

Objects as Conflicting Phenomena: Relocating the ‘Memorables’ against the Backdrop of Indo-Pak Divide as Reflected in Anchal Malhotra’s *Remnants of a Separation*

Jishina Gopinath

Research Scholar, Department of English

St. Joseph’s College Devagiri

Kozhikode, Kerala, India

jishipush@gmail.com

Abstract

The proposition of Indo-Pak partition and its subsequent implementation created unprecedented havocs across the two borders. The severely affected people of both countries underwent acute physical violence and psychological damage. People still carry the devastating memory of this traumatic event and this memory is consistently getting reflected in different works. Anchal Malhotra’s *Remnants of a Separation* adequately portrays the conflicting aspects of material memory carried from generation to generation across the border. She vividly describes the subtle features of these objects that carry the material memory of the affected people. The present paper attempts to analyse some of the material objects mentioned by Anchal Malhotra by incorporating the aspects of Trauma theory. On the one hand, these objects function as healing experience for them and at the same time, these material objects evoke intense agony and trauma for them. Thus, these memories have dual effects upon the survivors and these conflicting aspects can be traced in the work of Anchal Malhotra.

Keyword: Partition, Trauma, Objects, Memory, History, Intergenerational Trauma

Introduction

The partition of India in 1947 witnessed unprecedented struggles and subsequent displacement of thousands of aggrieved people. The affected people, irrespective of caste, class and gender, flowed across the borders of both countries carrying only their life and a handful of haunting memories. Even during this dreadful situation, some of them managed to carry with them a few material objects while crossing the border which, as they would hope, may enable them to maintain a memory of their lost life. These material objects also may function as financial aid in their pursuance of a new abode. Eventually, these objects became heirloom in their family which would constantly remind them an episode which they wanted to wipe off from their memory.

As time passes, these objects became common part in many households and they started using them on a daily basis. However, a single pensive touch on these particular objects could weave in them thousands of crystal-clear images of a horrid historical episode. It emphatically points out the fact that materials are so significant in the context of memory and even a single tumbler or knife can bring many events that they are associated with. Those associations can connect them with a related past incident or person, which may seem to be quite fascinating for common men. This is the real thread of Anchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation*.

Anchal Malhotra is an oral historian and writer and she is also the cofounder of Museum of Memory. She is personally connected with the horrid events of partition since her grandparents were from the other side of India. Their life was inextricably connected with the stories of partition and Malhotra inevitably has imbibed the nuances of those events from them. This made her collect the valuables from her own family and from others. Anchal Malhotra travelled extensively all over the world to collect materials and memory concomitant with Indo Pak partition. These material objects include kitchen utensils, shawls, sword, photographs, ornaments, pearls and others.

Remnants of a Separation truthfully unravels the stories about twenty-one such significant memorials preserved by different individuals from various parts of the world. For most of them, those objects represent a long-lost past which is so dear to them. Some of them do not want to get back to those days since they carry a kind of debilitated emotion. Their question is what is the purpose of bringing them altogether again. According to the author it is necessary for the present generation to understand all those narratives in order to have a real historical sense which will help them to develop a critical sense in present political scenario. This history of India is deliberately forgotten which is reminded by some essential valuables through Anchal Malhotra's work *Remnants of a Separation*.

These objects include a gaz of her grand-parents, a chain of pearl of Azra Haq, a maang tikka of her maternal grandma, a bagh of Hansla Chowdhary, a photograph of Nazeer Adhani, the book collection by Prof. Partha mitter, a poetry collection Prabhjoth Kaur, a Pashmina shawl of Preet Singh and others. All these objects function as major gateways to have a better understanding of the horrid events that took place in 1947 the and life before that.

This paper attempts to analyze these valuable objects using the tools of trauma theory and other related concepts. Psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies. The central concern of trauma theory is to identify and unearth the psychological havocs created by a particular event or a group of incidents on an individual or collective consciousness. This interpretation of the psychological wound and its impact on the collective psyche sheds light to different aftermath of the incident. Trauma theory makes use of various theoretical formulations like post structural, sociocultural, and postcolonial studies. Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Trauma theory was configured mainly from Freudian theories and Freud's work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* played a key role in

the evolution of trauma theory. Later the branch was further enlarged by theoreticians like Abraham Kardiner, Herbert Spiegel, Henry Krystal, Diane Russell, Cathy Caruth and others.

