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The Religious Plague, Holocaust, Decadence and Remembrance

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*Don't cry, my child,
in your courtyard
the sun is getting its final bath,
the moon, its grave.*

— Faiz Ahmed Faiz

*The flute that played notes of love is now forever lost
Brothers of Ranjha have lost the hero's devotion, his charm
Blood rains on the earth, even the graves are oozing red
The princesses of love are now weeping midst the tombs
Today all have turned into Qaidon, thieves of love and beauty
O where on earth do we go to look for a Waris Shah once more.*

— Amrita Pritam

*'Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its
inception but man was still a slave in both these countries: slave of prejudice,
slave of religious fanaticism, slave of barbarity and inhumanity.'*

— Saadat Hasan Manto

To all innocent Indian prisoners incarcerated for their peaceful and democratic struggle for freedom, you stand as adversaries to the forces of fascism.

To the relentless farmers who protest day after day to feed the world,

To my family, Professor Carmen Concilio, and my dear friends

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ABSTRACT

The escalating predicament concerning Muslims in India is reaching a critical juncture, exacerbated by the policies of the right-wing government led by Narendra Modi, which seeks to marginalise them from various aspects of Indian society. Towards the close of 2019, legislative measures such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) were introduced, targeting Muslims with the intention of categorising them as illegal Indian citizens. This gave rise to widespread protests across the nation. Against this backdrop, this monograph endeavours to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Partition, a pivotal historical event in India. The primary objective is to delve into the origins of the Partition and examine its role as a catalyst for the social and cultural decline of Muslims in India. Interwoven within this exploration is an examination of the evolving role of women in an independent and divided India, with a particular focus on the depiction in Anita Desai's novels, *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody*.

Comprising four distinct chapters, the first segment scrutinises the Partition through a historical lens. The second chapter delves into Partition literature, Anita Desai's biographical context, and the significance of fiction writing in her oeuvre. The third chapter exclusively addresses the plight of women during and post-Partition, featuring a comparative analysis between the characters Bim and Tara from *Clear Light of Day* to illustrate the contrasting facets of the new and traditional Indian woman. The conclusive chapter investigates the gradual decline of Muslim culture and the Urdu language in India from 1857 onward.

KEYWORDS: Partition, Urdu, Identity, Resistance, Socio-political Turmoil

INTRODUCTION

*"In the Language of Remembering"*¹

Seventy-four years have transpired since India attained independence and underwent the consequential Partition, the enduring repercussions of which persist. Regions such as Punjab and Kashmir continue to grapple with the lingering aftermath of the unjust territorial division executed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe in a brief span in 1947. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed turbulence between the nascent nations of Pakistan and India, marked by four wars prompted by territorial disputes. The initial conflicts in 1947 and 1965 were centred around Kashmir, the third conflict revolved around Bangladeshi Independence, and the last in 1999 focused on the Kargil district. Consequently, animosity between the two nations, both born from the land of Hindustan, intensified. The media in both India and Pakistan played a pivotal role in shaping public perception by aligning with governmental narratives. Presently, media outlets persist in disseminating information lacking an objective foundation regarding the Indo-Pakistani issue.

The ascendancy of Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister affiliated with the far-right BJP Party, exacerbated the situation. The proliferation of Hindutva and propagandist rhetoric has fueled an aversion to peace dialogue between India and Pakistan within the Indian Hindu populace. Despite this, individuals on both sides of the border have transcended physical barriers through virtual platforms like Facebook and Instagram to advocate for the principles of peace and brotherhood—initiatives that the Indian government has not been able to undertake. An additional testament to the genuine desire for peace among Indians and Pakistanis was the inauguration of the Kartarpur corridor, facilitating Sikh devotees' pilgrimage to the homeland of their first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji. This significant development materialised through the collaborative efforts of

¹ Malhotra, Aanchal. "Aanchal Malhotra - Home." [https://www.aanchalmalhotra.com/].

Navjot Singh Sidhu, a representative of the Congress Party hailing from Punjab, and Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The inauguration of the Kartarpur corridor transpired on the 9th of November 2019, coinciding with the celebration of the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. A noteworthy aspect of this initiative was the facilitation of devotees' visits to Kartarpur without the necessity of a visa for Pakistan.²

Broadly speaking, the current Indian administration appears to hold a stance that is unsupportive of Muslim interests, both domestically and internationally. Concrete evidence of this perspective emerged in late 2019 with the enactment of laws specifically targeting Muslims. A pivotal amendment to the Indian Citizenship Act, referred to as *The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)*³ was introduced to confer Indian citizenship upon individuals of any religious affiliation except Islam.

