

Gender, memory, trauma: women's novels on
the Partition of India.

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Ananya Jahanara Kabir

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Women's Novels on the Partition of India

Ananya Jahanara Kabir

There are certain images from my past which have always haunted me. Partition was a very violent experience for everybody in the Punjab. Although I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. There are images which have stayed with me. These were also the stories I grew up with.

0—Bapsi Sidhwa, "My Place in the World"

I wrote *Zindaginama* ("A Life Chronicle") thirty years after the Partition, even though I had made the first draft in 1952. Time is a strange chemistry. First we wanted to forget and then we wanted to relive the time that was!

—Krishna Sobti, "Memory and History of Partition"

Writing from opposite sides of the "Great Divide" created by the partition of 1947, these two authors from Pakistan and India, Bapsi Sidhwa and Krishna Sobti, respectively, seem separated by more than nationality. Sobti writes in Hindi, Sidhwa in English: Sobti writes as a Punjabi Hindu who left Pakistan for India in the aftermath of partition, Sidhwa as a Parsi who stayed behind in Pakistan and subsequently moved to America. They belong, furthermore, to different generations (if we measure generation by the yardstick of distance from a critical event): Sidhwa is one of the "Midnight's Children" generation, a writer who while not born in August 1947 was but a child at that moment, while Sobti, who was then twenty-seven years old, represents an older generation of partition survivors.

Despite these differences, there is much that they share, and my epigraphs capture this shared territory. Both Sidhwa and Sobti are authors of partition narratives: narrative representations of the events leading up to, culminating in, and constituting the immediate aftermath of the partition of India. Both are women who have written novels, from an upper-middle-class perspective, about women whose lives were deeply affected by partition. In their choice of subject matter and narrative form, both respond to partition as a traumatic event. Sidhwa's reference to images that have "haunted" her from childhood and Sobti's acknowledgment of the twin demands of forgetting and remembrance suggest a self-imposed authorial task of negotiating between traumatic recall and narrative commemoration, and between different kinds of memory that inhabit and fragment not only nations and communities but also the **[End Page 177]** subjectivities of the individuals who comprise these large identity-groups.

The consequences of partition have been explored by authors writing in all the major South Asian languages and all major narrative and lyric genres—poetry, short stories, novels, film, and television serials. Here I draw on one kind of partition narrative—novels by women authors from India, Pakistan, and the South Asian diaspora, in English, Hindi, and Urdu, and representing different generations.¹ These various authors enable us to explore the relationship between gender, memory, and trauma as manifested within two specific contexts: the postcolonial South Asian context and the context of the novel as an art form. First, I discuss why we should consider partition as collective trauma and outline the different ways in which the event has been remembered, allowing different groups to forge new bonds and solidarities as well as relinquish old ties. Second, I use some partition novels written by women to excavate the gendered dimension of such memory-work. I focus on how the sociocultural positions of the authors relate to questions of form: the temporal scope offered by the novel; a realist narrative technique; the relationship between author and narrator; the moments of thick description that interrupt narrative flow; the tropes that structure the narrative.

Analysis suggests that these novels function very much as testimonial narratives do for survivors of the Holocaust: they provide a means for the narrative integration of traumatic memory, thereby opening up



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