The period of 1990s witnessed an avalanching scholarship in the area initiated by scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman. Cathy Caruth analyses trauma as an unassimilated incident that deplores the psyche and remains in the exterior of the normal memory of a person. It is potential enough to produce a shadowy effect throughout the lifetime. Fragmentation or dissociation is a direct cause of trauma. This can be personal or collective. This reading helps to conceive the idea of transhistorical trauma. Traumatic experiences act as tumorous wound in the psychic realm. It constantly exerts a pathological effect on consciousness and memory. Cathy Caruth has made a significant observation in this regard in her work *Unclaimed Experience* “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (Caruth 92).

Since traumatic experience enters the psyche differently than normal experience and creates an abnormal memory that resists narrative representation, the unique process of this remembering results in an approximate recall but never to a determinate understanding.

The Duality of Objective Memory Reflected in *Remnants of a separation* is an excavation of migratory memory through some valuable daily life objects. Specifically, it focusses on the second and third generation of families who lived through the partition as it is clearly explained by Malhotra in the preface of the work, “It is about the extraordinary lives of completely ordinary people that constituted the fabric of Undivided India. It touches upon the everyday, upon education, travel and unshakable interfaith relationships” (Malhotra 18).

Among the widely discussed objects described by Malhotra, some stand out with peculiar effects and impression upon the readers. These objects invariably reflect the socio-cultural and familial terrain in the haunting era of partition.

Analysis of different objects

1. The Light of a House that Stands No More: stone Plaque of Mian Faiz Rabbani. The seventh chapter of the work is a detailed account of a material object that sheds vivid lights on the poignant memory of Indo Pak divide. Here, Malhotra speaks to a person from Lahore, Mian Faiz Rabbani. He crossed the border during the partition leaving a large haveli in Jalandar. He remembers his haveli which hosted grand parties in their neighbourhood. But now he feels that only the memory and some photographs are left. Rabbani also shares his experience as a student of AMU during the time of 'Batwara'. He asks a poignant question to Malhotra which most of the refugees from both sides of border may wanted to ask, 'If you uproot a sapling from its natural habitat and try to transplant it elsewhere, the chances of it growing and thriving are slim – and perhaps it may not live at all' (Malhotra151). This was the situation of most of the refugees during the time of partition and a kind of hard uncertainty always hung all over the air regardless of the religion. Conquering all the hardships including mental and physical torture, Rabbani's family reached Pakistan leaving their entire savings in a life time. Some of them were rewarded in the new country but many of them were denied the privilege. The greatest loss for Rabbani's family was the large haveli which was converted into a refugee camp for the Hindus coming from Pakistan. Later he revisited Jalandar to meet some of his friends and tried hard to find his haveli in a completely transformed Jalandar. It was still there with all its glory but underwent some changes as per the convenience of the new occupants. But surprisingly, the stone plaques remained there intact without any modification and this made Rabbani quite emotional, even though he could not take it with him. Later his niece and her husband visited the same mohalla and they were able to bring it back. It was a large stone

image with bright inscriptions in Urdu language. The inscription is about the dignity and honour of the house and the Rabbani family, the real inhabitants of Rabbani family. Even though the plaque represented ‘an incredible piece of family history and heritage’ (Malhotra 152), it symbolizes the lost home of a group of people who were uprooted and displaced by the undesirable event in the history of the newly independent India. The memories of the house later on turned out create both a sense of loss and cherishing memory for Rabbani and his family and this dual role is clearly visible here.

2. Utensils for Survival: The Kitchenware of Balraj Bahni

The third chapter of the work is a personal narrative of Malhotra that describes the plight of her paternal grandfather Balraj Bahni and his forced exile. Bahni’s family was originally from Quidirabad in Eastern Punjab and they fled to Delhi during the Indo-Pak divide. He carved a life for himself in India without seeking help from anyone. Even if being an octogenarian, he clearly carries the memory of partition, its eerie and intimidating atmosphere of insanity, the urge for violence from different corners and the cravings for freedom. But according to him freedom was earned at the cost of others and he is sceptical about the real meaning of freedom.

