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Fractured Identities and the Search for Selfhood: A Study of Veera Hiranandani's The Night Diary

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Abstract

Veera Hiranandani's The Night Diary (2018), winner of the Newbery Honor, stands as a luminous work of historical fiction that charts the psychological and emotional terrain of a young girl negotiating a dual cultural inheritance in the tumultuous aftermath of the 1947 Partition of India. Written in the form of diary entries addressed to her deceased mother, Nisha's narrative becomes a site of profound self-interrogation, as she attempts to reconcile her Hindu father's heritage with her Muslim mother's legacy in a world that violently demands singular allegiances. This paper examines the construction and fragmentation of identity in the novel, drawing upon postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" and hybridity, to analyze how Nisha's in-between existence—neither fully Hindu nor fully Muslim—mirrors the broader ruptures experienced by millions during Partition. The study further explores how silence functions as both a symptom of trauma and a mechanism of survival, arguing that Nisha's diary-writing constitutes a therapeutic act of self-authorship that enables her to transcend the binary logic of communal violence. The paper also investigates the representation of food, language, and domestic space as markers of cultural memory and identity, demonstrating how Hiranandani deploys these quotidian details to convey the enormity of historical dislocation. By situating the novel within the broader discourse of Partition literature, this paper argues that The Night Diary offers a distinctly child-centered perspective that humanizes the abstract violence of history, while simultaneously affirming the possibility of belonging beyond the boundaries of religious identity. The novel ultimately proposes that identity is not a fixed inheritance but a dynamic, ongoing negotiation shaped by love, memory, and the courage to claim one's own voice.

Keywords: Identity, Partition, Hybridity, Trauma, Historical Fiction, Postcolonial Theory, The Night Diary, Homi K. Bhabha, Third Space, Cultural Memory.

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Introduction:

The literary representation of the 1947 Partition of India has long occupied a central position in South Asian literature, producing canonical texts that grapple with communal violence, displacement, and the dismemberment of a shared subcontinent. From Saadat Hasan Manto's scorching short stories to Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy Man and Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow Lines, Partition literature has consistently interrogated the human cost of drawing political borders through the hearts of communities. Within this rich and anguished tradition, Veera Hiranandani's The Night Diary (2018) emerges as a distinctive and invaluable contribution: a novel addressed not to adult readers wrestling with the complexities of political history, but to young readers encountering this history for the first time through the intimate diary of a twelve-year-old girl named Nisha.

Published to immediate critical acclaim and awarded the Newbery Honor in 2019, The Night Diary occupies an unusual position in Partition literature. It is simultaneously a work of children's historical fiction and a sophisticated meditation on identity, belonging, and the violence of categorical thinking. Hiranandani, herself of mixed Hindu and Muslim heritage, brings a deeply personal sensibility to the material, investing her protagonist with the same cultural duality that defines the author's own background. Nisha, daughter of a Hindu doctor and a Muslim mother who died in childbirth, grows up in the fictional town of Mirpur Khas in what will become Pakistan after Partition. When the political borders are drawn and religious violence engulfs the region, Nisha and her family must undertake the dangerous journey to India, leaving behind the only home she has ever known.

The novel's central structural conceit—diary entries addressed to Nisha's dead mother, Mama—immediately establishes identity and selfhood as its primary concerns. In writing to a mother she never knew, Nisha is simultaneously constructing and interrogating her own sense of self. She is writing across the boundary between the living and the dead, between the Hindu world of her father and the Muslim world of her absent mother, between the child she is and the adult she is becoming. The diary form, with its quality of intimate address and daily reckoning, becomes the formal correlative of Nisha's psychological condition: fragmented, searching, and in the process of being assembled. As Nisha reflects on her divided inheritance, she asks, “But you’re still a part of me, Mama. Where does that part go?” (Hiranandani 17). The diary becomes her safe space of expression as she admits, “I’d much rather write than talk” (Hiranandani 12).

Postcolonial theory provides a particularly illuminating framework for reading The Night Diary. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space"—the liminal zone of cultural negotiation that exists between established identities—describes with uncanny precision the existential position Nisha occupies throughout the novel. Neither Hindu nor Muslim, neither fully belonging to India nor to Pakistan, neither child nor adult, Nisha inhabits a space of productive ambiguity that the violence of Partition seeks to foreclose. The novel's

achievement lies in its insistence that this in-between space, far from being a condition of deprivation, is the site of Nisha's most authentic selfhood.

