

The Individual and the Collective: Refractions of Memory, History and Testimony in Aanchal Malhotra's Selected Partition Writings

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Abstract

The partition of India in 1947 represents a turning point in the history of the Indian subcontinent. As an essential component of the human experience, memory plays an important role in the formation of both individual and collective identities. Memories of the Partition have contributed to the development of national identities, nurturing an emotion of belonging and shared history between the inhabitants of India and Pakistan. Individual and collective memories of the event are left permanently scarred by brutality, trauma, coerced migrations, and the death of loved ones. In the context of Partition, both remembering and forgetting are inextricably entangled. While certain elements of the event have been intentionally remembered and memorialised, others have been carefully forgotten or concealed. The transgenerational transmission of trauma and enduring impact, as well as oral histories, experiences, and the preservation of cultural objects, further add to the formation of both individual and collective identities. *Remnants of a Separation* (2017) and *In the Language of Remembering* (2022) by author and oral historian Aanchal Malhotra are analysed in the paper. By synthesising the themes Malhotra has used in her works, the Paper highlights the multifaceted and interwoven nature of memory. Malhotra's works help the reader to understand how recalling experiences from memory can shape alternative historical narratives over time. Exploring the mechanics of remembering/forgetting is thus essential for comprehending the complexities of how memories are formed and preserved or wiped out entirely.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Forgetting; Indian Partition; Individual Memory; Memory Studies; Oral History; Personal Narratives; Remembering; Testimony.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 is still widely regarded as an important turning point in the pages of the Indian subcontinent's history. The complex nature of the Partition, which included enormous dislocation, violent conflict, and the formation of two nations, has had significant and long-lasting impacts on the people and the communities involved. The narratives that are constructed in official histories of the Partition are often influenced by "political, religious, or patriotic agendas" (Copland 39). In the paper, an in-depth examination of the ways in which these narratives form a collective memory of the Partition is presented.

Particular attention has been paid to the possibility that experiences and perspectives that conflict with the state-sponsored narratives may have been erased, distorted, or marginalised. The investigation thus focuses on how the trauma that was linked with the Partition might cause individual memories to become fragmented, selective, or suppressed. In addition, it analyses how cultural narratives, public commemorations, and societal dialogue also contribute to the formation, maintenance, and transformation of collective memories of the 'Great Divide.'

Considering the painful and convoluted nature of the event, it is crucial to tackle this assignment with compassion and respect. Astrid Erll, in her research article titled "Traumatic Pasts, Literary Afterlives, and Transcultural Memory" vouches for and emphasises the importance of accurate and empathetic representation of traumatic pasts so as to not hurt the sentiments of the survivors and their descendants and appeals to audience's empathy and understanding.

Media Studies approaches to memory are perhaps better suited to getting to grips with this question of how literature and film represent traumatic pasts – and to what degree these "pasts" are always already mediated memories. (3)

The burden of memory, intimately interwoven within the framework of collective consciousness, often sustains long stretches of silence. This silence, while heavy, serves as an expression of the challenges individuals encountered while attempting to balance their individual experiences with the wider historical narratives, therefore underscoring the significant influence of memory on testimonies. When it comes to archiving the experiences that people and communities have gone through, the value of oral histories, memoirs, and personal testimonies cannot be overstated.

The comprehension of the Partition is deepened as a result of this research, which looks into how the narratives of survivors overlap with and differ from official histories. Pierre Nora, a pioneer in the field of Memory Studies has researched extensively on the sites of memory. Nora states that "...consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn..." (8).

One can deduce that memory has within it the capacity to forget, and the purpose of this paper is to analyze how the act of forgetting - whether on purpose or by accident - affects the community's collective recollection of the Partition. The political, social, and psychological variables that contribute to forgetfulness are investigated, as are the repercussions of these gaps for the formation of historical narratives and collective identities.

Aanchal Malhotra is a contemporary author who has conducted substantial investigation and documentation on the legacy of the Partition. Her works *Remnants of a Separation* (2017) and *In the Language of Remembering* (2022) throw light on the delicate link between individual memories, communal histories, and the power of testimony and how it can broaden the understanding of this crucial historical event. Against the backdrops of the Indian Partition, Malhotra's non-fictional books also encourages the reader to focus on the ongoing role of the aesthetics of memory, history, and testimony in the process of constructing the knowledge of the past by raising ethical questions about the representations of human accounts. By 'unearthing a part of one's consciousness', one may discover how one's memories contribute to the larger tale, influencing history and testimony.

