

**Narrating the Unassimilated Wound: Trauma, Displacement, and the Politics
of Voice in Train to Pakistan and Cracking India**

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Abstract:

This paper reads Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991, also published as *Ice-Candy-Man*, 1988) not merely as thematic archives of Partition violence but as texts in which trauma is built into narrative form itself. Because the two novels have already been paired repeatedly with other Partition narratives in existing scholarship — a body of largely thematic, content-focused criticism — this paper takes a different route, applying Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as a belated, unassimilated event that returns rather than is represented, Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through, and the feminist Partition historiography of Urvashi Butalia and of Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin on the gendered, embodied character of Partition memory. It argues that the two novels displace trauma onto different formal registers according to who is permitted to narrate it: Singh's omniscient, multi-focal narration holds catastrophe at an administrative distance, so that the recurring image of the train functions as an unassimilated symptom rather than a stable symbol, while Sidhwa's child-narrator internalises trauma through a dissociated, retrospectively self-correcting voice. Read together, the novels suggest that Partition fiction's deepest achievement lies less in what it depicts than in how it withholds, defers, and redistributes the act of witnessing.

Keywords: Partition literature; trauma theory; displacement; narrative form; gendered violence; Khushwant Singh; Bapsi Sidhwa

1. Introduction

The Partition of British India in August 1947 remains, by any measure, one of the largest and most violent displacements of the twentieth century. Estimates of the dead vary enormously and irreconcilably, from roughly two hundred thousand to two million, a discrepancy that is itself a historiographical fact worth pausing on: no state, colonial or postcolonial, ever produced an agreed count of its own founding violence. Between twelve and twenty million people crossed the new borders of India and Pakistan within months, and

government records on both sides claimed tens of thousands of women abducted during the migration — commonly cited figures include some thirty-three thousand Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan and fifty thousand Muslim women in India — of whom only a fraction were ever officially “recovered” (see Butalia; Menon and Bhasin). These are not merely background statistics for the literature that followed; they are the conditions under which that literature had to find a form. A catastrophe with no agreed death toll, no complete archive, and no single vantage point from which it could be witnessed in its entirety poses a formal problem to any writer who takes it as subject: how does a novel represent an event that resists being fully known even by those who lived through it?

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991) — published in its earlier South Asian edition as *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) — are among the small number of Partition novels that have entered the canon of Indian and Pakistani writing in English, and both have attracted a considerable body of critical attention. That attention, however, has followed a fairly consistent path. *Train to Pakistan* has been read alongside Saadat Hasan Manto's short fiction, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, in comparative studies that trace, with justified seriousness, the shared thematic ground of communal violence, displacement, and the collapse of syncretic village life. Sidhwa's novel has likewise been read against *Train to Pakistan* itself, as well as against other accounts of the abducted woman in Partition writing. This body of work has been valuable in establishing the thematic coordinates of Partition fiction, but it has tended to treat trauma primarily as content — as an event the novel depicts, more or less directly, more or less graphically — rather than as a problem the novel's form is compelled to solve.

This paper takes the latter approach. It argues that the significance of *Train to Pakistan* and *Cracking India* lies not only in what each novel shows of Partition's violence but in how each is structured by what it cannot show directly, and in who, within the fictional world, is permitted to know, narrate, or carry that knowledge. Reading the two novels through trauma theory and through feminist Partition historiography together allows a claim that a purely thematic reading cannot make: that displacement in these texts operates simultaneously on three levels — as the geographic and political displacement of populations across a new border, as a displacement of narrative authority (the question of who within the novel gets to narrate catastrophe, and from what distance), and as a displacement onto the gendered body, by which collective trauma is repeatedly resolved through what happens to women, even as women's own experience of that trauma is the thing least directly narrated. Singh's novel manages catastrophe through an omniscient, sociological narrative distance that keeps the event's full meaning unassimilated even by the story's own characters; Sidhwa's manages it through a child-narrator whose limited, retrospectively corrected understanding formally enacts the belatedness that trauma theory identifies as trauma's defining structure. The two novels, in other words, do not simply share a subject. They offer

two different formal solutions to the same problem of narrating an event that neither official history nor personal memory could fully hold.

