



Re-Mapping the Ordinary: Everyday Spaces and Subaltern Voices in Partition Short Stories

Dr. Sheeba Parveen

Assistant Professor, Department of English, R B.D Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bijnor, UP, India

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to re-examine Indian Partition short stories through a subaltern and spatial lens to argue that the ordinary spaces of courtyard, kitchens, trains, asylums and refugee camps function as counter-archives of resistance and trauma. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's notion of everyday practices, Henry Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of subaltern speech, and Homi Bhabha's perspective on the ambivalence of nationhood, this paper reflects upon how Partition literature remaps quotidian and the domestic into critical sites of historical remembrance. the paper situates Partition not merely as a singular rupture of history but also as a lived continuum of memory and displacement, through close reading of some stories by Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Krishna Sobti, Bhisham Sahni, Intizar Husain, Khushwant Singh and Jamila Hashmi. It asserts and argues that such stories ponder over the interdependence of the political and personal, the border and the home, and narration and silence—thereby changing ordinary spaces into testimonies of human endurance.

In the modern history of South Asia, Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most horrific and traumatic episodes. While the event of partition is often narrated through the rhetoric of national emergence and political freedom, its literature gestures toward a archive that exposes the dislocation, violence, and ruptured intimacies that accompanied decolonization. Urvashi Butalia observes in *The Other Side of Silence*, “the history of Partition cannot be written only in terms of political leaders and territorial divisions; it must also be written in the tremors of families and in the ruptured memory of those who lost everything” (Butalia 3). This essay repositions the Partition short story as a genre of witnessing that reconfigures the

domestic and ordinary spaces of everyday life into complex sites of survival, trauma and negotiation. Through its attention to fleeting moments and small gestures, the short story form enacts what Veena Das calls “the descent of the social into the everyday,” wherein the routines of living is absorbed into the catastrophic (Das 6).

While monumental histories of Partition privilege official discourse, the short story deal with the microcosm of the personal—silences endured, homes broken and families scattered. A crucial theoretical anchor is provided here by Henri Lefebvre's notion that “(social) space is a (social) product” (*The Production of Space* 26). In this sense partition literature, demonstrates how

space itself—whether the refugee camp, the home or the train is constructed through lived experience and political violence. The intimate transforms into the site of terror, familiar becomes uncanny;. This reconfiguration of spatiality underscores Lefebvre's perspective that "every society produces its own space" (31), and in the context of Partition, this production is mediated through gendered violence, trauma and exile. This production of partition space is epitomized in Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories. In the short story "Toba Tek Singh," the lunatic asylum turns into a parodic mirror of the subcontinent, where the insanity or madness of dividing a nation manifests itself literally. The impossibility of belonging is dramatized through Bishan Singh's collapse in the no-man's land and his refusal to accept either India or Pakistan. Manto writes, "There, behind barbed wire, lay Bishan Singh—neither here nor there" (Manto 34). This suspension of space exposes the absurdity of national logic and, in view of Derridean terms, constitutes a limit-space—an "aporia" where belonging and meaning unravel (Derrida 65). Similarly, Ismat Chughtai's "Roots" and Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti" foreground the fragility of spaces and domestic interiors which are traditionally associated with care and continuity. Though Bedi's protagonist Sunder Lal, campaigns for the rehabilitation of abducted women, he is unable to completely accept and reintegrate his wife into their home when she comes back. The house which was once a refuge, becomes the space of ethical crisis: "He had paraded her name in meetings, yet in his heart, he could not look her in the eye" (Bedi 42). As Gayatri Spivak argues, "The subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 90). Lajwanti's trauma, silence and her inability to give expression to her trauma, demonstrates how women's voices are systematically erased within both nationalist and patriarchal discourse.

The emphasis on everyday and domestic spaces is not accidental; it suggests what Michel de Certeau calls "the tactics of the weak" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 18). Women and displaced refugees engage in micro-practices such as waiting, cooking and storytelling that reassert agency amidst systemic collapse. In Krishna Sobti's short story "Ai Ladki," the

daughter tend to her dying mother and it becomes an act of remembrance. By the transformation of memory, the home, becomes a mnemonic terrain. Sobti writes, "Every cough of the mother was a story waiting to be told, every silence a memory untold" (Sobti 17). The domestic thus turns into the threshold of historical transmission, a feminine archive of endurance and loss. Partition's everyday geographies like its courtyard, kitchens, trains, asylums and camps are therefore not only passive settings but also active narrative agents. They constitute the stories' affective and ethical dimensions. In Bhisham Sahni's "We Have Arrived in Amritsar," the train station, usually considers as emblem of arrival, turns into a site of horror and chaos. The crowd surges "like waves breaking against a platform that no longer promised safety" (Sahni 9). Here, the ordinary infrastructure of travel transforms into the geography of misery and displacement. Similarly, in the stories of Intizar Husain, Lahore's refugee camps blur the boundary lines between waiting and life. Such spaces are, as Lefebvre would propose, social relationship is "decomposed and recomposed" through crisis (Lefebvre 73).

