Tracing the Echoes of Partition through Brushstrokes, Panels and Cinematic Lenses

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Abstract: The Partition of India in 1947 is etched in history as one of the most harrowing and intricate events in modern South Asia. This monumental geopolitical rupture not only displaced over fifteen million people but also claimed nearly a million lives, leaving scars that still resonate today. This research paper delves into the lingering echoes of this cataclysm through three compelling cultural texts: Arpana Caur s painting *Memories of 1947*, created in 1997; Vishwajyoti Ghosh s graphic novel anthology *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013) and Anup Singh s film *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* (2013). The research paper engages with two critical theoretical concepts: Marianne Hirsch s notion of postmemory" and Cathy Caruth s theory of traumatic latency" to uncover how art, literature, and cinema act as powerful sites to reimagine Partition beyond the confines of historical documentation. Each of these works vividly illustrates Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory"—the intricate intergenerational transmission of traumatic knowledge—and Cathy Caruth s poignant idea of traumatic latency", where history reveals itself not through straightforward representation, but through delayed, haunting returns. The paper posits that the Partition, interpreted through the lenses of postmemory" and traumatic latency", transcends mere historical fact to become a continuous process of recollection and reimagining. Each medium—the panels of graphic novel, the haunting imagery of cinema, and symbols of visual art—offers a distinctive way to engage with the enduring legacy of Partition.

Keywords: Partition; Postmemory; Trauma; Graphic novel; Cinema; Painting

The Partition of India in 1947 is not just a historical event; it is one of the most profound and tumultuous ruptures in the subcontinent s legacy and, indeed, in human history. This cataclysmic

moment, marked by unprecedented violence, mass dislocation, and the tragic loss of millions of lives, transcends geopolitical boundaries, emerging as a deep civilizational wound whose echoes continue to resonate in our cultural memory and identity. Writers, artists, and filmmakers have revisited this trauma over the decades, striving to confront its lingering grief, silence, and haunting legacies. This research paper delves into three distinct yet interwoven cultural responses to Partition: Arpana Caur s evocative painting *Memories of 1947* (1997), Vishwajyoti Ghosh s graphic anthology *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013), and Anup Singh s cinematic narrative *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* (2013). Together, these works illuminate how art, literature, and film serve as vital mnemonic and interpretive realms through which the unspeakable dimensions of Partition are remembered, reimagined, and passed down through generations. To frame this analysis, the paper draws upon two influential theoretical paradigms in trauma and memory studies: Marianne Hirsch s concept of postmemory" and Cathy Caruth s theory of traumatic latency." Hirsch s notion of postmemory—defined as the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (22)—sheds light on how the violence of Partition continues to shape not just the lives of survivors but also those of their descendants, who inherit its emotional and psychological burdens. In contrast, Caruth posits trauma as an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4), emphasizing its delayed nature, resistance to narrative closure, and its tendency to resurface in fragments, symptoms, and cultural expressions. Through these theoretical lenses, the paper explores how these selected cultural texts navigate the silences surrounding Partition, and celebrate the resilience of memory against the tide of erasure.

To begin with, Vishwajyoti Ghosh s *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013) stands as a remarkable testament to the power of storytelling that brings together nearly forty contributors from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in twenty-eight compelling graphic narratives. One of the most

captivating aspects of *This Side, That Side* is that its contributors are not direct witnesses to the Partition; rather, they are inheritors of its fragmented memories, silences, and incomplete testimonies. The anthology beautifully illustrates Marianne Hirsch s concept of postmemory , where the generations that follow a collective trauma engage with the past not through first-hand experience, but through the rich tapestry of stories, images, and behaviours" passed down to them (Hirsch 106). This profound connection makes the echoes of the past profoundly resonate in their own lives.

Several contributions compellingly illuminate the theme of inheritance through the captivating visual language of the comic form. For instance, in Priya Kuriyan s evocative piece, the narrative voice emerges from the rich tapestry of the family archive. Kuriyan beautifully portrays a child exploring an old trunk brimming with photographs and letters. This visual interplay powerfully reinforces Marianne Hirsch s assertion that postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth" (Hirsch 107).