2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Silence, and the Politics of Witnessing

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* remains the foundational text for literary trauma studies, and its central claim is worth restating with some precision because it is frequently flattened in application. Caruth argues, drawing on Freud's late writing on trauma, that a traumatic event is not experienced fully at the moment of its occurrence; it is registered but not integrated into ordinary memory and understanding, and it therefore returns later, "belatedly," in a form — a flashback, a repeated image, a compulsion — that testifies to an experience that was never, in the ordinary sense, fully "had" by the person to whom it happened. Trauma, on this account, is defined not by the horror of the event alone but by this structure of belated, unclaimed knowledge: the survivor is possessed by an image or scene whose meaning exceeds what could have been consciously grasped when it occurred. For literary criticism, the significant consequence of this argument is that a text genuinely engaging with trauma, rather than simply describing violent events, will tend to reproduce this structure formally — through repetition, deferral, gaps in what any single narrating consciousness can report, and images that recur without ever being fully explained by the plot that surrounds them.

Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* sharpens this framework for a text explicitly engaging with collective, historical trauma rather than an individual case. LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out," in which the traumatic past is compulsively repeated or relived without being narratively or emotionally processed, and "working through," in which a community or a narrating consciousness achieves enough critical distance to integrate the past into a livable, if never fully resolved, understanding. LaCapra is careful to insist that this is not a simple hierarchy in which working through is always available or even always desirable; some historical wounds, he suggests, may be so severe that acting out is the only honest response available, and a narrative that moves too quickly to resolution risks a false, premature working through that does violence to the event a second time. This caution is directly relevant to Partition fiction, where a novel's ending — reconciliation, sacrifice, rescue — always risks looking like an unearned resolution to a violence the subcontinent itself has never fully worked through.

If Caruth and LaCapra supply the vocabulary for trauma's temporal and narrative structure, Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* supply the historical and gendered specificity that keeps that vocabulary from floating free of its context. Butalia's oral-history project set out precisely to recover what she calls the "other side" of Partition's official history: the memories, largely of women, children, and Dalits, that had been excluded from a nationalist historiography organised around the political negotiations of 1947. Her central finding — that survivors' silence is not an absence of memory but a structured, often protective refusal to speak, shaped

by family and communal shame — reframes silence itself as historical evidence rather than as a gap to be regretted. Menon and Bhasin extend this argument specifically to the fate of abducted women, documenting how the postcolonial Indian and Pakistani states' official Recovery Operation, intended to repatriate abducted women to their “own” community, frequently treated women's bodies as the property of the nation and the family rather than as the site of individual experience or consent: a woman recovered from her abductor might be rejected by her own family, or recovered against her own wishes, because what mattered to the state and to the community was less what she had suffered than which side of the new border her body was seen to belong to. Read together, Butalia and Menon and Bhasin make the case that the deepest violence of Partition for women was often compounded, not resolved, by the very mechanisms — familial, communal, and governmental — that claimed to be restoring them.

Taken together, these four theorists suggest an analytic vocabulary in which “displacement” in Partition fiction cannot be treated as a single, self-evident category. Displacement is what happens to a population crossing a new border; but it is also, in Caruth's sense, what happens to an experience that cannot be directly represented and must be displaced onto a recurring image or a delayed understanding; and it is also, in Butalia's and Menon and Bhasin's sense, what happens when a collective trauma is discharged onto the bodies of women, who are made to carry a national or communal meaning that has comparatively little to do with their own experience. The readings that follow use this three-part sense of displacement to examine how *Train to Pakistan* and *Cracking India* each structure the unspeakable, and at whose expense.

3. The Train as Unassimilated Symptom: Administrative Distance and Displaced Witnessing in *Train to Pakistan*

Train to Pakistan is organised into four parts — “Dacoity,” “Kalyug,” “Mano Majra,” and “Karma” — a structure that already signals the novel's method: it moves from a criminal incident of purely local consequence, through a section named for the Hindu concept of a degenerate age, to the village itself as the unit under examination, before arriving at an ending whose title offers a moral vocabulary that the plot itself will not straightforwardly satisfy. The novel opens not with any of its individual characters but with the weather and the season: “The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year” (Singh, “Dacoity”). This is a telling choice of aperture. Rather than beginning inside a consciousness that might later be traumatised, Singh begins with an almost meteorological, sociological register, describing a whole country's atmosphere before he has introduced a single character. This distancing device recurs throughout the novel: its narrator moves fluidly between the perspectives of the corrupt magistrate Hukum Chand, the outlawed but essentially decent Jugga, the idealistic and ultimately impotent activist Iqbal, and the collective voice of the village itself, but rarely settles into sustained interiority with any of them. The effect, sustained across the whole novel, is of an event witnessed from slightly outside any single consciousness that suffers it

— precisely the administrative or documentary distance that keeps catastrophe from being fully “known” by anyone inside the story.

