

# Partition of India and Museums as Cultural Memory

Dr. Rosy Sinha<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Kamayani Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, ARSD College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Email: [rosysinha2009@gmail.com](mailto:rosysinha2009@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Aryabhata College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Email: [kamayani@aryabhatacollege.ac.in](mailto:kamayani@aryabhatacollege.ac.in)

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<p>Received: 06 May 2024; Received in revised form: 07 Jun 2024; Accepted: 15 Jun 2024; Available online: 24 Jun 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> Partition, Cultural Trauma, Postmemories, Museums</p>	<p><i>Partition of the Indian subcontinent generated a trauma which has not subsumed even after seventy five years. ‘Post memories’ as well as ‘prosthetic memories’ of partition continue to haunt generations born much later. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Partition qualifies as a ‘monumental traumatic event that resists understanding and integration’.<sup>i</sup> Several factors contribute towards this lack of ‘integration’. A major one being, that Partition in its immediate aftermath was relegated to the realm of the “unspeakable.” No public memorial of partition existed until 2017. This paper seeks to examine how memorial spaces, and museums help in allowing for ritual mourning and enables healing in instances of corrosive cultural trauma.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

“For the dead and the living we must bear witness.”<sup>ii</sup>

“...but museums and commemorations institute oblivion as much as remembrance...”<sup>iii</sup>

~ Claude Lanzmann, *The Sobibor Uprising*

The Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947. Seven decades later South Asia continues to grapple with the trauma Partition invoked. Rather than mitigating, this cultural trauma continues to inform, mediate and reconstruct the experiential world of people on both sides of the contested border. ‘Post memories’ as well as ‘prosthetic memories’ of partition continue to haunt generations born much later. It would not be an exaggeration to state that Partition qualifies as a ‘monumental traumatic event that resists understanding and integration’.<sup>iv</sup>

Several factors contribute towards this lack of ‘integration’. A major one being, that Partition in its immediate aftermath was relegated to the realm of the “unspeakable.” It was seen as an experience “too

terrible to utter aloud”<sup>v</sup>. Testimonies on Partition did abound but the underlying motif in these narratives was always one of ‘gaps’ and ‘silent/silenced mourning’. What complemented these ‘gap’s was the absence of state initiative in maintaining records on the social history of Partition. The state policies reinforced a culture of cultivated aphasia. In an absence of ‘milieux de memoire’<sup>vi</sup> that is “real environments of memory” essential for expression and recovery by cathartic means memories of Partition could only survive as *Lieux de memoire*<sup>vii</sup> that is, ‘sites of memory’ existing within the scarred psyches of individuals. It is these repressed memories that have claimed the post-partition generations through “traumatic countertransference or vicarious traumatization.”<sup>viii</sup>

### 1.1. Examining the gaps in Partition Studies

As Urvashi Butalia in her seminal sociological study of Partition, ‘The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India’ points out, there exist no

memorials on the Indo Pak border to mark the place where displaced millions crossed borders. Until 1997, apart from Andrew Whitehead's "India: A People Partitioned" a BBC radio series there existed hardly any documented social history of Partition. Ironically, the series could be accessed only in the Oral Archives section of School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, England.

While public memory constitutes a fundamental mechanism via which the collective identity of society is constructed, in India, there was no 'public memory' of Partition until 2017. In this year Yaadgaar - e - Tasqeen, the Partition museum was set up in Amritsar. A museum is seen as a 'space for memory' that enables ritual mourning, 'aesthetic wit(h)nessing', and possibly cathartic redemption. It serves as a conduit that helps to "...transform living memory into (one) institutionally constructed..." and "allow(ing) for rituals of remembrance to be performed in public."<sup>ix</sup>

#### 1.2. Examining the functions that museums play in trauma resolution

This paper seeks to explore why has there been such reticence in South Asia vis a vis an attempt to dedicate a museum to Partition. While memorials for cultural tragedies like the Holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11 abound why is it that a memorial on partition was seen as 'an unworkable idea' even as late as until 2016 when the leading historian Ramchandra Guha observed that, Partition museum is "more likely to create new fissures, open up old wounds. The narratives carried by these communities are so intensely felt, so parochial, that it is impossible ever to reconcile them within the space of a single building or exhibit."<sup>x</sup>

Indeed, as has been pointed out by a cultural theorist, "gaping absence of official memorials dedicated to naming the events and lives lost across the region – the display at the Wagah Border is subtle yet inefficient – procures this cultural trauma as an open, unhealed wound, reinforcing victim nationalism across all three borders"<sup>xi</sup>

This paper seeks to look into how museum helps to construct and negotiate a dialogue between a cultural trauma and its historical consciousness for they serve as *places where representations of past are created, displayed and widely communicated*. However, even while asserting the significant role that museums fulfil

one cannot ignore that museums are highly contentious spaces. As cultural theorists have observed museums become signifiers of a very volatile kind, and that "processes of memorialization are often contested and produce highly uneven outcomes for the parties involved. Groups compete to establish dominance over public discourse by establishing memorial landscapes in the built environment, influencing individual, collective, and even historical memory. Equally, memories can be denied to entire groups to sequester the political power of certain – usually traumatic – memories from mobilizing disenfranchised populations"<sup>xii</sup>