This paper examines how The Night Diary constructs and represents identity through several interlocking lenses: the diary form as a technology of self-fashioning, the figure of the hybrid subject in postcolonial thought, the role of trauma and silence in shaping subjectivity, and the function of food, language, and domestic space as repositories of cultural memory. By bringing these analytical frameworks to bear on Hiranandani's novel, this study aims to demonstrate that The Night Diary is not merely a work of historical fiction for young readers but a philosophically serious engagement with questions of identity, belonging, and the human capacity for resilience in the face of catastrophic historical violence. The atmosphere of communal tension is captured in the line: "Everything is different now, even though it's exactly the same" (Hiranandani 23).

The significance of studying this novel in the context of Partition literature lies not only in its literary merit but also in its pedagogical implications. As a text addressed to young readers, The Night Diary performs the crucial cultural work of transmitting historical memory across generations, while simultaneously modeling a form of identity that resists the reductive logic of communal categorization. In an era of renewed ethnic and religious nationalism, the novel's insistence on the complexity and multiplicity of selfhood carries an urgency that extends well beyond the historical period it depicts.

The paper proceeds as follows: the first section examines the diary form as a mode of self-construction, drawing on theories of life-writing and autobiography. The second section applies Bhabha's concept of hybridity to analyze Nisha's dual cultural inheritance. The third section explores the representation of trauma and silence in the novel, situating Nisha's speech difficulties within a broader framework of Partition trauma. The fourth section analyzes the cultural politics of food and domestic space in the novel. The conclusion draws these threads together to argue for the novel's significance as both a literary achievement and a work of cultural memory.

The methodological approach adopted in this paper is primarily textual and theoretical. Close reading of key passages in the novel is combined with the application of postcolonial and trauma theory to generate interpretations that are grounded in the specific texture of Hiranandani's prose while remaining alert to its broader cultural and historical resonances. Secondary sources include scholarly works on Partition literature, postcolonial theory, children's historical fiction, and trauma studies, which together provide the theoretical scaffolding for the analysis that follows.

The formal choice of the diary as the novel's primary narrative mode is far from arbitrary. Diary writing has long been recognized as a quintessential practice of self-

construction, a daily act through which the self is not merely recorded but actively produced. In the tradition of life-writing studies inaugurated by scholars such as Philippe Lejeune and Sidonie Smith, the diary occupies a distinctive position: unlike memoir or autobiography, which retrospectively organize a life into a coherent narrative, the diary is written in the present tense of lived experience, capturing the contingency and uncertainty of daily existence before it has been resolved into meaning.

Nisha's diary is addressed not to an anonymous future reader, as many literary diaries are, but to her dead mother: "Dear Mama," each entry begins, establishing an intimate mode of address that transforms writing into dialogue. This structural choice has profound implications for the novel's treatment of identity. In addressing her mother, Nisha is in constant negotiation with the absent half of her cultural heritage—the Muslim half that her father has, through grief and perhaps through fear, effectively suppressed. The diary becomes the space where Nisha can explore what it might mean to be her mother's daughter, not only her father's.

The act of writing is itself a form of agency in the novel, one that Nisha exercises in a world that repeatedly threatens to strip agency from individuals and communities. When political violence determines where people must live and what they must call themselves, the diary offers Nisha a space of self-determination. She can write what she cannot say aloud; she can explore identities that the external world refuses to recognize. The diary is, in this sense, a counter-narrative to the master narratives of religious nationalism that seek to define identity from without.

Hiranandani's choice to give Nisha a speech difficulty—she struggles to speak fluently in social situations—further intensifies the significance of the diary as a mode of expression. Where Nisha's voice falters in speech, it flows freely in writing. The diary thus becomes not simply a narrative convenience but a psychologically motivated form: writing is where Nisha is most fully and fluently herself. This contrast between spoken silence and written expressiveness maps onto the broader opposition the novel draws between the violent public language of communal identity and the more authentic private language of individual selfhood.

The addressee of the diary—Nisha's dead mother—also functions as a figure for the inaccessible cultural heritage that Nisha must somehow claim without direct access. Mama is Muslim, beautiful, beloved, and utterly absent. What Nisha knows of her mother comes through fragments: her father's grief, her grandmother Dadi's stories, the photographs she is allowed to glimpse. In writing to Mama, Nisha is constructing a mother—and therefore a part of herself—from these fragments. The diary is thus not only a journal of external events but an act of imaginative reconstruction, a piecing together of a self from the shards of an interrupted inheritance.

