Material Afterlives and the Psychology of Displacement: Trauma, Memory, and Narrative Form in Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation*

Harleen Kaur

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Amar Shaheed Baba Ajit Singh Jujhar Singh Memorial College, Bela.

Prof. Sanjana Shamshery

Department of English,

Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

ABSTRACT

The Partition of India in 1947, besides being a geographical partition, involved a long-term psychological displacement. *Remnants of a Separation* by Aanchal Malhotra is the subject of the study in this paper in which the interrelationship between trauma, memory and narrative reconstruction is explored. In the place of official historiography or state archives, Malhotra builds a counter-archive of ordinary objects that survivors carried across the border, such as clothes, kitchenware, letters and photographs. These items serve as memory anchors, and they often record affective histories beyond those captured in a written record. It is suggested that the paper portrays trauma as an ongoing condition of the psyche that is carried along by memory, not as a history (past) or a moment of rupture (present). The stories are rich, episodic, and sometimes hesitant, silent, and repeated. All of these formal elements are related to the

fractured nature of the memory of trauma. These narrative gaps are highlighted as a mode of ethical representation in the book, which rejects linear closure and embraces narrative discontinuity. The study also considers the role of longing, inheritance and intergenerational transmission in the formation of diasporic identities in the wake of displacement. Partition is a type of cultural trauma that is taken on in isolation and is also remembered collectively. *Remnants of a Separation* explores the nature of storytelling as a means to reach wholeness without obliterating rupture and foregrounds material culture as a storytelling catalyst. In conclusion, this paper proposes that through its attention to objects, Malhotra's writing broadens the literary conversation about trauma and illuminates the possibilities of storytelling as a way to make imperfect and scattered things important and reconstructive, to make memories.

Keywords: Memory, Partition trauma, Diasporic identity, Narrative discontinuity, Material culture.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 was not just a geographical division. It fundamentally reshaped the psychological landscape of the entire subcontinent. As Gyanendra Pandey observes, this event produced an internal rupture whose psychic severity rivals the generational impact of the World Wars on France and Japan (6). For the millions forced to migrate, geographic relocation did not resolve the experience of exile. Instead, displacement evolved into an ongoing psychological condition, re-enacted continuously through inherited stories, family silences, and preserved domestic objects. Because conventional historical accounts prioritized official treaties, diplomatic negotiations, and state-level statistics, they systematically failed to capture this enduring interior grief.

Urvashi Butalia's landmark oral history work exposed this archival limitation by documenting the suppressed experiences of women and marginalized groups. Her research demonstrated that Partition must be understood not as a completed historical milestone, but as an active, continuous negotiation between past trauma and present life (23). Approaching the issue from an ethnographic standpoint, Veena Das similarly argues that Partition violence is not confined to its status as a past historical event; rather, it permeates the fabric of the everyday, lingering within ordinary routines and recurring domestic practices long after open conflict ceases (Das 7). Together, Pandey, Butalia, and Das establish the foundational premise of this paper: Partition trauma operates as a living psychological structure that demands alternative literary modes to be properly registered.

Aanchal Malhotra expands this theoretical trajectory in *Remnants of a Separation* by building an unconventional archive. Moving beyond traditional oral testimony alone, Malhotra focuses on the physical items—kitchenware, textiles, letters, photos, and jewellery—that survivors salvaged during their journeys. She conceptualizes these physical belongings as memory vehicles capable of conveying emotional truths beyond what survivors can express verbally: "malcontents brought back with them something material rather than language itself" (xix). To unpack this material transmission, Marianne Hirsch's framework of "postmemory" proves essential. Hirsch explains how post-Partition generations inherit severe trauma not through direct participation, but "not as memories, but as displaced, secondary, or second-hand memory" (Hirsch 22). In Malhotra's text, survivor interviews and their corresponding physical heirlooms illustrate this exact generational transfer. Meaning is articulated obliquely through tactile touch and familial inheritance rather than strict chronological narrative.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory further clarifies this dynamic, noting that severe shock cannot be fully processed when it occurs, but instead re-emerges repeatedly through delayed recollections. Likewise,

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma explains why many accounts in this collection orbit an object without ever achieving complete emotional resolution. Jenny Edkins adds a crucial political dimension, arguing that resisting clean, redemptive national narratives is a meaningful political act rather than a failure of storytelling (4). Read alongside these theoretical perspectives, the fragmented, object-anchored testimonies in *Remnants of a Separation* reveal trauma in its active, ongoing psychological state. This paper proposes that Malhotra's book builds up a deconstructive archive of Partition in the material sense, thereby shifting the understanding of trauma from a historical rupture to a continuous psychological affliction. The narrative form of the book is episodic, non-linear, and encompasses silence – a formal depiction of traumatic memory as it manifests in the psyche. The paper situates *Remnants of a Separation* in relation to the larger interdisciplinary and interrelated dialogue between literary studies, trauma theory, and memory studies. The scholars from Caruth to Das have influenced this, and suggested here that material objects should be given a more central role in that talk than they have to date.

