million people and the deaths of 2 million due to religious conflict (Shashkevich). It was a time of great distress that caused immense suffering and trauma for the individuals who were involuntarily affected by it. It is regarded as one of the most tragic incidents in the history of the subcontinent. Since the only method for individuals to harm the sensibilities of other religions was to injure their women, women suffered the worst during the partition. They were tortured, sexually assaulted, and dehumanized in the name of religion.

There has been a lot of work done in terms of documenting and writing about this event, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. It is exceedingly difficult to accurately recall a former experience when doing so. Less emphasis is placed on people and more emphasis is placed on delivering the story through facts and data. As a result, it is challenging to portray the incident accurately because one does not want to become bogged down in the specifics and complexity of human emotions.

It starts to focus more on the incident and less on the victims of its effects. The identity crises that people went through, how it was more than just a religious conflict, how neighbours turned against one another in a single night, or what all the women experienced regardless of their religion are not particularly highlighted in historical narratives of division.

Therefore, there was a demand for narratives that went beyond this and spoke more about the anguish and pain of people from their perspective. Prabir Kumar Sarkar's, A Reflection on Partition Literature of Indian Subcontinent in English makes this point. History is a straightforward account of the partition that has been recorded on paper, but literature is a reflection and a representation of the sufferings, miseries, and challenges that the people of the partition tragedy had to deal with (Sarkar 2). As a result, post-partition writing about partition came into existence known as "partition literature".