"The CAA welcomes Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists and Jains who arrived in India before 31 December 2014 to escape religious persecution as minorities in neighbouring Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. All three happen to be Islamic states. The CAA, however, does not include Muslim minorities like the Rohingyas of Myanmar (with whom we share a border)."⁴

Furthermore, in conjunction with this amendment, a decision was made to scrutinise the legal status of Muslim citizens in India, who have been longstanding residents, through the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). They were summoned to substantiate their Indian identity with documents, and it was explicitly stated that those lacking proper documentation would face

² "The Kartarpur Corridor: Symbolism, Politics and Impact on India-Pakistan Relations." Institute of South Asian Studies, [<https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ISAS-Insights-No.-525-The-Kartarpur-Corridor.pdf>].

³ "How Democratic Processes Damage Citizenship Rights: The Implications of CAA-NRC." Centre for Policy Research, [[https://cprindia.org/how-democratic-processes-damage-citizenship-rights/#:~:text=The%20Citizenship%20Amendment%20Act%20\(CAA,deprive%20one%20of%20citizenship%20rights\)](https://cprindia.org/how-democratic-processes-damage-citizenship-rights/#:~:text=The%20Citizenship%20Amendment%20Act%20(CAA,deprive%20one%20of%20citizenship%20rights))].

⁴ "How Democratic Processes Damage Citizenship Rights: The Implications of CAA-NRC." Centre for Policy Research, [[https://cprindia.org/how-democratic-processes-damage-citizenship-rights/#:~:text=The%20Citizenship%20Amendment%20Act%20\(CAA,deprive%20one%20of%20citizenship%20rights\)](https://cprindia.org/how-democratic-processes-damage-citizenship-rights/#:~:text=The%20Citizenship%20Amendment%20Act%20(CAA,deprive%20one%20of%20citizenship%20rights))].

expulsion from Indian territory. These measures, both the amendment and the NRC proposal, faced widespread criticism not only in New Delhi but across India, prompting protests from citizens of all backgrounds. The critique centred on the discriminatory nature of these policies, seen as contradicting the fundamental principles of the Indian Constitution. Renowned for being the world's longest and most democratic constitution, it upholds values of plurality, diversity, and the secularisation of the Indian state, explicitly prohibiting decisions based on religion.

Considering the prevailing situation of Muslims in India, this monograph aims to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the Partition, a pivotal juncture in Indian history, from a historical standpoint. The primary focus is on understanding the origins of the Partition and the initial stages of Muslim social and cultural marginalisation. Within this context, the portrayal of the new woman in an independent and divided India is examined. The selected novels for this exploration are *Clear Light of Day* and *In Custody* by Anita Desai, forming the basis of four distinct chapters.

The first chapter, informed by Paul Brass' essay *The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-47: Means, Methods, and Purposes*, and Gyanendra Pandey's book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, History of India*, delves into the historical backdrop of the Partition. It endeavours to demonstrate how the Muslim League, led by Ali Jinnah, found itself politically isolated in the 1930s and 1940s, and how the Muslim community felt marginalised in the face of triumphant Hinduism, drawing parallels with the contemporary scenario. The chapter traces the formulation of the Pakistan Resolution by the Muslim League and the subsequent declaration of Partition.

The second chapter explores Partition literature as a distinct category within Indian literature, delving into novels written in English belonging to this genre. Special attention is given to Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, which is further examined in detail in the third chapter. Additionally, the second chapter addresses Desai's biography and her perspective on fiction writing. The distinction between history with a lowercase "h" and History with a capital

"H" is elucidated, and the solitary characteristics of Desai's characters are emphasised. Insights from Desai's interviews on YouTube contribute to constructing her biography and understanding her approach to fiction writing, with Rituparna Roy's *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh* providing valuable research support for this chapter.

The third chapter of this monograph delves into the portrayal of women in *Clear Light of Day* and their role during the Partition. The chapter commences with an elucidation of the novel's genre, identifying it as a Partition novel centred on the Hindu upper class, setting it apart from other works in the same category. Regarding the representation of women, a comparative analysis is conducted between Bim and Tara, two contrasting characters. Bim, shaped by her experiences, emerges as a symbol of the new woman in modern Indian society. In contrast, Tara embodies the traditional archetype, with her aspirations revolving around marriage and motherhood. Furthermore, the chapter aligns Bim with the mythological and divine figure of Ardhanarishvara, drawing on Sanga's theories from her work *South Asian Literature in English (An Encyclopedia)*. The concept of women as subalterns in Indian society is explored through Spivak's deconstructive theory presented in the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Additionally, the chapter considers the plight of women during and after the Partition, when mass displacement resulted in many being scattered. Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urvashi Butalia's research, notably Menon and Bhasin's *Borders & Boundaries*, Menon's essay *Do Women Have a Country?*, and Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, contribute significantly to this segment.