The Limitations of Official Historiography and Partition

Intercommunal bloodshed, and nation-building are frequently highlighted in traditional histories of Partition. While these frameworks are necessary, they have the potential of overstating actual experience. Women, refugees, and marginalized groups did not have a voice in official records as Urvashi Butalia observes in *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) (3). In a similar vein, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin highlight in *Borders & Boundaries* that nationalist triumphalism continued to obscure the gendered violence of Partition (10).

The absence of such a gap is not a coincidence of the way Partition has been narrated. It goes without saying, it is what the archive itself was designed to document. Gyanendra Pandey has contended

that the "high politics" of negotiations and transfer of power in the Partition historiography have given primacy to the negotiation and transfer of power that took place at the level of the household and the neighbourhood, thus overlooking the fragmented and mostly unrecorded violence. This leads to the event that is recorded in the official archives as a mere procedural incident, devoid of the "affect" that made it meaningful to people during their experience of it (Pandey 6–10). Vazira Zamindar's *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia* extends this critique by turning to the bureaucratic afterlife of Partition itself. She demonstrates that categories of "refugee" and "alien" were not simply the result of the apparatus of permits, evacuee-property law, and citizenship documentation, but were actively produced by them and that their production was based on the very identities and belongings they were trying to capture (Zamindar 2–8). In tandem with Butalia and Menon, Bhasin argues that the silences of official historiography are not only omissions that can be filled in at a later time, but they are structural, formed by the things the state's archive was meant to see and what it was meant to not see. Malhotra's project is part of this other line of historiographical tradition, but it takes it further by placing the focus on material artefacts instead of institutional documents or even oral accounts, or as she puts it, on "material objects" rather than on "memories. Each chapter revolves around an object like a dupatta, a cooking vessel, a family photograph transforming domestic remnants into archival evidence in their own right. The objects challenge the compulsion to institutionalise memory under the state authority as Derrida calls it in his essay "archive fever. In the state's archive, displacement is fixed into permits and property registers, but Malhotra's counter-archive is deliberately unfixed. The meaning of an object fluctuates according to the individual who remembers it. It cannot be easily categorised and it contains affect because it was not intended to be evidence. Rather than making a miniature version of the state's model of the archive, Malhotra gathers a counter-archive of affect and inheritance.

Trauma as a Persistent Psychological Condition

Trauma theory is one of the most important theoretical approaches to analyze the narrative method of a text. Cathy Caruth says that trauma does not simply get absorbed into the self at the moment of its occurrence, but is instead fragmented and repeated later (4). In her interviews, Malhotra often interrupts, recycles, or revisits memories of the past by survivors. Their speech represents the "unclaimed experience," and this experience does not flow smoothly but in a disorganized fashion. For example, in *Remnants of a Separation*, Azra Haq refuses to mention the horrors of migration, and responds: “If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about what I saw.” I'm sorry but I can't restate those points. “Can't bring them back to life” (Malhotra 69). This silence is a sign of the intolerable nature of trauma as survivors try to avoid "communal madness" (Malhotra 68). Refusing is not an avoidance of pain, but an act of ethics, of self-preservation, of witness; the words she never spoke are the words that could never be spoken, the words that witness but don't speak; the words that don't speak but witness; the words that prevent further harm through the telling of trauma. As Dominick LaCapra has pointed out, such silences are the result of trauma's ability to defy language, its symbolic representation, its ability to be larger than language (42). The survivor's hesitation is the reemergence of the trauma in delayed fashion, indicating that the terror has not yet been processed and absorbed, or has not yet been remembered. That such an account is often reluctant (23) to let go of what cannot be expressed here is in line with Shoshona Felman's claim that trauma testimony often fails as narrative because it must convey what cannot be expressed (168). Traumatic remembrance is often fragmented, as is the speaker's form of expression in the survivor's speech, with ellipses, repetition, and unexpected interruption. This is also elaborated upon by Judith Butler's notion of "grievability," in which silence is the only method of witnessing that does not require the trauma to be narrated as a consumable story within official historiography, for some experiences are

ungrievable (p. 47). These silences are upheld as integral parts of the evidence in Malhotra's counter-archive, revealing that there is more to what isn't said than what is.