The Echoes of Memory: Examining the 1947 Partition

The 1947 division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan has been forever etched in the history books as one of the most gruesome partitions the world has ever witnessed. Millions of people were displaced, many lives were lost, and communal and individual identities were forever altered as a consequence of this time of turmoil and bloodshed. Gyanendra Pandey in his book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (2010), says that the events of Partition were central to the "dynamic process of nationalising the nation" (17).

Pandey's book deems Partition as a means to resolve the ethnic conflict within the subcontinent, while also stating that it was mostly a selfish agenda of the political parties at the time. Taking Pandey's research one step further, Paramjit S. Judge has critically analysed his work and ar-

gued that while the purpose of the Partition may have been to resolve the ethnic conflicts, it instead created “far-reaching social and cultural consequences” and impacted the “cultural consciousness of the subcontinent” (78). As a consequence, Partition memory is now being seen as an ethnic property because it illuminates the impact of collective narratives on individual identities. This emphasises the dynamic relationship between individual recollections and communal histories in the preservation of cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, Anna Bernard in her seminal article titled “Partition as a Literary Paradigm” states that “the twentieth-century partitions have produced more problems than they have solved” (12). The repercussions of the Indian Partition are still being felt today, and people are still trying to make sense of this colossal human tragedy. In the process, the role of memory is pivotal in shaping the understanding and interpretation of the event. The examination of memory, especially while linked with an event as traumatic as the Partition, highlights the complex process of “reading the future, from the past, in the past present” (Bernard 14).

Thus, it is oftentimes marked by a sense of longing for a romanticized historical period, indicating the presence of nostalgia for an ‘idealized past’ within both personal and communal narratives. The memories of the Partition have had a profound impact on individual and community identities, shaping worldviews and relationships. It determines how the Partition is remembered, interpreted, and mediated through generations, influencing the cultural identity and historical consciousness of the Indian subcontinent.

Mediations on memory can be described as the numerous mediums and creative expressions that are used to depict, interpret, and assimilate recollections of the event. The public’s perception, historical narratives, and communal memory are all significantly influenced by these mediations. It is also aided by critical analyses, fresh perspectives, and a novel body of knowledge provided by historical research and academic works on the subject of Partition. Moreover, the channels of remembering are the many mediums through which the event’s collective memory is maintained, disseminated, and memorialised.

The mediations can happen through a variety of channels oral history, literature, cinema, museums, etc. serve as some of its examples. Novelist and oral historian Malhotra has accomplished a remarkable feat of maintaining the partition’s legacy with her debut book *Remnants of a Separation*

(2017). She explores the complex network of recollections of the Partition through her interaction with personal artefacts and the tales they bear. She uses those items to investigate how people form relationships with one another and how they cope with being uprooted from their communities. Her study illustrates the malleable and selective character of memory by revealing its inherent fragmentation.

Malhotra, whose methodology relies on material memory in *Remnants*, focuses on “things, things, things – the material objects possessed the unique history of being secreted across borders by refugees fleeing for their lives” (*Remnants* 11). She does so by using personal artefacts that survivors carried with them across the border. The chapters, each detailing the tale of a protagonist whose artefact narrates the stories of loss, record the oral histories of descendants of those who lived during the event. In the introductory segments of *Remnants*, Malhotra shares some of her insights into the role of memory, what it signifies and more specifically, what it does not.

Human Memory is fragile. We mentally store our experiences as memories. However, it is important to understand that our memory is not a recording device. It cannot be assumed that whatever one experiences will be stored as an exact and precise mnemonic trace of that moment, especially when time gradually begins to wear it down. (21)

In addition, Malhotra theorises that “there is a transference of memory into inanimate objects, which serve as a catalyst for remembering memories,” a sort of untarnished “portal into the past” (*Remnants* 43). Malhotra’s thoughts here can be correlated with Sigmund Freud’s notion of memory wherein he says “The memory of what cannot be spoken still speaks, and it does so irresistibly” (Terdiman 98).