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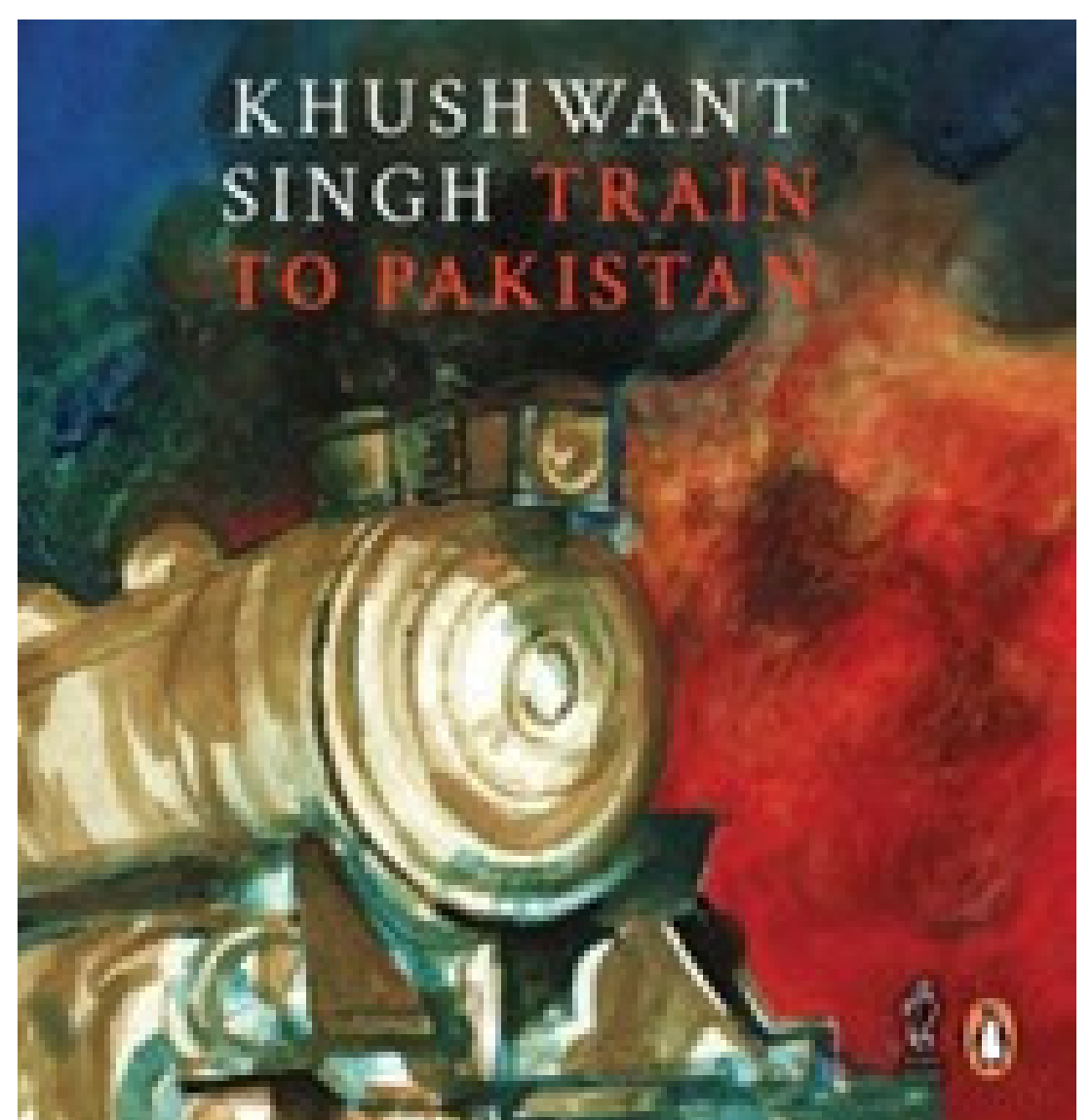
There has been a lot of work done in terms of documenting and writing about this event, whether it be fiction or non-fiction. It is exceedingly difficult to accurately recall a former experience when doing so. Less emphasis is placed on people and more emphasis is placed on delivering the story through facts and data. As a result, it is challenging to portray the incident accurately because one does not want to become bogged down in the specifics and complexity of human emotions. The term “partition literature” includes work that describes and analyses the event from all sides of the border. It consists of both fiction and non-fiction, but its focus is mostly on works of fiction that address the themes of displacement, loss trauma, and violence resulting from the 1947 partition of India. According to Muhammad Umar Memon’s essay, *Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain* the term “Partition Literature” is ambiguous and the shift it brought about had an impact on both the Muslim and Hindu communities in distinct ways (379). For the Muslim population, it represented an opportunity to regain their cultural identity and national identity, while for others, it brought back memories of unrest and sorrow. Partition literature was published in almost all languages spoken in the subcontinent such as Hindi, English, Urdu, Telugu, Bengali, Punjabi, etc. The notion that history is typically state-sponsored and patriotic, and therefore tends to be biased, is another reason why studying the division via literature is crucial (Sarkar 3). Literature, on the other hand, tends to be, people-centred and gives voice to the people who suffered.