Objects as Anchors of Memory

Two examples of Y.P. Vij's heirlooms that evoke complex, layered histories are a corroded key to a door that never existed and an alloy box that preserved a world that has vanished; the aged surface of both reflects the erosion of tangible roots, but demonstrates an ongoing connection to ancestral spaces; books and photographs transported from Lahore allowed a physical return to a lost homeland; a handoff of these inherited books, notes Malhotra, "had given my grandfather a pathway into the past and had led him all the way back to Lahore" (43).

They act as "performative archives" as described by Diana Taylor: "As the tangible material objects, rather than mere reflection, become sites for embodied engagement and thus activate memory, they serve as performative archives. Examples of performative actions that bridge the gap between the past and the present by creating a sense of repetition in the present through sensory experience are holding a worn-out key, dealing with inherited literature, or touching the bronze pots (Taylor 15). This performative component enabled Malhotra's grandfather to walk "all the way back to Lahore", as he could be physically touched by the books, which stimulated his memory and an embodied reproduction of the place through sensory cues that went beyond language mediation. These items act as a medium for what Patrizia Violi calls "mnemic displacement" and are used to re-create an emotional and psychological return to lost spaces even when a physical return is not possible. Malhotra challenges the authenticity of archives highlighting the importance of material culture. Urvashi Butalia (10) refers to her own experience in her groundbreaking book on Partition, where she reveals stories that are rarely told by state narratives. By showing that things themselves can act as witnesses, Malhotra expands on this intervention.

Fragmentation of Narrative as Ethical Representation

In Malhotra's book, the discontinuity of traumatic remembrance is echoed, with each section effectively functioning as a separate book. The text is in an episodic, not chronological, structure. While the chapters are based on different stories, there are some common themes. Conflicts are sustained and silences are intentionally not acknowledged. This deliberate avoidance of "closure" in the story is consistent with trauma ethics as it is described by scholars such as Dominick LaCapra, who is able to differentiate between "acting out" and "working thru" (70). The memory is left unresolved in Malhotra, too, because it doesn't touch the plight of any survivors in a tale of restorative nationalism. The stylistic disintegration of the narrative is therefore an ethical move that recognizes the constraints of representation. In addition, the dialogic style (oral evidence) is a form of opposition to authorial domination. Rather than being an omniscient narrator, Malhotra becomes that of a listener and a mediator. This joint approach highlights the role of relational memory, and is therefore a therapeutic story-telling technique. Malhotra's broken testimony highlights the ethical approach of discontinuity and is against the closure of the narrative. The cathartic disclosure of Bahri is an illustration of the repetition and pause in these narratives as a way of experiencing trauma: "The more he divulged, the less control the past held over him" (Malhotra 87). This is the way of dealing with memory as an ethical commitment to not forgetting in the spirit of Paul Ricoeur. The objects in these testimonies expand the scope of trauma studies by transforming "fragments" into "partial reconstructions of identity. The feminist interventions in the text emphasize the feminine point of view. Urvashi Butalia praises the inclusion of private voices that have not been included in official documents. The domestication of trauma is suggested by the transformation of the knife, which was once symbolised with ‘honour' suicides to cutting aloe vera: “How could something once used for ‘honour' suicides become such a mundane existence?” (Malhotra 155). Malhotra acknowledges the difficulty of crossing the bridge

and bringing to the fore the traumas of 1947, yet "the great difficulty of crossing the bridge and giving voice to the experiences of 1947 does eventually result in some form of lightness" (xix): in the face of the hardships of that time, the crisis is no longer a source of lingering trauma. It speaks of the healing and the painful nature of giving evidence. The book is not, however, a prescription for the future. Rather, these stories are unsolved, and Caruth cannot be denied a statement on the impact of trauma on traditional story-telling order. In this story telling, silence has its place. There is also a significant part of verbal and non-verbal aspects of trauma, as seen in partial stories or narratives. According to Veena Das, rather than being resolved thru cathartic storytelling, traumatic events are assimilated into daily life (7). It is best illustrated in the conversations of Malhotra, for pain is not revealed theatrically but rather, lies in the continuity of the household.

