

A Study of Displacement, Survival and Postmemory in Bhawana Somaaya's Memoir *Farewell Karachi*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 05 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 07 Aug 2026; Available online: 12 Aug 2026 Keywords— Partition, Postmemory, Displacement, Survival, Memoir ©2026 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 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).	India gained independence from the British Empire in 1947, an event accompanied by the country's partition into India and Pakistan. This division forced Hindu and Muslim communities who had coexisted for generations to migrate to majority-dominated regions. Amid heightened communal tensions, severe riots and massacres erupted on both sides of the border, resulting in approximately one million deaths and the displacement of over twelve million people. In the aftermath of these atrocities, survivors articulated their grief through fiction, life narratives, and poetry, contributing to the emergence of Partition literature. Memoirs and personal testimonies offer crucial interventions in formal historiography, serving as alternative historical sources that deepen our understanding of this tragic period. Within this framework, this paper examines Bhawana Somaaya's memoir, <i>Farewell Karachi</i>, which recounts her family's migration from Karachi to Kutch while documenting their complex experiences of displacement, survival, and resettlement. The paper will use the lens of postmemory to investigate how memories are transmitted intergenerationally and continue to shape their lives after Partition.

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It marked the division of British India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan, based primarily on religious demographics. Millions of people were forced to migrate across newly drawn borders, leaving behind their homes, possessions, and memories. The profound social, political, and psychological consequences of Partition continue to shape the collective memory, literature, and cultural identity of the region. The pains and pangs of Partition are captured in the form of novels, drama, poetry, essays, short stories, and memoirs, which have evolved as partition literature. Several prominent writers and scholars, such as Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Anjali Gera Roy,

and Urvashi Butalia, have interwoven their family histories, autobiographies, and interviews to explore the lost reality. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, argues:

Why had the history of partition been so lacking in describing how partition had impacted on the lives of ordinary people, what it had actually meant to them? Why had historians not even attempted to explore what I saw as the underside of this history—the feelings, the emotions, the pain and anguish, the trauma, the sense of loss, the silences which it lay shrouded? Was this just a historiographical neglect or something deeper? (347)

She questioned the unitary nature of the

historical narrative that displays a partial truth of the past from the dominant perspective. Excluding the ordinary narrative from history is a form of collective psychological suppression. Memoirs and testimonies expose the limitations of historiographical techniques and present us with a picture of the other side. One generation that directly witnessed the horrors of partition has passed away, but its traumatic experiences have been transmitted to the next generation through the sharing of emotional memories.

Marianne Hirsch, a prominent scholar, author, and Professor at Columbia University, coined the concept of "Postmemory" in her 1992 essay *Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory* to describe how children of Holocaust survivors inherit the deep psychological trauma of events that occurred before their birth. She writes in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation (Hirsch 5).

It is used to examine how descendants of Holocaust survivors inherit and process their ancestors' traumas. Second and third-generation descendants experience Postmemory as a profound connection to a past they did not personally witness, yet feel as a living presence through family stories, behaviours, and cultural artifacts.

Bhawana Somaaya was born and brought up in Mumbai and is the youngest of eight siblings. She is a film journalist, author, critic, and historian, and was awarded the Padma Shri in 2017. She wrote the memoir *Farewell Karachi*, published in 2023, which recounts her family's journey from Pakistan to India.

Somaaya narrates the events of the Partition, drawing on the lived memories of her parents and siblings. These traumatic memories encompass experiences of displacement, loss of life, and extreme human cruelty. In the first part of the memoir, she writes about the home, ancestors, and affiliations and holdings left in Karachi. Her grandfather, Mathai ji, worked hard to build a business and a life as an entrepreneur, and he lived happily with his big joint family, all of which collapsed during the partition. Her memoir begins with an epigraph from Galib: "Huyi Muddat ke 'Galib' Mar Gya Par Yaad Aata Hai / Who Har Ek Baat Pe Kehna Ke Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota." It sets a nostalgic memoir tone, recalling the time before the partition, when they lived in Karachi. She traces her family's lineage to the established business class, the Somaayas. Her elder brother recites, "I am Dalsukh Madhavji, son of Jeevraj Naagji, son of Naagji Lakhaji," describing the family lineage. Her parents married in the second week of April 1927, when her father was eighteen and her mother was only sixteen. Her mother told her that "The house was packed with droves of relatives. Baa later revealed that the first time she came face to face with Bapuji was on the fifth night of the wedding. Initially they were awkward with each other, but over time, they forged a bond that remained unbroken till the end" (16). The affection of belongingness and habits wired in the minds of her parents left them with the feeling of being homeless. Somaaya recounts her maternal grandmother's mansion, which spread over four acres on Bunder Road, stretching from Netty Jetty Port to Karachi Jail. The author reconstructs these spatial memories through her sister's handwritten notes, found beneath her bed mattress after her death. Bhawan's maternal cousin, Indira Ben, who was just eleven years old, remembered how on 6th June 1948, a truck full of men barged into their home and started dismantling all the furniture:

They ransacked all the cupboards and grabbed whatever they found - gold, cash, valuables. I could not see them because I was with my mother in the storeroom, though we could hear the chaos from behind the door, which she had locked from the inside. My mother was weeping and I was screaming, so she covered my mouth

with her hand. We were in the storeroom for a long time, worried for my dad. Fai was rocking on the swing in the courtyard. They did not spare anyone that day. The old ladies were beaten and bruised, their earrings, bangles and chains pulled out of their bleeding ears, arms and necks. On their way out, they poured kerosene over all our vehicles and set them ablaze. By the time my father and my grandfather got home, our entire house was burning. (Somaaya 56)

Indira Ben's sister, Sarala, had a different experience. When she was in school, the teacher was distributing sweets in the classroom on the occasion of partition. Her family did not expect Karachi to turn into something terrible. Ninety years old, Moti Ben talks about their journey:

family reached Karachi port early in the morning to board the Kutch bound ship...Bapuji had instructed everyone to hold hands at all times to prevent getting lost in a stampede... at the stroke of 8 am, the bugle shrilled and the anchor was set to loose for the ship to sail. My mother rushed to the glass window to have last glimpse of the land she had called home. (Somaaya 59)

It was a very unpleasant experience for the family who had to leave their ancestral land for India. They never went out of Karachi. On that day, every neighbour came to say goodbye. Her grandfather says:

it is no longer the Karachi we knew. Everything and everybody have changed. People we considered our friends have turned into vultures; old associates have lost their souls. A violent mob stormed into our mansion and took all our furniture, all the artefacts, cars, bicycles, everything, and flung an envelope with just 70,000 in my face! It was heartbreaking to see the mansion I built with so much love close on me

forever! (Somaaya 68)

The journey was full of difficulties. Despite that, they landed in India safely, but they are homeless in this new land. This feeling of homelessness exists in their minds throughout their lives. The trauma of partition is not yet finished because her father had to go back to Karachi to get transfer orders for the continuation of her job in India. But conditions were worse in Pakistan; morality had been eroded, and communal violence was taking place at that time.

Somaaya narrates her father's journey, which was full of danger. He collected the transfer order with three months' salary, but when he arrived at the Karachi port to board a ship, He faced a violent mob who attacked and looted all his money and belongings. He lost everything in the struggle to reach the ship. His clothes were torn, and he missed the ship but somehow managed to board a steamer with the help of a boat.

My father scrambled on all fours in the stampede to locate his document. It was a day when he saw human beings turned into monsters. Men were bleeding, children were shrieking. It looked like a day when even the gods had turned their backs on the country. After 4 days of arduous journey at sea, all of them heaved a sigh of relief. The first thing my father did after stepping on the ground was to check if his limbs were intact. He was burning up with a high fever and could barely walk, clothes tattered and shoes lost in the stampede. (Somaaya 71)

He reached home, but his condition was like that of a beggar. Even his son could not recognise him when he arrived at the door of home. He recovered from his weakness and later continued work at Burmah Shell. He rebuilt everything and worked hard in the refinery market. During this period, they had no permanent home, so they kept shifting in search of a good one. Therefore, displacement and placelessness haunted them every day. Once Bhawana's therapist asked her during counselling, 'What is your biggest fear?' she unthinkingly said, "It's not having a roof over my head," which reveals her unacknowledged fear of

displacement and placelessness. In conversation with the great-great-grandchildren of the Somaaya family, they still reflect on the traumatic past of partition. She writes:

When we meet, we still talk about Karachi, even though none of us were part of the migration. The inexorable attraction for the city still exists among us. Over the decades, I have tried visiting the homeland of my parents several times, but it never came to pass. And until that happens, Karachi will exist like a soul sister, far away but an inherent part of my family, my history and my world.
(Somaaya 161)

CONCLUSION

The paper has closely analysed Bhawana Somaaya's memoir, *Farewell Karachi*, which highlights the implications of Partition on the lives of victims. Somaaya did not witness the partition firsthand, but it was narrated to her through stories, written documents, and photographs. The paper revealed the inhumanity and brutality experienced by elders and especially how her father escaped a stampede and attack by a violent mob in Karachi. Somaaya employs postmemory as a reconstructive tool, mapping how her family navigated the trauma of displacement and successfully rebuilt their lives.

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