Such publications made an effort to go beyond the unifying and flat narrative that the educational institutions in history had taught. It enables the reader to view the tragedy from many angles and viewpoints and illustrates the variety of unique experiences (Mehta). Additionally, it provided the people of both nations with the chance to heal via the memory and history that these authors chose to write about because they could have a recording of a memory that is personal to them. While everyone suffered, some experiences were particular to one country’s population, and being able to record and read those experiences provided one with a feeling of identity. The anguish they might identify as their own and find healing in through literary pieces.

The authors of literature go beyond attributing the division solely to religion. All of their writings contained optimism and hope even at the most trying of times. They discuss how people still had a sense of solidarity and a moral conscience towards other people. They explore deeper into the partition’s social, political, and psychological aspects.

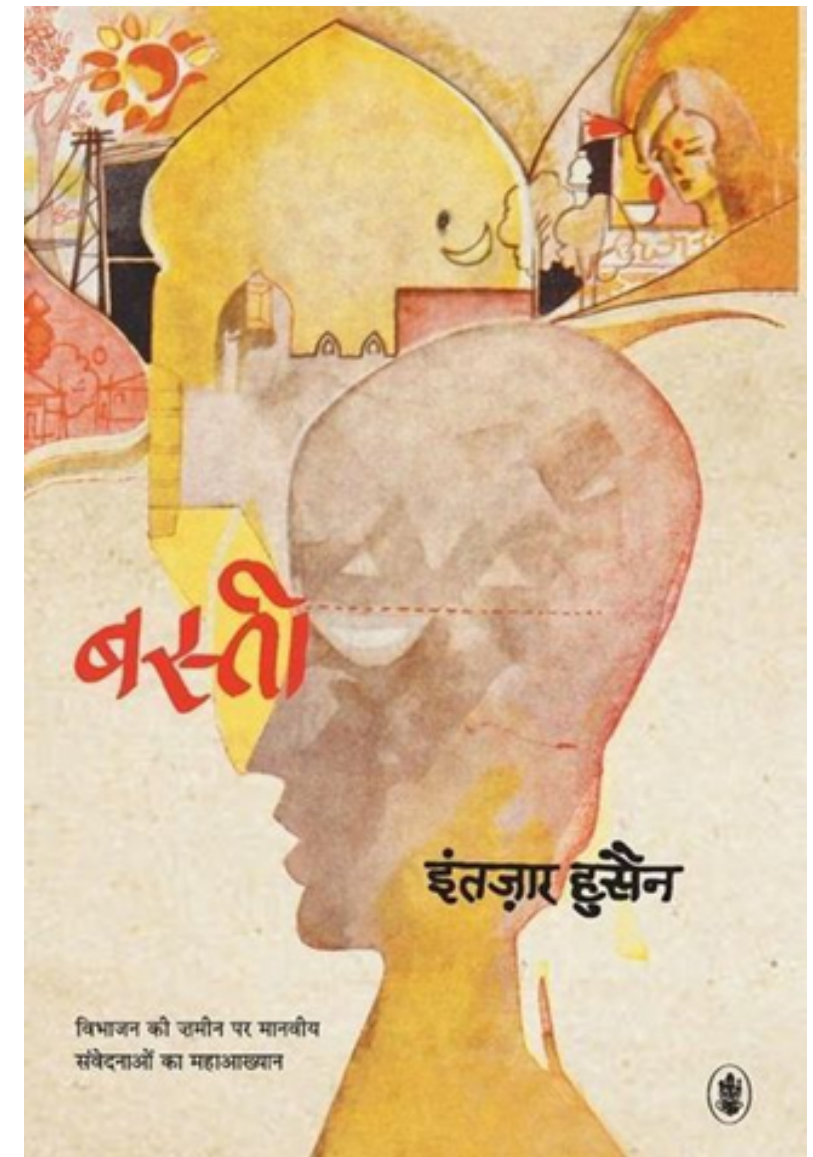
The subject at hand was covered by Sudha Tiwari in her essay *Witnessing Partition Through Literature: Probing Into Bhisham Sahni’s Tamas*, in which she claims that despite the boundaries, the writings of these creative writers are replete with references to Hindu-Muslim unity as well as shared memories of culture, tradition, and years of coexistence. The scholarly material that was produced soon after the partition focused primarily on issues related to the British government’s involvement in the partition, the process as a whole, the significant figures involved, and their ideologies (Tiwari 669). Historiographers’ perspectives on it have changed since then. As Tiwari noted, recent writings by historians including Mushirul Hasan, Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Gyanendra Pandey, and Ranbir Samaddar have centred more on the memories of partition and the creative literature that recaptures this harrowing event in the history.

Many authors, including Qurratulain Hyder, Sa’adat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Attia Hosain, Khushwant Singh, Krishna Chander, Mohan Rakesh, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Amitav Ghosh, Muhammad Umar Memon, Intizar Husain, Salman Rushdie, Amrita Pritam, K.S. Duggal, and Ismat Chughtai, are well-known for their writing about partition and partition literature. The majority of their work is from the perspective of the people who experienced it; it depicts the same anguish and heartbreak but through their eyes. Though most of the authors of partition literature asserted that they were “impartial” and “non-biased”, what must be kept in mind is that, at some point, partiality became extremely apparent in their writings. Despite their pretences of objectivity, Frances Harrison observes in her piece *Literary Representation: Partition in Indian and Pakistani Novels in English*, that they demonstrate a disassociation from the actual perpetrators of violent actions. The only explanation for this would be that these authors were from the wealthy upper class and were likely the least responsible for the murders and other crimes of the Indian partition (Harrison 97). Further, the study will briefly discuss two of these works to get a better idea about this notion of partition literature and how it has developed in both now neighbouring countries—India and Pakistan.