The recurring image around which this distanced narration organises itself is, unsurprisingly, the train. Before Partition's violence reaches Mano Majra, the village measures its life by the trains that pass: their arrivals mark the hours as reliably as a clock, so habitual that their daily passage is treated with the same unthinking familiarity as wishing a neighbour goodnight (Singh, “Dacoity”). This establishes the train, in the novel's early pages, as a benign instrument of communal time — a shared, unremarkable rhythm that binds Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu inhabitants of the village into a single temporal community regardless of their religious differences. It is exactly this function that Partition violence corrupts. When trains later arrive silently, off schedule, or carrying the dead rather than the living, the novel does not need to explain the horror discursively, because it has already trained its reader, along with its villagers, to read the train as a timepiece: an off-schedule, silent train is immediately legible as catastrophe precisely because the earlier, ordinary trains had been rendered so intelligible. This is, in Caruth's terms, very close to how a traumatic image functions: the train does not become a new symbol invented to represent the violence; it becomes the site onto which an event that resists direct narration is displaced, so that the image returns and accumulates a horror that no single passage of exposition ever states outright. The train is not explained; it recurs, and its recurrence is the novel's substitute for direct representation of a violence that its own narrative distance will not approach head-on.

That refusal to approach directly is most visible in the novel's treatment of sexual violence against women. *Train to Pakistan* gives considerable narrative attention to men's violence — the dacoity that opens the novel, the massacre trains, the mob that gathers to attack a train of Muslim refugees at the novel's climax — but it gives comparatively little direct attention to the sexual violence that, as the historical record makes clear, was a central and organised feature of Partition's brutality. Nooran, the Muslim girl loved by Jugga, is the novel's clearest female presence, yet she is granted little interiority: her pregnancy by Jugga is disclosed largely through other characters' responses rather than through Nooran's own extended reflection, and she disappears from the narrative's active centre well before its climax, departing with the Muslim exodus while Jugga remains behind. The near-silence surrounding what women in the novel's world would have risked, and often suffered, during the very migrations the novel otherwise narrates in some administrative detail, is not best read as an oversight. Read through Butalia's argument that silence in Partition memory is itself a historically produced structure rather than a simple absence, the novel's reticence about sexual violence looks less like a failure of nerve and more like a formal enactment of exactly the silence that the historical record itself preserves: the violence done to women is present in the novel largely as an absence that shapes what can and cannot be said, rather than as a scene that is narrated.

The novel's ending performs a similar withholding, this time around collective understanding rather than direct violence. Jugga, released from custody and moved by his love for Nooran and by an inarticulate loyalty to the community that has otherwise rejected him as a criminal, cuts the rope stretched across the railway track that was meant to sweep the Muslim refugees crowded onto a departing train to their deaths, and is killed in the act. The act is, by any conventional measure, heroic; but the novel grants it no witnesses capable of understanding it as such. Jugga dies alone, in the dark, performing an act that saves hundreds of lives but that no one in Mano Majra will ever know he performed. In LaCapra's terms, this is a resolution that refuses the shape of "working through": there is no communal recognition, no narrated moment in which the village absorbs and makes sense of what has happened, no story that will carry Jugga's act forward into the community's understanding of itself. What the novel offers instead is close to "acting out" in its purest form — an impulsive, unprocessed, and finally uncommunicated act of violence-against-violence that the narrative records but that the fictional community itself never gets to know. The reader is given more knowledge than any character in the novel possesses, which is itself a formal statement: *Train to Pakistan* suggests that even an act capable of redeeming a moment of collective catastrophe may remain, within the world it depicts, exactly as unassimilated as the catastrophe itself.

4. The Child's Eye as Traumatic Aperture: Dissociation and Embodiment in Cracking India

Where Singh withholds full understanding by distributing his narration across an omniscient, only loosely attached narrative voice, Sidhwa withholds it by the opposite means: by fixing her narration almost entirely inside a single, structurally limited consciousness. *Cracking India* is narrated by Lenny, a Parsi child of about seven at the novel's opening, whose polio-damaged leg has already made her, in her own account, an outsider within her own household, confined largely to her mother's garden and her ayah's company. Lenny's own description of her circumstance — "My world is compressed" (Sidhwa 11) — is usually read, correctly, as an image of a sheltered, domestic childhood about to be shattered by history. It also, however, describes with some precision the formal method the novel will use to narrate Partition: because Lenny's world is compressed, so is the reader's access to the historical catastrophe unfolding around her, and the gap between what Lenny can perceive as a child and what the adult narrating voice, looking back, now understands, becomes the novel's chief instrument for representing trauma.