Shohei Emura s evocative piece, *A Good Education*" delves into the unsettling ways in which prejudice is woven into the fabric of education. A Pakistani child, reflecting on memories decades after the turmoil of 1947, recounts classroom lessons that ingrained the notion of Indians as eternal enemies". By layering textbook diagrams of national borders with the child s own doodles: crosses, erasures, and tears, Emura powerfully illustrates that the trauma of Partition is not merely remembered; rather, it is filtered through inherited discourses, education, and the vivid realm of imagination. One striking caption reveals, I learned about Partition not at home but in the classroom, in the way maps were drawn and erased" (This Side, That Side 132).

Another touching example of this theme can be found in *The Tree*" by Anwar, which beautifully narrates the story of two boys—one Hindu and one Muslim—who, in a moment of unity, plant a sapling together before the Partition. Their friendship, however, is tragically severed by the tumultuous events that follow. Years later, a new generation stumbles upon the tree, still standing tall

and resilient despite the scars it bears from the past. The narrator reflects, This tree has seen more than I can ever imagine, yet it refuses to forget" (This Side, That Side 210). Here, the tree emerges as a powerful metaphor for postmemory - a silent witness that conveys memories not through mere retelling but through the endurance of its very being.

Sarnath Banerjee s striking piece, *Drawing the Line*," powerfully illustrates trauma through its interrupted narration. The story primarily recounts his grandfather s harrowing experiences during the Partition, but it artfully shifts between past and present, weaving in the narrator s voice as he wrestles with the unspeakable. One moment, the panels portray a train packed with desperate refugees; in the next, the page collapses into a stark white square, punctuated only by the haunting caption: He never spoke of what happened next" (This Side, That Side 78). This blank panel vividly embodies the concept of latency: the traumatic moment evades narration at the time, returning instead to the reader as silence, absence, and deferred meaning. The formal gap" between the panels mirrors what Cathy Caruth identifies as trauma s essential void—"the missing part of experience that can only return belatedly" (Caruth 8).

Similarly in *The Long Walk*" by Harshad Marathe, a profound exploration of latency unfolds through the narrative of a refugee family s migration. Rather than portraying the journey as a steady progression, the panels ingeniously loop back on themselves. The haunting image of bare feet walking resurfaces on three distinct pages, each time subtly transformed: sometimes marked by blood, fading into obscurity, or enveloped in stark white space. This recurring motif powerfully illustrates what Caruth refers to as the insistence of the event," returning in a delayed yet poignant manner. The caption deepens this resonance: The walk never ends. It comes back in dreams, in silences, in stories half-told" (164). The fragmented visual rhythm defies closure, capturing the enduring resurgence of trauma that echoes across time and generations, leaving an indelible mark on our collective consciousness.

The anthology *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* vividly demonstrates how the graphic form can capture and convey traumatic memories in ways that traditional historical narratives often fail to achieve. While conventional history tends to emphasize coherence, chronological order, and documentary evidence, the memory of Partition is marked by rupture, silence, and a haunting sense of belatedness. This anthology masterfully harnesses the unique strengths of the comics medium, its harmonious interplay of word and image, its poignant use of the gutter as a space of absence, and its capacity to weave together multiple temporalities to craft what can be described as a vibrant counter-historiography of Partition. In doing so, it invites readers to engage with the complexities of memory and history in a deeply impactful way. The impact of this word-visual interplay can be exemplified through an episode in the story *Making Faces*" where one narrator remarks I have never seen Partition, yet it stares at me through the faces of my grandparents" (95). This powerful statement captures the essence of what Hirsch refers to as the imaginative investment" of postmemory (Hirsch 109): memory is felt and claimed by subsequent generations, even in the absence of direct encounters with the past.

Caruth s concept of traumatic latency elegantly illuminates the anthology s tendency to disrupt chronology, evade closure, and embrace fragmentation. This structural delay resonates through the anthology s striking visual motifs—trains, borders, and empty frames—each intruding upon narratives that would otherwise flow seamlessly. Take, for instance, Sarnath Banerjee s *Drawing the Line*," where a train makes a sudden appearance across two panels, devoid of context, followed by the haunting words: He would not say more. He never did." (This Side, That Side 79). This jarring interruption captures the essence of latency: the event re-emerges not as a straightforward recollection but as a haunting, fragmented memory that lingers in the mind. Similarly, Priya Kuriyan s poignant story of uncovering family photographs, the act of gazing at sepia-toned images becomes a profound postmemorial practice: the narrator finds herself deeply influenced by an event she did not witness.

