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Decolonising Partition Memory: Subaltern Narratives in *Basti* and *The Night Diary*

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Abstract

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 is one of the most traumatic and transformative experiences in the history of South Asia. Dominant history has placed much emphasis on political negotiations, the role of political leaders, and the formation of new nations. In contrast, the role of the people has received much less emphasis or has been marginalised. However, according to the ideas presented by the Subaltern School of thought, particularly those of Ranajit Guha, dominant history has ignored or failed to include the roles of the marginalised sections of the people. Furthermore, according to Urvashi Butalia, personal histories and recollections bring to light the invisible social costs of partition. The present article aims to explore the roles of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* in the process of decolonisation of the memory of Partition. For this purpose, a qualitative comparative text analysis method grounded in theories of postcolonialism, trauma studies, and subaltern studies will be employed. It has been determined that *Basti* depicts the memory of Partition through fragmented memories, nostalgia, and cultural loss, highlighting psychological trauma. In contrast, *The Night Diary* depicts the trauma of Partition through a diary written by a young girl, highlighting issues of gender, religion, and migration. In both narratives, there has been a shift from political history to personal experience, thereby problematising the hegemonic discourse on Partition. There has been extensive scholarly research on Partition literature. However, few comparative studies have examined how these narratives explore the interface among subalternism, memory, and gender/childhood perspectives in works intended for diverse audiences. This article proposes to fill this research gap by arguing that both novels

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can be positioned as counter-histories that subvert the silenced voices and decolonise Partition history.

Keywords: Partition Memory, Subaltern Narratives, Trauma and Displacement, Postcolonial Literature, Decolonising Historiography.

Introduction

One of the most violent and transformative ruptures in South Asian history, the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, is a crisis of memory, identity, and belonging that continues to this day. Existing histories of Partition have focused on the political negotiations, leadership, and cartographic imperatives of the event. However, they have also come under criticism for their inability to address the millions of people who underwent trauma and violence in the post-Partition period. Existing political histories of Partition have been criticised for failing to address its emotive and lived aspects. There are alternative histories of Partition, particularly through the lens of the Subaltern Studies school, that address the histories of peasants, women, children, and others, subverting existing historical narratives (Guha 1-4). In this respect, the concept of "decolonising memory" is significant for challenging the dominant epistemology of trauma, fragmentation, and subjectivity. Memory, as a space, is where the past is constantly recreated, constantly reinterpreted (Assmann 101). Literature, in this respect, is a tool for conveying hidden histories, the emotional and psychological effects of trauma, and histories that could not be conveyed through conventional historical discourse (Butalia 6).

In this research article, two texts, *Basti* by Intizar Husain and *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani, which, though written in different genres, for different audiences, and in different narrative styles, share the common theme of the subaltern history of the Partition, have been chosen. *Basti*, a famous Urdu novel, uses fragmentation, nostalgia, time displacement, and cultural loss to convey the history and trauma of the Partition, which destroyed the past. Trauma theory, as Caruth points out, is concerned with the "belatedness" of the trauma narrative. Husain's narrative concerns the "fragmentary" nature of memory. *The Night Diary*, a contemporary children's historical fiction, offers a narrative of the Partition from the perspective of a girl-child migrant from Pakistan to India. Hiranandani uses the diary of a girl child narrator to provide a feminist perspective on the Partition and

to subvert the notion that children's literature has no place in history. *The Night Diary* uses innocence, vulnerability, and identity to include children in the discourse on the Partition. The literature on the Partition has not engaged with subaltern theory, trauma theory, or literature as a genre. The literary criticism on *Basti* has engaged with the novel's modernist elements and themes of nostalgia and exile. The literary criticism on *The Night Diary* has engaged with the novel's instructional value, themes of the girl child, and its readability for young readers. There is a lack of literary critique of how the novels portray the decolonising memory of Partition, a challenge to the subject's history. This research article aims to fill this theoretical gap by arguing that *Basti* and *The Night Diary* are counter-histories, a challenge to official history, reinstating the voices of the subaltern that have been erased from history in *Basti* and in *The Night Diary*, through the portrayal of Partition as a continuous process in the formation of identity.