At the heart of all these short stories lies what Cathy Caruth calls "the unclaimed experience"—a trauma that cannot be fully narrated or known (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In Manto's short story "Khol Do," the moment when Sakina mechanically obeys the command of opening her salwar—"Sakina's hands moved to her trousers, and she obeyed"—condenses the unspeakable terror of repeated violation (Manto 57). Caruth's observation that "trauma is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4) exposes this narrative of gesture and silence. Partition short stories thus deal with trauma not only as a theme but also as a medium of narration—elliptical, fragmentary and haunted by the unspeakable. Jamila Hashmi's "Exile," operates the same dynamic. In the story a Muslim woman who is relocated from India to Pakistan yearns for her belonging and lost home: "They said I was free now, but I could feel my chains in the soil I had left behind" (Hashmi 63). Hashmi's story reflects upon what Homi Bhabha called the "unhomely condition". A moment when "the borders between home and world become confused" (*The Location of Culture* 13). The

political and domestic collapse into one another, expressing the dilemma of identity after the colonial partition. Khushwant Singh's short story *Train to Pakistan* situates this dilemma within the geography of the border itself. In the village of Mano Majra, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs coexist. The village epitomises the symbolic microcosm of India's lost fraternity and harmony. When trains arrive at the station, filled with corpses, Singh writes, "The smell of death clung to the station like a curse" (Singh 114). The railway, which once symbolised progress under colonial modernity, now becomes the emblem of collective death. This transformation, reflects upon how the apparatus of modernity such as stations, train lines and administrative lists become what Lefebvre calls "the spatial form of domination" (224). Such moments represent the double logic of Partition: survival and destruction intertwined. Through their focus on the ordinary, such stories resist monumentalization. They address what Veena Das describes as "the return to the everyday as the site where the event of violence is absorbed without being transcended" (Das 7). The short story, mirrors this absorption by virtue of its fragmentation and brevity. Trauma is captured as dispersed fragments in place of a coherent narrative.

The cartographies of Partition are not just geopolitical but also domestic and affective. The transformation of ordinary spaces into sites of remembrance and violence poses challenge to the conventional hierarchy of the private and the public. According to Homi Bhabha, "The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (*The Location of Culture* 15). Partition short stories repeatedly represent such invaded interiors to assess how silenced, bodies and gestures register the trauma of division. Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti" epitomizes this tension between home and history. Sunder Lal's domestic space symbolises the microcosm of the nation's moral instability and dilemma. The inability of Sunder Lal to reintegrate Lajwanti into the household encapsulates the failure of postcolonial rehabilitation discourse to reestablish the dignity of women. The story presents what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the "double effacement" of subaltern women as victims of patriarchal and colonial violence, and as figures

of nationalist redemption who are reabsorbed just symbolically but never heard. Spivak writes, "Between patriarchy and imperialism, the figure of the woman disappears—not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling that is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman'" (*"Can the Subaltern Speak?"* 102). Lajwanti's silence, therefore, operates not just as passivity but also as protest: the hypocrisy of men is unmasked by her wordless presence. Men champion her rehabilitation though fearing her agency.

Similarly, the courtyard, which is traditionally seen as a feminine and communal space is reconfigured into a site of estrangement in Ismat Chughtai's story "Roots". Escalation of communal tensions fracture the shared domestic spaces of Hindus and Muslims. The narrator of Ismat Chughtai observes, "The neem tree in the courtyard stood as if uprooted, its roots exposed to the sun." The imagery resonates with what is termed by Lefebvre as "the violence of abstraction," in which the lived experience of space is over-elaborated by ideological demarcations (*The Production of Space* 289). The courtyard which was once a locus of belonging, becomes a symbol of displacement. Krishna Sobti's short story "Ai Ladki" expands this investigation of the domestic by contextualising memory itself within the rhythms of the household. Fragmented recollections of the mother's loss and migration come forth in pauses between her sips of water and in some moments of breathlessness. The daughter's act of listening turns out to be what Marianne Hirsch mentions as "postmemory" which indicates a belated inheritance of trauma that is conveyed through familial storytelling (*Family Frames* 22). Sobti's prose, familiar yet elliptical, carries out Caruth's notion of "the latency of trauma," where "the event returns belatedly, in the form of narrative and repetition" (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). The domestic thus becomes a medium of the transmission of history rather than a retreat from history.