Displacement and the Formation of Diasporic Subjectivity

Diverse diasporic identities were created as a result of displacement brought on by partition. Many survivors will talk about feeling like they are living in two countries, but not all. This is very similar to Homi K. Bhabha's (13) idea of "unhomeliness," which is the sense of unease felt while being outside one's own home. The homeland is not a physical location in Malhotra's stories, but rather an everlasting desire. The homeland is not a physical location in Malhotra's stories, but rather an everlasting desire. The boundary is both a psychological and physical barrier. These tensions are experienced through something physical, like an image with no landscape or a landscape with no image, a key with no house, or a house with no key. These works reflect finality and yet maintain a sense of place of origin. In this context diaspora encompasses both temporal and geographical displacement. Memory puts survivors in the center of the past and present, making possible what Avtar Brah calls "diaspora space" where histories intersect and identities are negotiated (181). Storytelling as a means of communicating displaced person's hybrid

identities in the context of rupture and resilience. In fact, as noted by Biswas, Malhotra's themes of fractured home-seeking remind him of Tomb of Sand (664). Displacement reworks Partition as a cultural catastrophe that is negotiated on an individual and communal level and remembered socially, leading to diasporic identifications through longing and inheritance. Malhotra's role as a descendant uncovering her grandparents' silences is set against the backdrop of the postmemory as conceived by Marianne Hirsch, the "generation after" who learns traumas through stories and things. Her grandfather's Inkwell evokes inquiries into the past, how micro-items can bring forth history, and they complain, "we are not forgetting!" "The kids are!" Items are used to tell a story, and the affect of rupture does not produce a lack of coherent narratives; the affect of smell, as his wife explains, is particularly evocative, and "smell" is one such artifact that continues to remain, even while maintaining Anglo-Indian ties; Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory is expressed here in cross-border conversations. This illustrates the fact that olfactory memories are more retained. The whiff of curry food, monsoon rains or some flowers is an extra sensory reminder that brings displaced people back to pre-partition surroundings, an embodiment rather than a cognitive one.

Cultural Trauma and the Construction of Collective Memory

The 1947 Partition serves as a case in point of sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander's definition of "cultural trauma," which refers to the "disruption" of a community's identity because of a "radically new event" (1) that upsets the symbolic framework that keeps a community unified. Cultural trauma is an event which, Alexander writes, "a group of people endure and can be described as terrible" that "changes identity in ways that are lasting and has an impact on the collective consciousness of that community beyond the individual" (1). The Partition was such a tragedy due to both the physical and the psychological displacement of the people. This is a stream of influence that has affected generations of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike, bringing about “a fundamental change in [the group’s] future identity” that Alexander

cannot reverse (2). The focus on concrete goods such as clothes, kitchen supplies, letters and photos diverts the audience from the nationalistic ideology and looks at the personal aspects of the displacement which transcends political lines. An act of challenge to the single-narrator historiography, as seen in Urvashi Butalia's oral history, is the introduction of the marginalised voices, particularly the women's voices and voices of subaltern communities. This offers a different way to present history as a conversation between past and future, rather than a record (Butalia 23). In the same way, Malhotra's material counter-archive continues to hold onto histories and emotional residues that traditional state archives can't capture, by foregrounding the mundane objects common to both sides of the border.

Conclusion

In *Remnants of a Separation*, literary and historical practices of Partition focus on material afterlives. Trauma remains a psycho-cultural phenomenon, as the text reveals, thru items, testimonies and a nonlinear narrative framework. The book shows how narrative can help to (partially) reconstruct identity by placing memories in 'ordinary' objects. This means a focus on the constant struggle between loss and attachment which is at the heart of displacement psychology. Partition in this work is not a past historical event or an unchangeable wound, but an ever-present story, maintained by objects, stories and the process of remembering.

Works Cited

Alexander, Jeffrey C. “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., University of California Press, 2004, pp. 1-30.

Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. Routledge, 1994.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora*. Routledge, 1996.

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. HarperCollins, 1998.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Das, Veena. *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. University of California Press, 2007.

Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Felman, Shoshana. “Literature and Trauma.” *The Trauma Reader*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Springer, 2004, pp. 17-45.

Hirsch, Marianne. “The Generation of Postmemory.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103–128.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing Big Events: Oddio, Oblivion, and the Question of Postmodernity*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Malhotra, Aanchal. *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. HarperCollins India, 2017.

Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Kali for Women, 1998.

Pandey, Gyanendra. *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2011.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive of the Rain: Memory, Performance, and the Politics of Place*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Violi, Patrizia. "Mnemic Displacement and the Psychology of Material Objects." Journal of Memory Studies, vol. 14, no. 3, 2019, pp. 245-263.

Zamindar, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali. *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. Columbia University Press, 2007.