It is a common theme in the literary works on Partition that the memory of Partition has been decolonising, a challenge to the subject's history, and this challenge has been portrayed differently in the two novels. There is a lack of literary critique. In this article, subaltern studies, postcolonialism, trauma studies, and memory studies will be used to demonstrate the reflective and formative nature of literary engagement with the Partition of India. *Basti* and *The Night Diary* subvert the epistemic boundaries of history by emphasising the personal, the emotional, and the subaltern. This article will show that the decolonisation of the Partition of India as a historical event is only possible when there is a move from the macro-politics of the event to the micro-experiential, from the archival to the testimonial, and from the linear to the non-linear modes of storytelling.

Literature Review

However, there has been a shift from a state and elite-centred approach to a broader focus on experiences and memory. The early histories of the Partition of India, as described by historians, are mostly limited to political and administrative decisions and leaders, making it purely a political discourse, devoid of any reference to the people. This has been challenged by other historians, such as Ranajit

Guha, who claims, "The orthodox historiography has ignored the contributions made by the subaltern people of the country." The Subaltern Studies group focused on the history of marginalised subaltern people. The focus has been on returning the voices. Gyanendra Pandey and many other historians claim, "Official documents cannot reflect the brutality and chaos of the Partition. Therefore, they cannot be used as a source to understand the Partition of India." According to Partha Chatterjee, "Nationalist historiography is a form of colonial knowledge production. Decolonising history is a necessity." Memory has also come into conflict with the official history discourses in this environment. Social scientists like Jan Assmann have theorised memory as a socially constructed concept, and trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth have focused on the fragmented and belated nature of trauma, the problem of representation, and the use of indirect narrative strategies in trauma narratives. There has been growing interest in using human narratives as a counter-archive of the Partition of India, which seeks to capture the affective dimension of the violence. Social scientists like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon have focused on the gender dimension of the violence and the way in which women's narratives have revealed the hidden history of the violence.

Partition fiction has also been used to analyse critical aspects of the interrelationship among memory, trauma, and identity, and to offer a perspective distinct from history. The critical analysis of *Basti* focuses on narrative strategy, nostalgia, and cultural alienation. The non-linear narrative strategy and non-linear narrative form are similar to the psychological condition of the characters, as analysed in trauma studies (Husain 45; Nayar 78). *Basti* is also a product of the crisis of cultural and civilizational continuity. The subaltern perspective of *Basti* is yet to be critically analysed. The critical analysis of *The Night Diary* is based on children's and young adult literature, the diary genre, the child protagonist, and the text's teaching potential regarding the history of Partition. Moreover, the issues of gender, identity, and immigration, especially regarding the female character's religious and national crossover, have also been addressed in the novel, as shown in Hiranandani's *The Night Diary* and Crisp. The immediacy and intimacy of the journal genre have also enabled the description of the trauma in a subtle yet deep

manner. It is because of the common perception that children's literature is not as important as 'real' literature in the genre that interest in the subject has remained low. Most importantly, the scarcity of studies on the comparison of how the narratives and the audiences' perception of the narratives have addressed the issue of the Partition as a subaltern and painful experience is a gap in the literature, which this study hopes to address in the context of the mediating nature of the memory, which has the potential to traverse the boundaries of the generations, genders, and genres.