The gendered economy of partition narratives is also complicated by these re-imagined domestic interiors. Questions of purity, honor and national identity are inscribed on Women's bodies which are often treated as extensions of territory and contested sites. In Manto's story "Khol Do,"

Sakina's violated body exemplifies the collapse of meaning. Her response to the command of the doctor "open it" shows the psychic inscription of violence that is persistent beyond consciousness. As Caruth observes, "The trauma is the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Manto's narration is sparse that refuses sentimentality and the body speaks what language fails to express. In this light, the bodily and domestic interconnect as parallel geographies of trauma. The silences of Sakina, Lajwanti, and the mother in *Ai Ladki* are not absences but become alternative medium of expression as gestural languages of survival. They act what Veena Das writes as "the act of living through" violence (Das 15). Through caring, cooking, or simply sustaining, these women inhabit what de Certeau calls "the tactical everyday" which is a practice of reinhabiting the violated space without the privilege of any transformation.

Partition short story also turns to transitory and liminal spaces such as trains, borders and camps beyond domestic interiors to present and dramatize collective displacement. Acco to Alok Bhalla, the train became "a microcosm of the subcontinent's divided body" (Stories about the Partition of India 62). In Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh," the asylum turns into an allegorical train yard of nations and humans are exchanged like cargo. Bishan Singh's assertion "Upar di gur gur di annexe di bedhiyana di moong di dal of Pakistan and Hindustan" becomes a nonsensical mixture of languages and represent the collapse of communicative order (Manto 33). Derrida's opinion that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" (Monolingualism of the Other 23) is evident here as Partition fractures both subjectivity and speech. Trains in Khushwant Singh's short story "Train to Pakistan" extend this metaphor and transform from madness to massacre. The very symbol of connection becomes a sign of dismemberment When the villagers of Mano Majra's come to know that a train from Pakistan carries the corpses of Sikhs. Singh writes, "The train came in silently, like a ghost, its carriages sealed, the stench of death preceding it" (Singh 112). The helplessness of the

stationmaster and the villagers' horror and terror is encapsulated in what Bhabha calls "the unhomely moment," where "the borders of the self are crossed by the ghostly returns of the national past" (The Location of Culture 14). The railway that once symbolised a colonial apparatus of modernity, is re-signified and seen as a necropolis of the newly partitioned nation.

The refugee camp, another recurring symbol condenses the tension between what is visible and what is invisible. In Sahni's and Bedi's stories, as well as in Urdu sketches of Husain, camps become liminal spaces of waiting that is neither home nor exile. Lefebvre's idea of the "production of abstract space," where lived experience is homogenizes, portrays their existential emptiness (Lefebvre 49). Yet the stories record vulnerable acts of solidarity within these zones of emptiness and deprivation such as Women sharing food and men searching for their names on relief lists. Such gestures frame what de Certeau would name as "the silent invention of the everyday" (de Certeau 19). The refugee camp becomes an archive of loss in Intizar Husain's prose, particularly in short stories like "An Unwritten Epic,". Haunted by the irretrievability of the past Husain's narrators often hover between guilt and nostalgia. One narrator recalled it as "Even the dust of Lahore seemed to accuse us,". This sense of haunting resonates with the concept of hauntology, given by Derrida which means the persistence of absence that frames the present. The refugee, as Derrida would call, "is the name of that which comes back, always dislocated, never fully present" (Specters of Marx 10). In this way Husain's short stories stage memory as spectral geography, where the ghosts of the unburied dead engage and mingle with the living. If the camp and train signify transit of spaces of transit, the asylum in Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" is the ultimate point of this logic as it becomes a space of confinement masquerading as care. Bishan Singh's death in no-man's-land becomes an epitome of the ultimate failure of Partition's geographic rationality. Lefebvre's perspective that "every representation of space hides the violence of its own abstraction" (289) reveals a literal counterpart in the farcical bureaucracy that finalizes which lunatics come from which nation. Manto's sarcasm, imbued

with compassion, transforms the asylum into a contemplative question: can sanity endure the state's madness?

Throughout such stories, the voice or absence of voice becomes a political sign. As Spivak writes, "The subaltern cannot speak" and the cause is not that she lacks voice, but the structure of portrayal refuse to hear her voice (104). Yet Partition stories perform a nuanced counter-move as they make silence audible. In Lajwanti's silence, Sobti's mother, in Sakina's gesture, silence becomes articulative and expressive. Veena Das calls such quiet forbearance as "a form of speech that takes place after the breakdown of language" (Life and Words 16). The fragmentation and brevity of short story echo this broken idiom. They are properly aligned with trauma's inexpressibility. At the same time, Through the persistence of the everyday these texts challenge despair. De Certeau's notion of "making do" (xxiv) illustrates how ordinary operates through such acts as feeding a stranger, sweeping a courtyard, sharing a story. All these acts turn dominated spaces into zones of rebellion and resilience. In Hashmi's short story "Exile," the protagonist's action of watering an infertile and barren garden in Lahore, though seemingly unproductive, portrays a quiet retrieval of belonging: "I knew the soil would not forget me" (Hashmi 67). The metaphysical comes out of mundane here, echoing Lefebvre's notion that "to change life, we must first change space" (190).