This process of self-construction through writing is complicated by the political events that overwhelm the novel's second half. As Partition violence erupts and the family is forced to flee, Nisha's diary entries become records of trauma as well as vehicles of identity-formation. The diary must now contain things that resist containment: violence, loss, fear, and the bewildering collapse of the familiar world. Yet the act of writing persists, suggesting that the self-constructive function of the diary is not suspended by trauma but intensified by it. Writing becomes a way of bearing witness to what has happened and of insisting on the continuity of selfhood in the face of forces that would reduce individuals to members of a mob or victims of history.

The concept of hybridity, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture, describes the condition of subjects who exist between cultural identities, neither fully assimilating to one nor the other, but inhabiting a "third space" of cultural negotiation and transformation. For Bhabha, hybridity is not a simple blending of two cultures into a harmonious synthesis; it is a more unstable, productive, and sometimes painful condition of simultaneous belonging and non-belonging. The hybrid subject exists at the intersection of cultures, languages, and identities, and this intersection is a site of creative tension rather than comfortable resolution.

Nisha's hybrid identity is established from the novel's opening pages. Her father, Kazi, is Hindu; her mother, Ammi, was Muslim. In the India of 1947, on the eve of Partition, this combination is not merely unconventional but politically charged. The categories of Hindu and Muslim are becoming the organizing principles of a new geopolitical order, one that demands clarity and allegiance where Nisha offers only complexity and ambiguity. She is, in the most literal sense, the product of an intercultural encounter that the Partition project seeks retroactively to make impossible. The fear created by Partition is visible when Nisha writes, “I think of everyone I know and try to remember if they are Hindu or Muslim or Sikh and who has to go and who can stay” (Hiranandani 22).

Bhabha's third space is not a physical location but a discursive and psychological one, a space of enunciation that exists prior to and between the fixed positions that cultural and political systems create. Nisha's diary is precisely such a third space: a zone of self-enunciation where she can speak in a voice that is neither her father's nor her mother's but her own, forged from the intersection of their worlds. In writing to Mama, she creates a dialogic space in which the two halves of her inheritance can coexist without canceling each other out.

The novel consistently dramatizes the pressure exerted on hybrid subjects by forces that demand categorical identity. Nisha's classmates, her neighbors, the adults around her—all operate within a framework that assumes and enforces the mutual exclusivity of Hindu and Muslim identities. When the family's cook Kazi Sahib must flee because he is Muslim

and they are moving toward Hindu India, the violence of categorical thinking is made painfully concrete. The friendship between Nisha and her Muslim friend Amira, which crosses the communal boundary with apparent ease in childhood, becomes impossible to sustain once the logic of Partition takes hold.

Yet the novel refuses to allow this pressure to fully succeed. Nisha's hybrid identity, though threatened, is not destroyed. Her friendship with Amira persists in memory and in the pages of the diary; her mother's Muslim identity continues to inform her sense of self; her father's stories of her mother's intelligence and beauty keep alive an image of intercultural love that contradicts the dominant narrative of Hindu-Muslim enmity. The novel thus suggests that hybridity, though politically vulnerable in periods of communal violence, is psychologically resilient because it is rooted not in abstract identity categories but in specific relationships and memories.

Hiranandani's portrayal of Nisha's twin brother Amil is illuminating in this context. Where Nisha turns inward, processing her identity through writing, Amil turns outward, expressing himself through drawing and storytelling. Together, the twins represent different modes of engaging with their shared hybrid inheritance. Amil's art, like Nisha's diary, becomes a space where the complexity of their situation can be represented without reduction. The twins' relationship itself—intimate, complementary, each compensating for what the other lacks—models a form of identity that is collaborative and relational rather than singular and self-contained.

The journey from Pakistan to India that forms the novel's climax is also a journey through the third space of Partition: a movement between two newly created national identities that reveals how artificial and violent those identities are. On the road, Nisha encounters people of various religious backgrounds thrown together by the upheaval of history, their categorical identities temporarily suspended by the shared urgency of survival. These encounters suggest that the third space is not only Nisha's private condition but a social and historical reality that Partition both creates and conceals.