Theoretical Framework

This research has used an interdisciplinary approach to analyse the data, incorporating subaltern studies, postcolonialism, trauma studies, and memory studies, as well as a critical analysis of the Partition of India and its consequences in literary works. The theoretical perspective of this research is based on Ranajit Guha's intervention and the subaltern studies approach, which focuses on the subaltern perspective in opposition to the elitist perspective of conventional history. Ranajit Guha, a subaltern studies scholar, has argued that "the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism, colonist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism," highlighting the subaltern perspective of marginalisation and the need to write a "history from below." This is beneficial for students of Partition literature, as it allows them to relate to works that focus on ordinary people rather than political leaders. The work of Partha Chatterjee goes a step further, arguing that nations in the postcolonial world are a continuation of colonialism in terms of knowledge; hence, a re-evaluation of history is necessary (Chatterjee 38). The process of memory decolonisation is an initiative that involves re-evaluating history and reclaiming the voices of the marginalised.

Trauma theory also adds richness to this analytical perspective by examining the effects of extreme violence in the past. Cathy Caruth says, "Trauma is not merely a consequence of destruction but, at its core, an enigma of survival" (Caruth 58). There are fragmented and repetitive characteristics of trauma. The fragmented nature of the partition narrative results from the inability to express trauma. Being late is an important factor in this case. LaCapra's trauma theory focuses on the concept of 'acting out' and 'working through,' and the

narrative space is where trauma is worked out. Thus, traumatic experiences can be useful for understanding the fragmented and repetitive characteristics of partition narratives. Memory studies, beyond trauma, can also be useful for understanding the mediation and reconstruction of the past. In 2011, Jan Assmann says, "Cultural memory is a social process, and as such, it transcends the boundaries of the individual memory." Memory is knowledge with an identity index, which enables a group to 'see' its uniqueness and unity. This concept of memory, therefore, reveals the importance of narratives in constructing group identity and the dichotomy between memory and history.

Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist, has contributed greatly to the concept of memory, and the theory of 'Collective Memory' he put forward helps us understand it within social groups. Halbwachs says, "Society recollects, recognises, and localises memories," which proves the social nature of memory. Memory is an important concept in the context of Partition because it is associated with sociopolitical ideologies. Feminist theories, as advanced by feminist historians such as Urvashi Butalia, emphasise the importance of incorporating previously overlooked women's experiences. "Official histories... Tell us what the survivors of Partition went through" (Butalia 3). These theories offer a broad framework for studying how literary works address Partition as both a historical event and a subject of memory and trauma. This study would employ theories of subalternity, postcolonialism, trauma, and memory to highlight how *Basti* and *The Night Diary* address Partition.

Fragmented Memory and Cultural Loss in *Basti*

In *Basti*, a story by Intizar Husain, the experience of Partition is shown through a series of fragmented moments of memory, nostalgia, and chronological dislocation. Zakir's world, the protagonist of the story, is a world of the past and the present. This is a form of temporal collapse, a concept from trauma studies. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as follows: "Trauma is an incomplete experience. Trauma is characterised by delayed awareness." Basti's nonlinear narrative reflects the trauma of Partition.

The aspect of nostalgia, which is a longing for a lost home and a resistance to historical amnesia, is quite fascinating. The seasons

came and went with a regularity that seemed everlasting, unaffected by the craziness that was to follow" (Hussain 3). Zakir remembers his home as a place of harmony, coexistence, and unity before Partition. The memory of Zakir is disrupted by his displacement, creating a tension between his past and present. The memory of Zakir's house in Rupnagar before Partition might be regarded as Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory," which suggests that memory "is not a reproduction of the past but a reconstruction of it according to present needs."

Psychological pain is also highlighted through the use of silence, alienation, and dislocation. Dominick LaCapra described the inability of Zakir to narrate his experiences as "acting out," where the subject is trapped in a cycle of trauma, and there is no closure. "What had happened was so immense that words could not contain it; it lived instead in silences and pauses" (Husain 87). The fragmented narrative can also be seen from literary and thematic perspectives, as it is an experience that cannot be fully expressed.