Yet, the narrative is punctuated by telling gaps—blank panels and silences in the elder s voice—that vividly illustrate Caruth s concept of latency.

This intricate interplay of inheritance and delayed return imbues the graphic form with remarkable power. A blank panel, a recurring image, or a fragmented page layout does more than merely depict trauma; it embodies it, creating a visceral experience. For instance, in *The Long Walk*" a caption occurs as: The silence between footsteps says more than the words we never heard" (167). The gutter—the white space between panels—serves as a striking visual metaphor for historical silence, representing what is unrecorded and unspeakable, yet undeniably present.

From a historiographic perspective, this graphic anthology compellingly challenges the singular national" narratives of Partition that often reduce this monumental event to mere political agreements or cold statistical losses. Instead, the anthology boldly asserts that Partition can only be truly remembered through its myriad fragments, contradictions, and disruptive moments. This celebration of multiplicity can be exemplified through one of the dialogues from the anthology which concludes as: Our history is not a line. It is a collage, torn at the edges, pasted again and again" (202). This striking quote encapsulates the heart of the collection, boldly rejecting the notion of linear narratives in favour of rich, fragmented stories. It reveals that history is not merely what is inscribed in books, but also what lives on in memory, what is inherited, and what emerges belatedly.

The moment of Partition in history has often been commemorated through state-sponsored memorials and polished narratives that tend to sanitize its complex reality. Yet, a courageous group of artists and writers has ventured to explore this trauma in more evocative ways, employing vibrant colours and powerful symbols to capture its fractured essence. In a similar vein, artist Arpana Caur masterfully employs this fragmented storytelling technique in her paintings, capturing the deep psychological scars left on those who witnessed this turbulent chapter in history.

Arpana Caur, born in 1954 in a newly independent India, emerged from a crucible of historical trauma marked indelibly by the partition. Growing up in an environment profoundly shaped by this

tumultuous period, she was influenced by her mother, Ajeet Cour—an esteemed writer who bore not only the scars of partition but also the haunting legacy of the violence that swept through India in 1984. This intricate and painful heritage deeply informs Arpana Caur s painting *Memories of 1947*," which resounds with the lingering echoes of her family s grief, suffering, and enduring wounds. In crafting *Memories of 1947*," Arpana Caur embraces the dual identity of daughter and artist. As a daughter, she channels her mother s untold stories through her brushstrokes, preserving the unspeakable in vivid color and form. Simultaneously, she embodies the role of an artist, skillfully weaving together silences and tales of sorrow through innovative and fragmented techniques. In this remarkable interplay, Arpana Caur finds herself in the liminal space of postmemory: neither a direct survivor nor a detached historian, but a profound bearer of a collective legacy that speaks to the resilience of the human spirit.

One of the most compelling aspects of Arpana Caur s *Memories of 1947* is its poignant portrayal of the Partition through a deeply feminine lens of suffering and resilience. The canvas is alive with female figures—displaced, fragmented, and ethereal—whose bodies vividly embody the trauma of history. Women are not simply depicted as passive victims; they emerge as vital repositories of collective memory, carrying both personal grief and the heavy scars of national disruption. In this way, the painting aligns powerfully with feminist historiography, emphasizing the crucial need to recover the silenced voices of women whose stories have often been overshadowed in the grand narratives of independence and Partition.

Arpana Caur s evocative canvas of *Memories of 1947* confronts us with the profound agony wrought by the Partition. Caur deliberately opts against the bright, celebratory hues typically associated with Independence Day. Instead, the canvas is enveloped in sepia browns, murky greys, and vivid streaks of rusted red that evoke the haunting imagery of blood. These tones conjure a scorched landscape, as if the very soil of Punjab—one of the region s most deeply scarred—has absorbed the blood of countless displaced souls and victims of massacre. The subdued palette rejects

any notion of festivity, compelling us to confront a profound atmosphere of grief and mourning. In Caruth s perspective, the painting serves as a powerful vessel for the return of trauma, illuminating the unresolved pains of the past and vividly bringing them into the present.

The painting creates a disconcerting sense of weightlessness, as figures float aimlessly, stripped of any grounding. Lacking a horizon line, architectural structures, or solid earth beneath them, they exist in a realm of perpetual uncertainty. This deliberate dislocation powerfully mirrors the plight of refugees, torn from their ancestral homes and rendered stateless. The canvas transforms into a fractured borderland—shattered, ambiguous, and impossible to inhabit.