This gap is worth dwelling on, because it is precisely the structure Caruth identifies as trauma's temporal signature: an event is registered before it can be understood, and its meaning becomes available only belatedly, from a position the original experiencing self did not occupy. Lenny narrates as an adult recalling a childhood self who witnessed the dismemberment of Lahore's composite communal life without being able, at the time, to interpret what she was witnessing. The narration is accordingly full of moments where a child's literal, sensory perception precedes and exceeds her comprehension — Lenny

registers gestures, silences, and half-heard adult conversations with great precision, pressing her ear to walls and doors to catch what she is not meant to hear, while consistently either misreading or only partially grasping their significance until much later, if ever. This is not merely a charming device of naive narration in the tradition of the child's-eye novel; it is, read through Caruth, a formal reproduction of the way trauma is lived — sensed and recorded before it is known — with the crucial difference that Sidhwa gives her narrator the adult vantage point from which to retrospectively correct, without ever fully closing, that gap.

The character onto whom the novel's central trauma is most visibly displaced is Ayah, Lenny's beautiful, much-admired Hindu nanny, whose circle of suitors — a hotel cook, a masseur, a zoo attendant, and above all the ice-candy vendor Dil Navaz — Lenny observes with the same close, uncomprehending attention she brings to the adult political world, learning early to read the subtle signals and unspoken rules by which this circle of admirers coexists around her. Ayah functions, for most of the novel's first half, as an emblem of the very composite, cross-communal sociability that Partition will destroy: her admirers are Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Pathan, and Parsi, and their competition for her attention is rendered as good-humoured rather than as a fault line. It is exactly this function — Ayah as the living embodiment of communal harmony — that makes her the novel's chosen site for enacting communal harmony's destruction. When the ice-candy man, having himself witnessed and been brutalised by communal violence, becomes complicit in Ayah's abduction and eventual coerced marriage, the novel is not simply reporting an individual act of betrayal; it is staging, on a single body that had earlier stood for pluralism, the exact mechanism Menon and Bhasin describe in their account of the historical Recovery Operation — a woman's body becoming the ground on which a community's rupture, and one man's own traumatised, “acted out” violence, is worked out. Crucially, and consistently with the pattern already observed in *Train to Pakistan*, Ayah's own experience of this violence is never directly narrated. Lenny sees Ayah before her abduction and again after her eventual recovery; what happens to her in between is precisely what the child-narrator cannot witness and the adult narrator will not invent. The novel's most important trauma is, in the most literal sense, displaced outside the boundaries of what its own narrating consciousness is permitted to know.

The one significant exception to this pattern — the one moment where *Cracking India* departs from Lenny's limited perspective to narrate atrocity with comparatively direct force — is the chapter given to Ranna, the young son of Lenny's village friends, who survives the massacre of his family and community and afterward makes his way, wounded and nearly mute, to a refugee camp. That this is the novel's one sustained departure from its otherwise consistent narrating consciousness is itself analytically significant. Sidhwa appears to recognise that Lenny's particular form of dissociated, retrospectively corrected child narration — however effective at rendering the slow, uncomprehending erosion of Lahore's communal life — is not adequate to the direct, immediate violence Ranna experiences. That violence requires, if it is to be represented at all, a different narrating register, external to

Lenny's own consciousness and to her own social position as an unharmed, sheltered Parsi child at one remove from the worst of the killing. The structural admission here is precisely the one Caruth's model would predict: some experience cannot be assimilated even into a novel's chosen mode of witness, and must be granted its own separate, formally distinct register, displaced not just within the story but at the level of narrative technique itself.

5. Comparative Synthesis: Two Displacements

Read side by side, *Train to Pakistan* and *Cracking India* offer what might be described as two formal answers to the same historical problem: how does a novel narrate an event that resists being known in its entirety by anyone who lived through it? Singh's answer is collective and administrative. His narration moves across an entire village and, by extension, a whole disintegrating social order, holding catastrophe at the distance of an observer who can describe the mechanics of violence — the arrival of trains, the movement of mobs, the political manoeuvring of a magistrate — without granting any single character, or the reader, full access to any one consciousness's experience of it. Trauma, in this novel, is displaced onto a recurring image, the train, precisely because no character is permitted enough narrative interiority to process it directly. Sidhwa's answer is individual and embodied. Her narration compresses to the perspective of a single, structurally limited child, so that trauma is displaced not onto an external image but onto the gap between a child's sensory registration of catastrophe and an adult narrator's only partial ability to make retrospective sense of it — a gap the novel is compelled to breach once, in Ranna's chapter, by abandoning its own chosen narrator altogether.