The process of memorialising the Indian Partition is, therefore, complex, and continuous, including a wide variety of factors that impact people and communities. As per Malhotra, such material objects become “... a collated experience of their physicality and potential metaphysicality” (*Remnants* 35). Malhotra, however, justifies her first book’s dependence on material memory by emphasising that survivors are themselves wary of speaking about it themselves and instead, their tales are narrated by the objects they have carried *sarhad paar*.

She says “...memories, possessions...about which the affected people were unable and unwilling to speak” (*Remnants* 17). Therefore, through her fo-

cus on material memory, the readers can deduce that family tales spoken by the elderly are a common way for descendants to learn about the horrific event. To make sure these tales do not fade away over time, people are now recording and archiving them. Malhotra says "...I had become interested in artefacts of the old; people and objects that had survived this colossal historical event and continues to exist in the present" (*Remnants* 35).

Malhotra realises how such objects become symbols of their past, of better times when they were not destroyed or disrupted by the partition. For example, a lady reveals to Malhotra a knife that she intended for suicide in the case of an attack. Similarly, in the third chapter of *Remnants*, Balraj Bahri, Malhotra's grandfather, discusses the few objects that his mother brought along as they crossed the border into India. Her major worry was that "...ration might be provided, but what would we cook it in?" (*Remnants* 97). Through these dialogues, one can see that these artefacts and their tales mirror each other. It is rather disheartening to think that the artistry of these objects, which are typically of high worth, is not even the last thing on the survivor's mind when living as a refugee.

Unravelling the dynamics of Remembering with Oral History and Testimony

Experts in the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, and others examine the Partition in great detail. Those who lived during that time and their descendants as well as academic researchers, make substantial contributions to its memorialization via academic documentation, sharing of personal memories, and participation in commemoration events. Through their work, they are paying tribute to the people whose lives were altered by keeping their memory alive and in the public consciousness.

Artistic and imaginative representations of the narratives, feelings, and encounters of survivors are essential tools for giving those a meaningful aesthetic value, some of which Malhotra has also done through material memory. She calls human memory as "...fragile but these objects endure" (*Remnants* 39). They carry "memories sometimes too heavy to be borne" (*Remnants* 18). Even Nora argues that through the channels or sites, "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" or "becomes the medium through which the exhausted capital of collective memory condenses and is expressed" (Nora 7).

Malhotra researched extensively to learn more about this event and its

aftermath. In the introductory segments, Malhotra stated that she often “wondered” to herself “as the third generation of a family affected by the Partition” about what had actually transpired (*Remnants* 5). After her debut book *Remnants* was published and popularised, she wanted a novel approach to look at the Partition, to uncover the voices *unheard*. Those who have lived through it or those who witnessed it pass on their narratives to the next generation, forming the memory of that which one has *not* experienced.

Soon enough, Malhotra discovered that oral histories and personal narratives have become one of the most important channels for shedding light on diverse perspectives and hoped “to provide an alternative lens to view it with” (*Remnants* 8). This helps to preserve memories and gives people a more direct connection with the past. Such an exploration, however, in no way undermines other records like gazetted documents, official reports, and archival material. These provide a formal, institutional view of the event, in contrast to the many viewpoints explored in other studies. The Indian Partition is best understood through the personal and communal recollections, historical narratives, and testimonials of individuals passed onto later generations.

Through her second book *In the Language of Remembering* (2021), Malhotra sheds light on the relationship between memory, history, and testimony, highlighting the importance of both individual and official narratives in constructing the knowledge of the event. Through an extensive series of interviews with survivors and their descendants spanning regions across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, *In the Language* delves into the intricate process of memory transmission to subsequent generations. It explores how descendants, in their attempts to reinterpret the experiences of their displaced ancestors, become deeply immersed in the emotional complexities of their narratives.

Central to the narrative is the notion of ‘the passage of memory,’ which elucidates the complex interplay between generations who directly experienced historical trauma and those who inherit and grapple with its memory. Malhotra states that it preserves the “... relationship between a generation that has lived through a historical trauma and a generation that has inherited the memory of that trauma” (*In the Language* xxx). This represents a significant departure from traditional Partition scholarship, which has tended to focus exclusively on the tangible suffering of victims.