The artwork powerfully highlights the fragmented postures of women s bodies. Adorned in tattered garments that seem to dissolve into the background, these women exist in a haunting interplay of visibility and erasure. Their spectral presence poignantly recalls the countless women who were abducted, raped, or silenced during the Partition—a violence frequently overlooked in the grand narratives of national independence. By placing women at the forefront of her work, Caur boldly disrupts the male-centric discourse surrounding Partition, which has often commemorated political leaders while sidelining the profound everyday suffering endured by women. The fragmented female bodies emerge as postmemorial witnesses, embodying the untold stories that echo through generations.

A striking feature of the painting is its deliberate lack of facial detail. The figures appear either headless or blank-faced, effectively shielding them from the viewer s instinct to identify or personalize them. This anonymity transforms them into haunting collective presences; they embody shared trauma rather than representing specific individuals. Their ghostly essence resonates with Hirsch s assertion that postmemory is less about direct recollection and more about engaging with the haunting presence of events that defy full representation. The disjointed portrayal of bodies in the painting also embodies Caruth s assertion that trauma defies assimilation. Survivors of Partition

frequently recount their memories as punctuated by profound silences and disconcerting gaps, as though their minds grappled with the overwhelming scale of the violence they endured.

Moreover, the figures appear to melt into their surroundings, struggling to maintain any stable boundaries. This fluidity poignantly reflects the disintegration of social and political borders in 1947, a pivotal moment when neighbours turned against one another and once tightly woven communities were abruptly torn apart. The indistinct lines between the figures and their background powerfully embody what Caruth describes as the unspeakability of trauma, a state in which memory is not confined within neat frames but instead spills over, blurring the distinctions between past and present, personal and collective experiences. The figures float ethereally, unmoored and weightless, mirroring the harrowing narratives of refugees as shared by survivors with their children and grandchildren: homes left in the dust, land irretrievably lost, and cherished belongings forsaken in the frantic rush of migration.

Anup Singh s film, *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* (2013), is also set against the emotional backdrop of post-Partition Punjab, where it delves deep into the haunting legacy of displacement. The narrative follows Umber Singh, a refugee resolute in his quest to reconstruct his shattered world. This powerful story reveals how the trauma of 1947 transcends its historical confines, weaving itself into the very fabric of family life and shaping identities across generations. Marianne Hirsch s concept of postmemory" beautifully captures this inherited trauma, as Kanwar—born a girl but raised as a boy to fulfill her father s patriarchal expectations—embodies a life scripted by wounds she has not personally endured. Equally compelling is Cathy Caruth s notion of traumatic latency", which illustrates how Umber s unprocessed grief resurfaces over time, distorting his daughter s reality and transforming the Partition into a ghostly, recurring spirit that looms over their existence.

The film *Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost* (2013) opens in a landscape deeply marked by fracture and displacement. The narrative centres on Umber Singh (portrayed by the Irrfan Khan), a Sikh farmer forced from his ancestral land during the tumultuous Partition of 1947. Alongside his

weary wife Mehar (the talented Tisca Chopra) and their daughters, Umber embodies both the resilience of a survivor and the haunting presence of an exile, weighed down by an unresolved grief that ignites an obsessive yearning for a son—one who could restore the shattered lineage of his family. Mehar, exhausted from the trials of continual childbearing, gently admonishes him: Umber, why must you carry this curse of a son on your shoulders? Daughters are blessings too" (Qissa 00:07:10). Yet, Umber s response is not one of solace but rather an assertion of his patriarchal conviction: A man without a son is a shadow. I will not live as a shadow" (Qissa, 00:09:22). This poignant dialogue encapsulates the film s central motif—the deep-rooted patriarchal belief that male heirs represent permanence, stability, and the possibility of symbolic redemption in the wake of Partition s chaos.

When Mehar gives birth to yet another girl, Umber cannot bring himself to accept this reality. He defiantly declares, This is my son. Kanwar is my son" (Qissa 00:11:03). In this poignant moment, the infant s body becomes a canvas for Umber s longing to reclaim a shattered dream of fatherhood. The swaddling of the child into a boy: a transformation that involves binding her body, cutting her hair, and forcing her into masculine attire serves as a powerful metaphor for the silencing of women s voices and identities during and after Partition. This symbolic act resonates with Judith Butler's insights in *Gender Trouble* (1990)," where she asserts that gender is not an inherent truth but an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179). Simultaneously, the film echoes Marianne Hirsch s captivating notion of postmemory," where the subsequent generation inherits the trauma of their forebears not through direct experience, but through the nuanced mediums of storytelling and behavioral echoes (Hirsch 5). Kanwar, thrust into the role of the son that Umber insists upon, becomes the poignant symbol of this postmemorial inheritance. a living testament to the enduring legacy of historical wounds that span across generations.