From a subaltern perspective, the reader is concerned with the lives of ordinary people who went through the horrors of history. The story is about ordinary people who have been marginalised throughout history. This is somewhat similar to the point Ranajit Guha makes in his work on the elitism of historical writing in colonial India (Guha 1). The lack of political personalities and politics in the narrative of the story's history highlights the line of demarcation between epic history and ordinary life. Instead, the reader is treated to a view of the "slow violence" of the Partition of India, the gradual decay of humanity's social fabric. Zakir writes, "The people were the same, yet everything had changed; the bonds that once held them together had quietly dissolved" (Husain 112).

It also centres on memory rather than the written history, thus going against accepted history. Gyanendra Pandey has mentioned that "histories of the violence of partition itself have a tendency to be sanitised, to be removed from the record, and it is the task of some other kind of representation to restore it". *Basti* has achieved this by re-living history through the medium of memory rather than the accepted history. Degradation and disintegration in the city, relationships, and traditions symbolise the disintegration of a

common reality. The views of postcolonial theory, as propounded by Partha Chatterjee, reveal a loss of history's complexity in nationalist history. Memory has been used in *Basti* to challenge the accepted history by remembering what has been erased or lost. There is no comprehensive history of Partition; there is only uncertainty, disintegration, and plurality. There is a decolonisation of memory in the attempt to come to terms with the psychological effects of trauma. *Basti* re-creates the Partition as a quintessentially human experience that cannot be captured in written history but rather in memory, loss, and disintegration.

Childhood, Gender, and Trauma in *The Night Diary*

The novel The Night Diary by Veera Hiranandani offers another perspective on the Partition of India, from a new angle: the diary of a young girl, a space for trauma and identity. Unlike *Basti*, which employs a non-linear narrative, *The Night Diary* follows a diary format, allowing the reader to experience the trauma of the Partition of India through the eyes of a young girl, Nisha, as she writes to her deceased mother. Trauma theory centres around the inarticulable nature of trauma, which finds its way through the narrative of the young girl, where some parts are understood, some are not. Cathy Caruth explains, "The trauma, in other words, is not an event but an experience; an experience that is only fully accessible, fully understood, after the fact." Nisha's diary reflects her understanding of the new reality, though she cannot grasp it intellectually.

The child's epistemological perspective highlights innocence and reveals the absurdity of communal violence." Nisha's observation, where she says, "How can people who were friends yesterday become enemies today?" is a simple, though profound, observation. (Hiranandani 2018). This, in a way, reflects the confusion of those who lived through the violence and turmoil of the Partition, but it also runs counter to the philosophies that led to it. While studying memory, Maurice Halbwachs, in the context of the social framing of memory, says, "The knowledge of individuals is constructed in relation to a social context which, in times of crisis, is itself in a state of crisis" (Halbwachs 38). Nisha cannot differentiate between her old and new friends because the social context is in crisis due to ideologies.

Gender, in *The Night Diary*, depicts the vulnerability of a young girl in a patriarchal society who becomes a victim of an attack. Feminist historians have pointed out that women during Partition experienced a particular kind of violence, kidnapping, sexual violence, and displacement, which remains outside the official history. The official history, according to Urvashi Butalia, cannot capture the experiences of people who have lived through Partition, especially women, whose experiences are never recorded. Nisha's narrative does not reflect any serious brutality. The narrative reflects a general sense of anxiety and insecurity, which reflects the gender aspects of Partition. The journey has made Nisha fearful: "I am afraid all the time now." Nisha is fearful of the people she and her gang might meet and the consequences they might face. Nisha's small expression of terror reflects the fear that women and young girls experienced during Partition.

Religion and identity are major themes of the novel. Nisha, being the offspring of a Hindu and a Muslim, is a hybrid. In fact, hybridity is what the partition between India and Pakistan sought to create. Nisha's diary states, "Hindu or Muslim?" No longer knowing where I belong (Hiranandani 146). Hence, it is a symbol of postcolonial identity, in which a single identity is imposed on a hybrid one. According to Partha Chatterjee's theory of postcolonial identity, a nation-state is a space where a hybrid identity is marginalised and excluded from society because it does not conform to the mainstream narrative (Chatterjee 38). Hence, Nisha's identity crisis challenges the notion of partition, which denies hybrid identities.