Malhotra’s study highlights that memory does not function as a tool for

storing information. A human's memories fade as time progresses as, it is inherently "malleable and acquires perforations" that mould them with "new impressions and corrections", in a way that "recollection becomes a reconstruction" (*In the Language* 39). Her research thus emphasises the subjective character of memory by showing how memories get shattered, altered, or recalled selectively through time.

By investigating the cultural milieu in which these items were created, she unearths "counter-narratives." Malhotra observes how memory "seemed as visceral as the way these would have been described to them" (*In the Language* xxvii). The second book, therefore, is a poignant reminder that official histories often erase the lived realities of under-represented communities and groups, concealing the diverse perspectives that are now coming to light, owing to the extensive scholarship in the field of Partition Studies.

The way the tales are told shows their depth – the book's title reflects Malhotra's interest in how narratives are woven. In the Introduction chapter of *In the Language*, she talks about what 'language' means; not just the words or syllables, but also how people talk and what they do not, or cannot say. While writing the book she found that emotions are "embedded in bodies" of the survivors- they can be seen in the nuances of movement, gestures, or the "looks in the eyes" (*In the Language* xxx).

In addition, Malhotra uses oral histories to investigate how social narratives create collective memory, the passing down of trauma from one generation to the next, and the complexity of individual identity. Her research highlights the need to keep these accounts alive so that they may serve as a testament to the past and help break the 'institutional silence'. Her investigative reporting and documentary work thus illuminate the larger historical currents that prompted the Partition. She places the event into its historical context by analysing political causes, the effects of colonial control, and the role of a few pivotal personalities. Her research helps focus on the causes and effects that led up to that fateful year of 1947.

The Interwoven Threads of Individual and Collective Memory

In the context of the Indian Partition, both the function of individual and collective memory are very important for maintaining the human qualities of this historic event. It assures that the individual accounts will not be lost and thus provides perspectives into the psychological toll, resilience, and the lasting consequences that it has had on both individuals and com-

munities. Malhotra strongly asserts that individual memory forms the building blocks for a more nuanced historical understanding. Personal encounters with violence, relocation and loss shape the subjective recollections of an event via first-hand individual narratives and family oral histories. Material memory can be considered here in keeping the individual experiences fresh.

In the Language of Remembering also has a section about material memory, which Malhotra describes as the “ability of an object or a possession to retain memory, and act as stimulus for recollection” (*Remnants* 4). This type of memory “considers the object a primary character around which the past is arranged” (*In the Language* 373). Ordinary objects, because they are everyday items, are not typically valued for their age, rarity, craftsmanship, beauty, or even their chance of survival, but they can indeed serve as “vessels for memory” (*In the Language* 373).

Collective memory, on the other hand, is how members of a society or group remember and understand past events. It shapes public discourse, the national narrative, and the historical knowledge. Collective memory allows civilizations to remember historical events by keeping cultural traditions alive and passing on the experiences of survivors to future generations. Isha Dubey, in her article titled “Remembering, Forgetting and Memorialising” helps the readers to understand the intricacies of collective memory:

A useful way to understand the complexities of the interplay between social/communicative and cultural/national memory would be to address the question of inclusion or exclusion of groups or communities from either and then the responses of those excluded to both. (512)

As the social, political, and cultural climate changes throughout time, so does this process. The viewpoints of the subaltern groups and the marginalised also provide an alternative to the mainstream narratives and help influence collective memory. This inclusive and holistic view of 1947 is made possible by recollections that focus on the experiences of people who have been historically marginalised or disregarded. In simpler words, the collective memory of the Indian Partition has been shaped throughout time by the interplay and intersection of these many mediations of memory. They have the power to shape the ways in which people from various groups and generations commemorate the ‘Long Partition.’

Individual experiences too are contextualised within a larger historical narrative when people recount their memories and share testimonies or recollections. Memory refractions are the varied and often conflicting ways in which the event is remembered and understood by people, groups, and historical eras. The partition's multifaceted and painful nature has resulted in fragmented recollections, rather than a coherent whole. It was a complex event with far-reaching ramifications for people of many faiths, cultures, and geographies. Consequently, accounts vary substantially from the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, to other religious groups.