Indo- Pak divide was a terrible episode for lakhs of people like Bahni, which prompts him to question the way freedom was bestowed to the people of undivided India. During the ordeal, he was a graduate student studying in Rawalpindi and his family’s migration happened during his summer vacation. He, along with his father, mother and two siblings, left home overnight leaving all their intimate things and belongings except some kitchen utensils that his mother insisted to carry with them. She was keen on carrying those utensils as they would, she hopes, help them sustain and overcome the traumatic experience, which would also enable them to live and survive. Ration was provided in the refugee camps but they needed basic utensils to cook the food. During that hard time, survival was the only prospect they looked

for. Those bartans consist of a Patiala glass, katoras and some thali. Each handmade curve and rivet of those bartans were reminders of their long-lost village and life there. Bahni and his wife carried those utensils and he insisted to have his food from them to keep his emotional connection deeply.

3. Stones from My soil – The maang tikka of Bagh Malhotra

A maang tikka is a traditional ornament which women wear on their foreheads. This is one of the most beautiful objects that Malhotra presents in her work. It is owned by her maternal grand -mother Bhag Malhotra. She inherited it from her mother, Laajwanti. Bag Malhotra's father was a member of zamindar family in Muryali in North-West Frontier Province. But he died very early, leaving his wife with five daughters and a son. The woman was forced to leave her husband's family penniless. They moved to a place called D.I.Khan city. But she was a woman of immense courage and will power and she provided proper education to all her children without any gender bias. Their separation from the paternal haveli was followed by another displacement, as an aftermath of batwara. According to grandma, 1947 was the year in which she witnessed the worst face of humanity, "This was the year of Independence, the year that changed everything and whether it was violence or intolerance, it was the year that saw the worst side of humanity." (Malhotra101) Subsequently, the whole family moved to Delhi. The shift was quite hard since they could not carry anything essential with them. No clothes, no blankets, no kitchen utensils and they are empty handed by all means. To describe their predicament, grandma uses the word mohtaj- which means a person heavy with shame and remorse. While standing at the Karol Bagh railway station during their exile, they witnessed one of the most gruesome but common sights of the partition, a train full of dead bodies. That grotesque sight haunted grandma constantly throughout her life. Lajwanti, author's great grandmother was strong enough to safeguard all the children during that tough time and she brought them up to be worthy citizens. They brought two objects from the other side, a knife

and the maang tikka, which the grandmother kept with her. The knife was a means of protection during their time of exile whereas the tikka was a memoir and precious piece of jewellery. They carried it thinking that they can sell it for a good price, however she failed to do so since her intense emotional bond prevented her to get rid of it. The maang tikka reminded the great grandmother of the past life she had in Muryala and stones on the tikka belongs to the land, the soil of her birth. It is a beautiful piece of ornament, “It was a large pendant with a ruby flower at its centre. Leaves and branches set in a gold formed a web around it, with a round border enclosing the ornament. It was a spectacle of specks of blue stone, red ruby dull garnet, dusty gold, pearl and diamond. It was handmade” (Malhotra109). Author’s grandmother firmly believes in the significance of the soil of one’s origin and Pakistan still remain to be her homeland with all the surety. So, the stones from her home land too stand so much close to heart of her.

Conclusion

The process of partition was an intensely emotional and heartbreaking experience for the victims and survivors. Independence was achieved at the cost of it and the real struggle followed. The mass migration inflicted deep wound in the human history which could be clearly read as a trauma. And this trauma in the collective memory was passed through from generations to generations in the form of stories, documents, objects and so on. Here the analysis is restricted to a few objects from Malhotra’s collection, which clearly depict the agony of its bearers as well as the nostalgia they carried through. The dual role of these objects renders them to be distinguished from the perspective of all readers. Orhan Pamuk once made a remark in this regard, “we can bear the pain only by possessing that belongs to that moment” (Pamuk 110) This is clearly became the dictum of Anchal Malhotra for asking for the ‘things’ to the survivors of partition, even though the question sometime disturbed them and herself.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there

are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Copyright: © 2026 by Jishina Gopinath Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

Bibliography

Breuer Joseph, and Sigmund Freud. *Studies on Hysteria*. New York [1897] 2009.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995 --- *Unclaimed Experiences, Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Crane, Susan A., editor. *Museums and Memory*. Stanford UP, 2000

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, NY: Basic, 1992

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. Columbia UP, 2012

Kwint, Marius, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley, editors. *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*. Berg, 1999

Malhotra, Aanchal. *Remnants of a Separation* (India: Harper Collins, 2018)

Orhan Pamuk, trans. Maureen Freely, *The Museum of Innocence* London: Faber and Faber, 2010