However, it is also important to note that migration and displacement are significant. The migration of the family from Pakistan to India is a difficult and emotional experience. The trauma is a result of losing a place and a future. Nisha says, "We have left everything behind, our home, our memories, even the feeling of safety" (Hiranandani 72). Dominick LaCapra refers to structural and historical trauma. The second kind of trauma is associated with an event and affects life and identity. LaCapra (70) explains that it is associated with an event. Similarly, in the novel, people's lives and identities are disrupted as they migrate from a familiar place to an unfamiliar place.

Nisha also uses the diary as a tool to make sense of her experiences and to exert agency amid overwhelming situations. "For working through trauma and emotions, diaries can be useful." This also makes sense in the context of trauma theory, which makes use of the narrative as a means to make sense of trauma and violence. The diary form also allows the novel to enter children's literature, making the study of the Partition possible, as it does not exclude children's experiences but incorporates them.

Thus, *The Night Diary* becomes a counter-history, a complement to *Basti's* narrative techniques. It is in this way that the novel attempts to retrieve the marginalised history and write the memory of the Partition in a particular way. The novel, through its focus on the 'micro-level of reality,' seeks to challenge the discourses of Partition in significant ways. The novel, through its focus on the personal and immediate nature of the narrative, attempts to underscore the need for alternative histories within the complex reality of Partition, thereby reiterating the fact that 'history is not just the record of the past, it is also the experience of the people who lived through it.'

Comparative Discussion: Subaltern Memory and Narrative Strategy

A comparative study of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* reveals that the divergent narrative styles of the two works share the goal of highlighting subaltern memory that contests the dominant historical discourse. Both novels feature divergent elements, and these divergences complement each other in their themes of trauma, displacement, and memory. *Basti* has a non-linear narrative, while *The Night Diary* has a linear one, reflecting the immediacy of lived experiences. However, the divergent narrative styles in *Basti* and *The Night Diary* resonate with Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma contests conventional temporality, reflecting the narratives of trauma and repetition and constituting a non-linear narrative of trauma (Caruth 4). Trauma is embedded in the narrative structure of *Basti*, whereas in *The Night Diary*, it is embedded in lived experiences.

This dichotomy in narrative voices also highlights the complexity of the subaltern's perspective. *Basti* is a narrative of an adult, a retrospective consciousness, marked by nostalgia and existentialism. In contrast, *The Night Diary* is a narrative from a child

whose perspective on the event is limited but emotive. The dichotomy in narrative voices, as seen in the work of Maurice Halbwachs, may be noted: "Memory is above all a social fact, and it is the social position and the social context in which individuals find themselves that, in a large measure, determine the nature and the content of the memories which each group and each individual preserves" (Halbwachs 1).

As far as the representation of trauma is concerned, *Basti* is inclined towards the implicit articulation of trauma. In contrast, *The Night Diary* is inclined toward an explicit emotional tone, expressed through fear, confusion, and longing. This difference in the representation of trauma aligns with the distinction between "acting out" and "working through," as proposed by Dominick LaCapra. *Basti* is a reflection of "acting out," while *The Night Diary* is a reflection of "working through," as proposed by LaCapra (70). The diary reflects Nisha's working-through approach, while Zakir is unable to work through his experiences.

Despite the above-mentioned differences, both texts converge on a viewpoint grounded in the subalternist approach, which focuses on the voices of the subaltern, or those on the periphery of discourse. As in Ranajit Guha's critique of elitist historiography, neither text focuses on political leadership or the state but on the lives of common people in relation to the disruption of the Partition. Furthermore, a similarity has been found between the two texts: they both function as counter-narratives that challenge the concept of dominant narratives. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, the violence of Partition is lost in the dominant narratives of history; thus, the role of literary narratives is crucial in reclaiming the human side of the violence. Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that, while differing in terms of literary style and thematic concern, both *Basti* and *The Night Diary* share a common purpose in their attempt to rebuild the history of Partition from a deeply personal perspective, and thereby challenge the hegemonic discourse on Partition in a manner that contributes to the decolonisation of Partition memory.