Thus, there are often contrasting accounts of what happened since different communities saw different things. The concept of 'becoming' a victim involves a complex process in which people undergo a multilayered change, transitioning from mere spectators to active players in shaping their narratives. This shift enables individuals to use their status as victims to negotiate their position within the communal memory, revealing the complex relationship between personal experiences and the formation of historical events.

Mathew Graves and Elizabeth Rechniewski in their article titled "From Collective Memory to Transcultural Remembrance" assert that the responses to "official commemoration and memorialisation vary widely according to cultural difference, ethnic identification, generation, class, and gender" (5). The primary component of the works of Malhotra and Puri is the complicated interaction between individual and collective memory in the backdrop of the Indian Partition.

Individual memories contribute to the collective memory, and collective memory impacts how individuals make sense of their own experiences. In the 14th chapter of *In the Language*, entitled "Memory", Malhotra continues to discuss the lasting impact of the Partition passed on to the descendants of the survivors, and the legacy that they carry within themselves of a past they have not witnessed first-hand:

Though this transference - whatever shape it may take - results in the preservation of memory by subsequent generations.... I have always assumed that memory is ready to be exhumed. (346)

Over the years, people's recollections of the event have changed and morphed. The first-hand witnesses' experiences and memories may differ from those of their descendants who have only heard tales about it. People's recollections may also vary depending on where they were born or

later settled. The Partition has been remembered and portrayed differently due to other reasons as well, including political and nationalistic goals.

Depending on their respective agenda, many nations and groups may place more emphasis on certain aspects of the Partition. Some people and families, traumatised by the split, have repressed or kept quiet about their experiences. This silence may cause lapses in remembering and mediation, adding to the refracted quality of the memory of the event as a whole. Such complexities are brought into focus by the reflections of memory that arise while analysing Malhotra's works. The diverse perspectives that they both have taken due cognizance point to the need to take a nuanced and comprehensive look at the aftermath of the Partition and its continued significance in the South Asian consciousness.

Conclusion

Both India and Pakistan continue to have their identities, their narratives, and the very fabric of their societies influenced by the collective memory of this tragic event. The paper delved into the complexity of memory, history, and testimony, with a special emphasis on the role that forgetting and remembering had in the context of the Partition. The authors stressed how the aesthetics of memory help the development of historical narratives and the retention of personal experiences by studying how individual and collective memories refract and intersect.

In this regard, the purpose was to show how Malhotra makes use of the influence of testimonies in the process of conserving and transferring lived experiences through oral history and personal testimonies. These testimonials are significant tools that may be used to promote mediation, as well as challenge the suppression of personal narratives within dominant historical ideologies. Malhotra deftly handles these complications with care, making certain that the perspectives of people whose lives have been impacted are acknowledged and protected. The need to preserve human narratives to cultivate empathy, ensure historical authenticity and promote community healing, has also been highlighted.

While reading *Remnants of a Separation* and *In the Language of Remembering*, one encounters unique and deeply moving moments of recollection involving not only multiple generations within a single family but also individuals from diverse families across borders and religions, connected by a remarkable web of friendship. The books delve into people's histories, exploring tales of love and conflict, displacement and settlement,

wealth and poverty, loss of home and a sense of belonging, and nostalgia. It predominantly focuses on memory and forgetfulness, illustrating how hidden narratives resurface through chance remarks, mentions of past places and individuals, serendipitous encounters, and the preservation of cherished material possessions.

Understanding the complex history of South Asia requires remembering the Partition of 1947. The event's influence on local and national identities may be recognised in this way. As Malhotra and other such Partition authors' works are getting the mainstream recognition they deserve, the effort of healing and mediation, among groups that were dislocated during the Great Divide, is also being facilitated. Recognising wrongs done in the past is an important first step towards reconciliation. The Partition highlights the need to strike the right equilibrium between forgetting and remembering. It is important to remember the historical importance of the event, even if selective amnesia helps those affected recover from the attendant trauma. Understanding the joint history of India and Pakistan requires remembering the Partition, both in terms of its human repercussions and its place in history.

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