What the two novels share, despite this formal divergence, is more striking than what separates them. In neither text does the woman who bears the community's violence most directly — Nooran in Singh's novel, Ayah in Sidhwa's — narrate her own experience of that violence. Nooran disappears from the narrative at the point of greatest personal risk; Ayah is watched closely before her abduction and observed again, briefly, after her eventual recovery, but the abduction itself, and whatever she suffered and felt during it, falls into the same narrative silence that, according to Butalia, characterises the historical record itself. This convergence is not, this paper would argue, a shared limitation of two otherwise very different novelists so much as it is a shared, historically accurate observation: both writers, working in genuinely different narrative modes some thirty-five years apart, arrive independently at the same structural silence, because that silence was, according to the feminist historiography of Partition, the actual condition of women's experience within both the event and its subsequent commemoration. Where official nationalist history spoke of “recovering” women as though recovery settled the matter, and where communities readmitted or rejected women according to the community's own sense of contamination and honour rather than according to the woman's own account of what had happened to her, these two canonical novels reproduce, formally, exactly that evacuation of female testimony — not necessarily by design, but because the historical structure of silence Butalia describes

was, in a real sense, inescapable for any writer working from the archive, communal memory, and reportage available to them.

The endings of the two novels make a final point of comparison. Jugga's death is unwitnessed and uncommunicated within the world of the novel; it achieves nothing that the village of Mano Majra will ever know to commemorate, even as it saves the lives of the Muslim refugees on the train. Ayah's story ends differently — she is eventually traced and, with the help of Lenny's godmother, given the choice to return to her family in Amritsar rather than remain with the ice-candy man who now calls himself her husband — and this ending has often, reasonably, been read as more hopeful than the closed, solitary heroism of Jugga's sacrifice, because it restores some measure of agency to Ayah at the very end. But it is worth noting, following LaCapra's caution against premature or falsely redemptive endings, that even this resolution stops short of narrating Ayah's own account of what happened to her. She is granted a choice, at last, about where to go; she is never granted, within the novel, an extended first-person reckoning with what she endured. Both novels, in other words, resist the temptation to convert catastrophe into a fully “worked through” narrative resolution — Singh by refusing his protagonist any communal recognition at all, Sidhwa by granting her central female character rescue but not voice. Read as two attempts to solve the same formal problem, both novels arrive, by different routes, at endings that are honest about what the genre of the Partition novel cannot yet resolve.

6. Conclusion

To read *Train to Pakistan* and *Cracking India* as texts structured by trauma, rather than simply as texts about trauma, is to shift the critical question from what each novel depicts to how each is organised by what it withholds, defers, and displaces, and onto whom. Singh's omniscient, administratively distanced narration converts an unassimilable historical rupture into a recurring image — the train — that accumulates meaning through repetition rather than through direct representation, and it withholds from its own characters the collective recognition that would allow Jugga's sacrifice to become a genuinely shared act of communal memory. Sidhwa's child-narration converts the same historical rupture into a gap between sensation and understanding that the adult narrating voice can only partially close, and it is compelled, in Ranna's chapter, to admit that some experience exceeds even that chosen narrative method. What unites the two novels most significantly, however, is the fate of the women whose bodies bear the communal violence each narrative is organised around: neither Nooran nor Ayah is permitted to narrate her own trauma directly, a convergence that this paper reads not as authorial failure but as an accurate formal inheritance of the historical silence that Urvashi Butalia, and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, have shown to be the actual condition of women's experience within, and after, Partition.

This approach suggests a broader methodological point for the study of Partition fiction, and perhaps for the study of literatures of mass displacement more generally: that the presence or absence of graphic violence in a text is a considerably less reliable index of its

engagement with historical trauma than the architecture of its narration — who is allowed to witness, who is allowed to speak, and what remains, by the text's own design, permanently unassimilated. Applying this narratological and historiographically grounded framework beyond the two canonical, English-language novels examined here — to Partition narratives in Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu, and other regional literatures that have received comparatively less attention in Anglophone criticism — would be a natural and valuable extension of the argument made here, and one this paper leaves as an invitation for future research.

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