The novel *Train to Pakistan*, written by Khushwant Singh in 1956, which tells the story of the partition of India in August 1947 from the viewpoint of a fictitious border town named Mano Majra, was welcomed and appreciated by the public. This novel stands out since it doesn't focus on a single character and instead features several protagonists. Khushwant Singh makes an extremely thorough and explicit attempt in *Train to Pakistan* to put the fact of Punjab's partition and the issue of violence on both sides of the border front and centre. In the foreword, Arthur Lall remarks that Singh's characters are very credible and that the novel's inherent traits keep the reader interested (Chopra 166). The short novel's central subject is that both Hindus and Muslims felt guilty after the violence that broke out in response to reports that a division of the nation into 'Hindu' India and 'Muslim' Pakistan had been proposed. Calcutta was the initial epicentre of the riots, which quickly extended over the entire nation. Singh tries to portray the idea that this violence was never one-sided, and both the communities had played an equal role in inciting it. "Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides were killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed", writes Singh. On the other hand, things were drastically different in the village of Mano Majra, where everyone lived in harmony, serenity, and camaraderie. Except for a single Hindu family who belonged to Lala Ram Lal, the majority of the village's residents were Sikhs and Muslims. The killing of Ram Lal one day disrupts the village's tranquillity. This served as the communal starting point, which is discussed later in the book. Even while the novel actively strives to be non-biased, there are certain instances of dishonesty and bias. Even if this is fiction, it would have been nice to have the concerns given a lot more thought and sensitivity. In order to present a picture of religious unity between Hindus and Muslims, Singh lies about when the violence began, as Harrison has shown. Singh does not dismiss the violence, however, and does so intentionally. If it weren't for the politicians, Singh claims, the country and its citizens would not have been divided, and only the political leaders had a key role in the country's divide (Harrison 99). Even though it is fiction, it is vital to respect some historical truths to give it a little more realism and credibility. A journalist by profession, Singh allegedly fabricated historical details for an excessively historical novel, according to Harrison. If Singh had not put the village of Mano Majra on the border of India and Pakistan, one may try to believe that the residents there were unaware of the tensions and bloodshed that were raging in both nations as Singh claims in one section of the book that they were. Furthermore, it was near the railway that connected the two nations and regularly witnessed trains full of dead bodies. As Hindu-Muslim riots broke out, Hindus and Sikhs once again formed a unified front, Singh writes in another passage of the book, contradicting himself once more (Harrison 102). A further reason for their cultural compatibility, according to him, is that Sikh and Hindu groups worked together to murder Muslims during the partition riots. It is very evident that Singh, despite having to see the partition on his own, was unable to capture or describe a variety of nuanced feelings and stories.



Cover of Intizar Husain's *Basti*

Next, the famous Pakistani writer Intizar Husain's work *Basti* which was published in 1979 can be considered. Before the novel came out, Husain in an interview said, "A decade ago when I was talking about the experience of migration and the articles, I wrote concerning it, I was in a state of great hope and optimism. It was then my feeling that in the process of partition, we had suddenly, almost by accident, regained a lost, great experience—namely, the experience of migration, hijrat, which has a place all its own in the history of the Muslims and that it will give us a lot. But today after our political ups and downs, I find myself in a different mood. Now I feel that sometimes a great experience comes to be lost to a nation" (Menon 377).

This statement by Husain tells us a lot about how people felt after the partition; what began as a means of regaining control turned out to be nothing but painful. In the end, a shadowy box held the hope that both Pakistan and India had after gaining their independence. Husain thought that the establishment of Pakistan had given the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent a past, or at the very least the desire to document and understand their past, as well as a feeling of purpose and direction, as well as optimism for the future. The events in this story are set in the years leading up to and following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The protagonist of the tale is a child named Zakir, who was nurtured in the quaint village of Rupanagar in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The central theme of the narrative is how ordinary people attempt to manage life after partition. *Basti* makes an effort to take the reader to various places and times to help them remember the memories of people who lived through the partition. It illustrates both the pre- and post-partition periods as well as how people's experiences varied depending on their social, cultural, and economic starting points. The book does a great job of conveying the sense of displacement, highlighted by the line "Displaced, uprooted, and disconnected from the past, we had become a community of strangers, bound together by nothing but our shared trauma" (qtd. in Kumar).



Exploring their religious identity in the context of the society and the setting they live in is the main challenge the characters encounter. One such instance is described in the novel, where Zakir hesitates and appears uncertain when asked to recite the Kalma in class. Husain writes “I could not bring myself to recite the Kalma, the Islamic declaration of faith. It was as if some invisible force was preventing me from doing so. I felt like a traitor as if I was betraying my religion by affirming it in public” (qtd. in Kumar). The novel was an attempt to recount stories through the spaces they existed in because it is not surprising that memories are strongly tied to the physical area where they were conceived.

By taking a look at the two works, one can see how the literature from the two nations differed greatly and how attempts to maintain its impartiality frequently failed. Even if it was not detrimental both countries’ writers made a concerted effort to regain their identities via it. It’s not necessarily a negative thing, and perhaps that is why partition literature was created. Everyone had the opportunity to tell their own story as they believed it to have happened.

Themes in partition literature have also abruptly changed in recent years, becoming more concerned with documenting and preserving it as the posterity moves farther from the partition and the number of individuals who saw it in person is decreasing. Thus, there is a pressing need for people to write and record as much as they can. As a result of the public’s increased awareness and consciousness of everything they read and consume, one also needs to be more responsible, cautious, and sensitive when composing literature. Since greater responsibility has begun to be placed on the writings now, no historical fiction can be written nowadays without taking care of the historical facts.

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We thank you!!!