The fourth and final chapter concentrates on the waning influence of both the Urdu language and the Muslim cultural and poetic tradition. Given the limited research on this facet of Indian culture, Rachna Sethi's essay *Can Past Cultural Hybridity Be Revived? Old Delhi in Anita Desai's Fiction* and Amina Yaqin's *The Communalization and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's In Custody* serve as primary sources. The chapter endeavours to trace the history of Old Delhi, the epicentre of Muslim culture and poetic tradition, from its establishment in 1639 by Shah Jahan onward. Its decline is depicted

from 1857 when the Mughal Empire yielded to the British Empire, with New Delhi and Calcutta becoming capitals in 1911. Post-1947, Old Delhi experienced a decline as people left due to Partition, and others relocated elsewhere in India. Alongside Old Delhi's history, the chapter emphasises the significance of the Urdu language and its poetic tradition, exemplified through Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*. The characters of Deven, a Hindi teacher passionate about Urdu language and literature, and Nur, a decadent poet, serve as vehicles to depict the neglect of Urdu language and its poetic tradition in independent and modern India. This neglect contrasts starkly with its historical status as the language of the literate elite.

Contemplating what endures from the Partition era today prompts the response: "Hope." This sentiment is articulated by my grandmother, who witnessed the harrowing events of Partition during her childhood. Recounting her experiences, she often shares that, amidst the turmoil of migration from Pakistan, the only possession she carried in her pockets was *kala chana* (black chickpeas), sustaining her during times of hunger. Her recollections underscore a sense of privilege compared to the hardships endured by many others. Consuming these black chickpeas represented more than a mere act of nourishment; it embodied a tangible expression of hope and positivity for her future.

The continuity of this hope in contemporary times finds its roots in the endeavours of oral historians dedicated to preserving the stories and artefacts of Partition survivors. A noteworthy figure in this domain is Aanchal Malhotra, born in 1990 and residing in New Delhi, whose work is exclusively focused on Partition narratives. In 2017, Malhotra published her seminal work, *Remnants of a Separation*, garnering recognition through shortlisting for prestigious awards such as "the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar, British Academy's Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding, Hindu Lit for Life Non-Fiction Prize, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize, and the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize."⁵ Malhotra's commitment to documenting the remnants of Partition

⁵ Malhotra, Aanchal. "About - Aanchal Malhotra." [https://www.aanchalmalhotra.com/about/].

contributes to the preservation of hope, allowing descendants to reconnect with their ancestral lands and birthplaces

"Remnants of a Separation is 'an in-depth study of the objects that refugees either took with them when they fled their homes on either side of the border in 1947, or the objects that never migrated but have survived the event and still exist today, ranging from precious heirlooms to mundane household items. It is also an exploration of personal and collective histories of the people of the subcontinent; the lives and families of those who migrated, the circumstances that led them to do so and the consequences of this event. These objects are physical and aching reminders of a true home, family and feeling of belonging, which, in most cases, act as reservoirs of memory. The physical weight of the object is outweighed by the emotional weight invested into it over the years. It, in a way, occupies the weight of the past, the weight of the event."⁶

Indeed, it is these tangible artefacts that serve as conduits, guiding survivors back to the homes they left behind with the anticipation of a reunion. These objects become portals to reliving moments from their past, frozen in the linear expanse of eternity. The touch of these timeworn and rusted relics materialises the distant historical epoch and the essence of the Partition itself, encapsulating that poignant historical moment within one's grasp.

Parallel efforts are underway through initiatives like *Project Dastaan*, where technology becomes a means to reconnect survivors with their birthplaces. This innovative approach not only facilitates virtual visits but also involves the collection of their narratives, aiming to disseminate awareness about the concealed facets of the Partition on a global scale. In conclusion, it becomes apparent that the responsibility to bridge the divide and foster peace between India and Pakistan lies with the younger generations. By dispelling hatred and dismantling artificial barriers, the youth holds the potential to usher in an era of reconciliation and harmony.

⁶ "Exhibition Remnants of a Separation by Aanchal Malhotra." Concordia University, September 8, 2015, [<https://www.concordia.ca/cuevents/finearts/fof/a/2015/09/08/exhibition-remnants-of-a-separation.html>].