The tension escalates as Kanwar comes of age. In a deeply moving exchange with her mother, Mehar, Kanwar gently whispers, Ma, who am I?" (Qissa 00:46:02). This poignant question cuts through the veneer of patriarchy, exposing the profound psychological toll of a coerced identity. Just as the nation imposed arbitrary borders across Punjab, tearing apart families and communities, Umber stitches a false identity onto Kanwar, forging divisions between daughter and son, woman and man. At one moment, when Kanwar strives to assert her individuality, confesses, I… I am what my father made me." (Qissa 00:46:21). This vulnerability encapsulates the violence of patriarchal naming and the broader pressures of Partition memory, where survivors were often compelled to reconstruct their very selves within the confines of newly drawn national boundaries.

The tension reaches its zenith when Umber arranges Kanwar s marriage to Neeli (Rasika Dugal), a calculated move meant to normalize" his daughter s imposed identity. For Umber, it serves as an effort to mend the dissonance between Kanwar s lived experience and the fabricated identity he has created. His chilling proclamation, Now you are a man. And a man must have a wife" (Qissa 00:42:05), starkly reveals that marriage is not an act of liberation but rather an instrument of patriarchal control.

On their wedding night, Neeli s heartfelt plea, Kanwar, why do you always turn away from me? Don t you love me?" (Qissa 00:47:32), is met with Kanwar s haunting silence. This silence echoes the concept of the latency of trauma, as articulated by Cathy Caruth; it signifies how unspeakable histories resurface not through words but through absence and repression. Neeli s anguished revelation—"Kanwar, who are you? What are you?" (Qissa 01:13:04)—unveils the fractures in Umber s constructed reality, turning the marriage into a border, a symbolic extension of Partition s divisive logic infiltrating the intimate realm of domestic life. Her desperate cry, You lied to me, Kanwar! You lied to me, all of you lied!" (Qissa 00:52:10), resonates with Marianne Hirsch s notion of postmemory: the heavy inheritance of traumas that are not one s own, yet must be relived.

Umber s death does not bring closure to the conflict; instead, his voice lingers, haunting and authoritative: You are my son. Do not betray me" (Qissa 01:28:42). In this insistence, Singh reveals a profound exploration of what Derrida terms hauntology," first articulated in *Spectres of Marx* (1993). For Derrida, the ghost embodies a paradox, existing in a state of being neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (Derrida 5). Anup Singh s film breathes life into this philosophical concept: Umber Singh s ghost is not mere supernatural embellishment—it is a cinematic embodiment of the unresolved history of Partition. His spectral presence destabilizes the binaries of life and death, mirroring how Partition shattered the binaries of nation and belonging.

When Kanwar hears her father s voice, she urges him to depart with a desperate plea: Leave me, Baba. Let me live" (Qissa 01:29:10). This cry resonates deeply, serving both as a personal lament and an allegorical voice for a generation yearning to forge their own identities, free from the choking grip of inherited trauma. Furthermore, the hauntology in *Qissa* transcends the figure of Umber s ghost, permeating the film s entire atmosphere. In one particularly poignant moment, Kanwar confides to Neeli, I do not know if I am alive… or already a ghost" (Qissa 01:21:34). This heart-breaking admission encapsulates the hauntological condition: Kanwar is alive, yet she navigates life as an image of her father s unfulfilled aspirations, weighed down by the unprocessed grief of Partition.

The Partition of 1947 continues to resonate powerfully in our cultural memory, finding renewed expression in art, literature, and film. The works examined in this study vividly demonstrate that trauma is not simply recalled; it is imaginatively reinterpreted and transmitted across generations. By weaving together history and creative expression, these texts shatter silences, complicate established national narratives, and elevate individual grief to a collective memory. In doing so, they remind us that the Partition is not a distant relic of the past but a living legacy—one that continues to shape identities, challenge boundaries, and insist on the importance of remembrance.

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