Trauma studies, as developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, among others, has established that traumatic experience is characterized by its resistance to ordinary modes of representation. Trauma disrupts the narrative continuity of selfhood; it leaves wounds that do not heal cleanly and memories that return unbidden rather than being smoothly integrated into the story of a life. The literature of trauma must therefore develop formal strategies for representing what resists straightforward representation: fragmentation, repetition, ellipsis, and indirection are among the techniques that trauma narratives employ. The Night Diary is, among other things, a novel about the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Nisha's father carries the grief of his wife's death as a silent wound that shapes the entire emotional atmosphere of the household. His inability to speak of Mama, to share

memories and photographs freely, to acknowledge the Muslim dimension of his children's heritage, represents a form of traumatic avoidance that has consequences for Nisha's identity formation. She has been raised in a household of silences, where the most important things go unspoken.

Nisha's own speech difficulty can be read as a somatic expression of this family culture of silence. In a household where the central truth—that Nisha is also her mother's daughter, that she is both Hindu and Muslim—cannot be spoken, Nisha's voice becomes unreliable. She stutters, hesitates, and falls silent at moments of social pressure. The body speaks the silence that the household enforces, and it speaks it as a disability: Nisha's voice fails her in public precisely because the public world does not have room for what she needs to say.

The diary writing is thus a form of therapy in the most literal sense: it is a space where Nisha can give voice to what cannot be spoken aloud. In writing to Mama, she is breaking the family silence, addressing the suppressed half of her heritage directly, insisting on its existence and its importance. Each diary entry is an act of healing, a small step in the process of integrating the fragmented elements of her identity into a more coherent whole. The therapeutic function of writing is well established in trauma theory; what Hiranandani adds is a specifically historical dimension, situating Nisha's personal healing within the broader context of a society in the process of traumatic rupture.

The violence of Partition that the novel depicts in its second half represents a traumatic intensification of the silences that have already characterized Nisha's life. The communal violence she witnesses—the burned villages, the terrified refugees, the casual brutality of mobs—exceeds what can be easily processed or narrated. Yet the diary continues. Nisha keeps writing even as the world around her collapses, and this persistence of writing through trauma represents the novel's deepest claim: that the narrative self, the self that tells its own story, is the most fundamental form of resistance to the forces of dehumanization.

The novel's treatment of trauma is notable for its sensitivity to the developmental stage of its protagonist and its implied readers. Unlike adult trauma narratives, which can deploy the full resources of retrospective understanding, The Night Diary represents trauma as it is experienced by a twelve-year-old: incomprehensibly, with gaps in understanding that the adult narrator cannot fill in because the child narrator genuinely did not understand. This epistemological limitation, far from being a weakness of the novel, is one of its most powerful effects. Readers are positioned alongside Nisha in her incomprehension, experiencing the bewildering violence of Partition from within rather than from the distancing perspective of historical overview.

One of the most distinctive and aesthetically accomplished aspects of The Night Diary is its use of food as a vehicle for cultural memory and identity. Hiranandani's novel is deeply attentive to the culinary dimensions of the household's life, and this attention is not merely decorative but thematically central. Food, in the novel, is the medium through which cultural identity is transmitted, contested, and preserved.

The family's cook, Kazi Sahib, is Muslim, and his cooking represents a living link to the Muslim dimension of Nisha's heritage that her father's silence has suppressed. The foods he prepares—the biryani, the korma, the sweets associated with Eid—are also the foods that Mama might have cooked, and eating them is a form of communion with the absent mother. When Kazi Sahib must leave because of Partition and the family cannot take him with them to India, the loss is not only of a beloved person but of a culinary heritage, a daily practice of cultural memory that has sustained Nisha's connection to her mother's world. Nisha's own developing interest in cooking—she learns recipes from Kazi Sahib, carefully recording them in her diary—can be read as an act of cultural preservation. In learning to cook the foods associated with her mother's world, Nisha is ensuring that this dimension of her inheritance will not be entirely lost when Kazi Sahib departs. The recipes she records become a kind of second diary, a repository of cultural memory encoded in the practical language of ingredients and techniques. This encoding is significant: cultural identity is preserved not through grand narratives but through humble, daily practices.

Language functions in the novel in a similarly complex way. The multilingual environment of Mirpur Khas, where Urdu, Hindi, and English coexist and overlap, reflects the cultural complexity of pre-Partition India and contrasts sharply with the monolingual insistence of the new national identities being created. Nisha moves between languages with the ease of one who has grown up in a linguistically plural household, and this linguistic hybridity is another marker of her in-between status. The Partition project, which seeks to assign Urdu to Pakistan and Hindi to India, threatens to split what Nisha experiences as a unified linguistic inheritance.