The epistemology of trauma is mirrored through compression, formal economy, irony and ellipsis of these stories. They resist closure, demanding instead an ethical interaction with the reader. Caruth claims that "listening to trauma is itself a form of bearing witness" (9). Reading of these short stories, make us partake in an act of ethical listening and we confront the paradox of expressing the unspeakable. As Manto declared, "If you cannot bear these stories, it is because truth is unbearable" (Kingdom's End xii). If taken together, all these narratives conceptualized what Derrida might call a "counter-archive" (Derrida 68). This is an assemblage of gestures, fragments and absences that rebel against incorporation into historiography of the state. Urvashi Butalia's observes that subaltern testimonies and women construct "a history without borders" (Butalia 22) reverberates here.

The courtyards, kitchens and camps in these short stories become mnemonic landscapes where marginalized voices speak not through sovereignty but through perseverance. The form of short story itself becomes the perfect vessel for this kind of counter-archival impulse. The dislocated temporality of trauma is mirrored through its compression. The dignity of the unsaid is preserved in its silences. As Lefebvre claims, "Space is not a thing but a set of relations between things" (73). By re-mapping the relationship between body, space and narration, partition literature, reclaims the ordinary as a domain of historical truth.

If Partition narratives have taught anything, it is that how extraordinary terror and violence of history is experienced and lived through the ordinary. The short stories of Chughtai, Manto, Sobti, Bedi, Sahni, Hashmi, Singh and Hussain deny the monumental to favour the intimate. They unfold not in parliaments or palaces but in courtyards, kitchens, railway stations, and asylums. At these spaces loss and survival intertwine together. In doing so, they construct what Lefebvre calls "dialectic of lived space," where the everyday turns into both the repository and at the same time the critique of history (The Production of Space 39). Partition literature re-mapped these ordinary geographies as spheres of endurance, where gestures become testimonies and terrains become silences. What makes these narratives distinguished is not their narration of trauma but the reconstruction of meaning through the ordinary and banal. Michel de Certeau's notion that "the practice of everyday life invents itself through innumerable ways of poaching" (xii) illustrates upon how the dispossessed and displaced regain agency through care and habit. The act of telling a story to a child, cooking in a refugee camp, or tending a graveyard in exile turns into a subaltern pattern of authorship. These stories reflect upon the fissures in the grand narration of nationhood and independence and nationhood by making us to remind what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions, that "representation has never meant speaking for, but speaking nearby" (104). In this way, Partition stories dwell within trauma and do not seek to master it. They accept what Cathy Caruth observes that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event"

(5). The fragmentary form of short story mirrors this possession; its silences, its brevity and its suggestive ellipses act to perform the very framework of belatedness. The short stories demand from their readers what Derrida calls “hospitalite”, which is the ethical openness to the pain of others, even when it fails to be understood completely (Of Hospitality 79). Moreover, these narratives give expression to the gendered grammar of Partition memory. The living archives of survival and violence are witnessed through the bodies of women whether it is Sakina, Lajwanti, Sobti’s mother, or Hashmi’s exiled protagonist. Their silences do not symbolise voids but presences. As Veena Das writes very well that, “The descent into the everyday is not a forgetting of the event, but a way of surviving it” (Life and Words 19). The politics of quiet resistance is enacted through the gestures of these women that refuses both patriarchal pity and nationalist redemption.

Finally, if we talk about what makes partition short stories relevant even today then we can say that these stories compel us to rethink about what really constitutes history itself. By transforming transient sites and domestic interiors into places of witnessing, the authority of official historiography is successfully displaced. Derrida’s insistence aligns with their fragmented form, which resists any closure, as Derrida observes that “the archive is never complete; it is always a promise and a debt” (Archive Fever 36). This, Partition short stories, are primary modes through which history is re-articulated. They can not be considered just supplementary accounts of history. These short stories convert the silenced into the signifying, the ordinary into the extraordinary and the everyday into the eternal and this is an extraordinary contribution of these stories in the field of literature. Through their insistence on the margins of speech, of space and of memory, these narratives have restored to Partition the honour and dignity of the human. They remind us, as Butalia concludes, that “it is in the telling of these stories that we recover the fragments of ourselves” (22). The short story becomes both an act of reconstruction and an act of mourning. It becomes a form that approaches the truth of suffering by embracing the limits of representation. To go through these short stories

is to engage with the unfinished ethics of memory. In the end, the margins are not just peripheries but the pulse of history itself.

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