Despite which, museums for ages have functioned as 'public space,' as a repository of material culture, with their significance emanating from their role as agents of identity formation, nationalism, and most recently, social inclusion. Museums have not always been received as preservers of the natural and social heritage of a culture, instead, they are also seen as sites that generate knowledge, function as a 'structure of power', and produce and reinforce discourses of the dominant culture. Harold Innis (1951) defines such an institution as a 'monopoly of knowledge', whereas in terms of Marxist cultural theorists, such as Gramsci, Althusser, Williams and many others, "museums are hegemonic one of several ways in which the cultural ideologies of the ruling class are made acceptable to the masses." On the other hand, Benedict Anderson saw museums as integral to the creation and sustenance of the nation as 'imagined political communities' and envisioned museums as tools for remembering and narrating national identity.

He envisions museums as tools for remembering and narrating national identity. Evans (1999) takes the argument further and states that nations need to be 'imagined' through certain "symbolic and tangible,"<sup>xiii</sup> such as "traditions, museums, monuments and ceremonies"<sup>xiv</sup>. Employing Habermas' (2001) concept of 'public sphere' one can see museums as space which facilitates discussion, construction and contestation of ideas.

Having said this one can justifiably assert that a museum as a 'public space' fulfills multiple functions such as producer and disseminator of knowledge, 'representative of heritage,' provider of 'emotional legitimacy,' sanctions legitimacy to nations as

imagined communities, and last but not the least fulfills the roles of remembrance and veneration.

India's independence from British rule was amidst rampage, mayhem, violence and exchange of populations. The year 1947 also saw the birth of two nations India, and Pakistan and an invasive cultural trauma. A museum in such a context would have served as a major connotative tool to serve its conceived roles of 'ethical representation' 'remembrance and veneration', conservation of legacy and also as per Anderson's vision providing a space for 'imagining' the nascent nation state - India. However, it took seven decades for it come up with a museum and this is what this paper seeks to address. This cultivated amnesia is what one needs to ponder.

Memorial museums are additionally devoted to the "acquisition, conservation, study, exhibition, and educational interpretation...[of] a historic event [involving] mass suffering of some kind." <sup>xv</sup>

Moreover, with the demise of the generation that survived Partition being imminent, the museum must be populated with as many memories as possible. This quest for a museum has opened new avenues for public discourse on social memories since the shift in focus from the intangible memories of individuals to their objectified and tangible manifestation as public exhibits needs to be negotiated before it can be given form. One concern is that static exhibits in a museum will deprive individually experienced or socially shared memories of their main characteristic: their fluidity.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, while there are museums and memorials dedicated to the Holocaust in Europe, North America

<sup>i</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture*. 2012. Columbia University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Weisel, Eric. <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/mission-and-history/wiesel>

<sup>iii</sup> Saint, Tarun. *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, and Fiction*. Taylor and Francis. 2019

<sup>iv</sup> Hirsch, Marianne. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture*. 2012. Columbia University Press.

<sup>v</sup>Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1997.

and Israel, and in Cambodia the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum commemorates the victims of the genocidal violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime, India has been late in rising to the occasion and creating a space which can help people deal with memories of 1947. Critic and independent curator Murtaza Vali points out that the absence of a memorial within the Indian subcontinent to commemorate Partition is due to the complexity of the event, which is tainted with massive violence perpetrated by citizens, as opposed to a political regime. Vali writes: "First there was no clear distinction between perpetrator and victim, both 'sides' raped and killed and were raped and killed; guilt and victimhood were hopelessly intertwined across newly formed borders."<sup>xvi</sup> The author further contends that the violence was widespread throughout the geographical space of the subcontinent, which demonstrates how vast the traumatic event of the Partition was. A single memorial is therefore insufficient when one takes into account the immense impact Partition had on those affected, and one can perhaps understand why a memorial does not exist. Some of the material and visual culture to be presented in the museum includes maps, artifacts, diaries, archival footage, transcripts of oral testimonies, and tickets from the infamous trains that went between India and Pakistan, transporting refugees and the dead from one side to the other. The guiding force behind the establishment of the Peace Museum is to provide a visually evocative account of the horrendous event as a reminder that violence does not bode good.

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<sup>vii</sup> Ibid 7

<sup>viii</sup> Herman, 140.

<sup>ix</sup> Silke, Arnold-de. *Mediating Memory in the Museum Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia*. Palgrave Macmillan 2013, 37.

<sup>x</sup> Guha, Ramchandra. *Memorializing Partition*. History Workshop. <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/museums-archives-heritage/memorializing-partition/>

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<sup>xii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xiii</sup> Wróblewska, Marta. *Museum Practices as Tools to (Re)Define Memory and Identity Issues Through Direct Experience of*

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<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xv</sup> Williams, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (New York: Berg, 2007), 8

<sup>xvi</sup> Vali, Murtaza. “Proposals for a Memorial to Partition,” in *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space*, eds. Iftikar Dadi and Hammad Nasar (London: Green Cardamom, 2012), 117.