The domestic space of the family's home in Mirpur Khas is also richly coded with cultural meaning. The arrangement of rooms, the objects that fill them, the practices that organize daily life—all reflect the hybrid culture of the household. When the family must flee, leaving behind most of their possessions, the loss of the physical space of home is experienced as a loss of the material culture that has shaped their identities. The house, as a space of memory and belonging, cannot be taken with them; they carry their household only in their minds and in the pages of Nisha's diary.

The journey to India is narrated partly as a movement through other people's domestic spaces—the houses of strangers who offer shelter, the refugee camps with their improvised domesticity, the temporary accommodations that are never quite home. Each of

these spaces throws into relief what has been lost, but also suggests the possibility of creating new forms of belonging. The novel ends with the family established in a new home, and while this new home is not the old one, it represents the possibility of a future that is not simply defined by what has been destroyed.

Placing The Night Diary within the broader context of Partition literature illuminates both its continuities with the tradition and its distinctive innovations. The canonical texts of Partition literature—Manto's short stories, Sidhwa's Ice-Candy Man, Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan—share certain preoccupations with Hiranandani's novel: the arbitrariness and violence of the Partition process, the human cost of communal ideology, the complexity of identities that cross religious boundaries, and the role of personal relationships in humanizing abstract political violence. Where The Night Diary differs most significantly from these canonical texts is in its choice of a child protagonist and in its formal strategy of diary writing.

The child's perspective has both advantages and limitations as a vehicle for representing Partition. Its advantages are significant: it defamiliarizes events that adult readers might approach with the armor of historical familiarity, it focuses attention on the human dimensions of violence rather than its political causes, and it models forms of response—confusion, grief, resilience, love—that resist the ideological frameworks that made Partition possible. The child narrator cannot fully understand the political forces at work, and this incomprehension is, paradoxically, illuminating: it reveals how arbitrary and unjustifiable the violence appears when viewed without the rationalizations that adult ideological frameworks provide.

The novel's engagement with the archive of Partition memory is also noteworthy. Hiranandani draws on historical research—maps, documents, personal testimonies—to construct a fictional world that is historically accurate in its broad outlines while remaining focused on the intimate drama of one family's experience. This combination of historical research and imaginative investment is characteristic of the best historical fiction and ensures that the novel's emotional impact is grounded in historical reality rather than floating free of it.

The Night Diary also participates in a specifically American tradition of historical fiction for young readers that includes classics such as Karen Hesse's Out of the Dust and Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak. Like these works, it uses the diary form and a young female protagonist to explore traumatic historical experience from the inside, privileging emotional truth over historical comprehensiveness. Its publication in the United States and its Newbery Honor suggest that its representation of South Asian history has found resonance with readers who may have little direct connection to that history, demonstrating the power of literary empathy to bridge cultural and historical distances.

The Night Diary by Veera Hiranandani is a novel of remarkable emotional intelligence and formal sophistication, one that brings the full resources of the literary tradition to bear on a historical trauma that remains deeply relevant to the present. Through the diary of twelve-year-old Nisha, the novel explores the construction of identity under conditions of extreme pressure, demonstrating how a hybrid self—one that refuses the binary logic of communal identity—can be sustained and even deepened in the face of forces that seek to destroy it.

The paper has examined this argument through several analytical lenses. The diary form, we have seen, functions as a technology of self-fashioning that enables Nisha to construct a coherent identity from the fragmented elements of her cultural inheritance. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space illuminates the in-between position that Nisha occupies, neither fully Hindu nor fully Muslim but something more complex and more fully human than either category allows. Trauma theory helps us understand the silences and speech difficulties that shape Nisha's voice, as well as the therapeutic function that diary writing performs. And the analysis of food, language, and domestic space reveals how cultural identity is embedded in the material practices of everyday life.

Taken together, these analyses support the central argument of this paper: that The Night Diary is not only a work of historical fiction about the 1947 Partition of India but a philosophical exploration of identity that speaks to readers of any time and place who have experienced the violence of categorical thinking. Hiranandani's great achievement is to have made this philosophical argument through the specific, intimate, unforgettable voice of one girl writing letters to her dead mother in the dark hours of a historical catastrophe. That voice—searching, resilient, stubbornly committed to complexity in the face of enforced simplification—is the novel's most lasting gift to its readers.

The Night Diary, in conclusion, affirms the power of literature to bear witness to historical trauma while simultaneously offering resources for imagining identities that transcend the boundaries that history draws. In doing so, it makes a contribution to Partition literature that is distinctively its own: a child's-eye view of catastrophe that is also, in the deepest sense, a humanist manifesto against the violence of categorical thinking.

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