Decolonising Partition Memory

However, the necessity of decolonising the memory of Partition requires a paradigm shift from a state-centric, official, and

historiographical approach towards a more lived-experience-based approach that highlights aspects of affect and marginality. The stories of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* contribute to the decolonisation of the memory of Partition, a process of moving away from a political incident towards understanding Partition as a present-day trauma, embedded in the memory of the event. The stories of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* challenge the epistemological claims of the dominant narratives of Partition by prioritising nationalist historiography, political leadership, and territorial division over accounts of human suffering. According to Partha Chatterjee, nationalist historiography is embedded in colonial epistemology, which has marginalised other ways of making knowledge, memory, and understanding the world around them (Chatterjee 38). The stories of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* challenge nationalist historiography by privileging objectivity over lived experience and affect.

In *Basti*, fragmented memory and nostalgia can be seen as a form of resistance to the erasure of history, in line with Jan Assmann's theory of memory as an active process of identity creation and maintenance (Assmann 37). The same can be seen in *The Night Diary*, which reclaims the Partition through the voice of a child, making it a potent form of counter-memory. The emphasis on personal narratives exemplifies Urvashi Butalia's theory that they can uncover the "hidden" aspects of Partition obscured in official histories (Butalia 14).

Furthermore, storytelling itself is an ethical act of witnessing, and literature becomes a space for articulating trauma that cannot be represented in any other way. In a way, as Gyanendra Pandey has shown, the violence of Partition cannot be represented formally within historical discourse and therefore requires new forms of narrative that can capture its complexity and depth, allowing its history to be told. In this way, both novels reimagine the memory of Partition as fragmented, multiple, and contested, thereby disrupting its narratives. Ultimately, decolonising memory means recognising the legitimacy of this new history and embracing a kind that is sensitive to silence, subjectivity, and trauma.

Conclusion

The discussion above has sought to demonstrate that both *Basti* and *The Night Diary* offer a highly engaging refiguration of memory that

focuses on subaltern experience, which is marginalised in mainstream memory of the Partition of India. Both works, which depart from the state-centric approach to the Partition of India, seek to refocus the reader's gaze on the individual experience, which is marginalised in the mainstream memory of the Partition. Through their distinctive narrative styles, both works aim to emphasise that trauma is not only experienced but also recollected in complex, non-linear ways. As Cathy Caruth points out, trauma is never represented straightforwardly and is recollected in fragments, as seen in both works (Caruth 4).

Moreover, by engaging with subaltern perspectives, both works can be seen as responding to the need to create a 'history from below,' a concept advocated by Ranajit Guha, which aims to subvert the elitist leanings of conventional historical writing (Guha 1). The individual, gender, and childhood aspects are intended to emphasise that the experience of partition cannot be reduced to a simplistic analysis. It may, therefore, be asserted that both texts have subverted the conventional form of history writing in the name of memory.

Ultimately, this study has argued that the decolonisation of memory in relation to Partition requires a reorientation of historiography towards the affective, the marginal, and the experiential. It is in this context that literature has been seen as a space of ethical importance, in which the unsaid can be articulated and trauma meaningfully engaged with. As such, the narratives of *Basti* and *The Night Diary* have served to reaffirm the argument that, ultimately, Partition is a process, and not merely a product of the past, but a process which is still ongoing and which has a significant impact on identity, memory, and cultural consciousness in complex ways. Possible avenues for further research could include other literary and cultural works that complicate and deepen our understanding of the subject's complex and multifaceted nature.

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