

From Recollection to Reconstruction: A Ricoeurian Analysis of Narrative Identity of the Partition Survivors in Rajeev Shukla's *Scars of 1947: Real Partition Stories*

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes selected narratives from Rajeev Shukla's Scars of 1947: Real Partition Stories, a 2022 collection of personal, memory-based testimonies and oral histories of 1947 Partition survivors. The study employs Paul Ricoeur's concept of "Narrative Identity" to, first, investigate the varied "emplotment" strategies that the Partition survivors utilize within their recollective narratives to structure their fragmented and fractured Partition memories to construct a coherent and meaningful life story, and second, to locate certain events, objects, symbols and themes present in the narratives through which the survivors shape their personal and collective identity by distinguishing between their continued sense of "Idem" (sameness) and "Ipse" (selfhood). The analysis argues that the Partition survivors' personal memories construct their sense of self and belonging across space and time. It highlights the need to recover subjective histories of the Partition to understand how the affected individuals actively remember, forget, and utilize their memories, both traumatic and nostalgic, to forge their identities.

Keywords: Partition, Memory, Oral History, Narrative Identity, Emplotment, Selfhood

Introduction

The geographical separation and demographic migration of people between India and Pakistan brought by the Partition of British India in 1947 is considered a cataclysmic event in the history of the Indian Subcontinent that resulted in the uprooting of millions of people, a devastating scale of mass-scale communal violence, the shattering of the socio-economic fabric of societies, and deep psychological trauma for the affected individuals and communities (Settar and Gupta). The Partition has been depicted in literature as both an acute historical tragedy and a continuing social process, "the long Partition" (Zamindar), that structurally reshaped communities, societies, and states in the Indian Subcontinent. While early historiography focused primarily on the high politics and subsequent nationalism-oriented state politics of the Partition, the 'memory turn' in Partition studies in the 1990s shifted the attention to microhistories, oral testimonies, and survivors' voices, intending to humanize the lived experiences of the Partition.

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Memory-based narratives became central to recover and remap the otherwise forgotten, ignored, or suppressed dimensions of the Partition, with interventions including the unearthing and evaluating the psychological trauma and socially-rooted silence around the Partition (Butalia), analyzing the gendered nature of the Partition violence and women's experience of the tragedy (Menon & Bhasin), observing the lived experiences of physical and material displacement of ordinary people (Pandey), and foregrounding objects and symbols as carriers of memories for the Partition survivors and its intergenerational transmission (Malhotra).

Scholars of memory studies have long argued that oral testimonies and narratives hold a distinct sense of authenticity. Alessandro Portelli remarks that "the unique and precious element which oral sources force upon ... is the speaker's subjectivity" (52). He also points out that 'the oral sources may not add much to what we know ... but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs' (52), revealing how an individual remembers their past, what constitutes their recollection, and why certain elements of the past are selectively recalled. Borrowing from Russian formalist narrative theory that distinguishes between "fabula", the chronological story or history, and "sjuzhet", the narrative structure or emplotment (Tomashevsky), memory studies focus more on the authentic meanings and symbols embedded within the subject's sjuzhet than on the mere historical accuracy of the fabula. Studying oral narratives thereby becomes relevant because they organize the past within their plots, revealing significant details about speakers' relationships with their past and history.

Following this, the Partition oral historians also consider memory-based recollections to be active sites where survivors rearrange past events related to the Partition into meaningful life stories. (Butalia, Malhotra). They regard that the Partition-affected individuals tend to add, emphasize, or omit certain details in their recollections to make sense of the impact of the Partition rupture and trauma on their psyche and being (Butalia). The present study focuses on four oral micro-narratives from *Scars of 1947: Real Partition Stories*, a 2022 book by Indian journalist and politician Rajeev Shukla. It is a collection of personal testimonies from Partition survivors and their descendants, whom the author met and interacted with over the course of thirty years of travel across India and Pakistan. The book can be considered part history, part memoir, as it weaves together eyewitness accounts and personal anecdotes from both ordinary people and families of known personalities, with historical insights, social commentary, and personal opinions, to reflect on memory, trauma, displacement, resettlement, and cross-border connections provoked by the Partition.

Aims and Objectives

The paper argues that the personal, intimate, and guarded memories of the Partition survivors define and shape their identity and sense of self across spatial and temporal boundaries. The objective of the paper is to identify instances, symbols, motifs, people, practices, or claims within the micro-narratives of the Partition survivors that have played a central role in constructing individual selfhood and meaningful life stories. The study focuses on interpreting the structure and content of Partition survivors' remembrances to explore how Partition memory, whether traumatic or nostalgic, has been represented and transmitted in select recollective narratives. It also explores the precise psychological moves the Partition survivors have made to reconcile with their fractured pasts and recalibrate them with their present selves.

Theoretical Framework

The paper undertakes an intensive hermeneutic narrative analysis of four deeply articulated oral micro-narratives from Rajeev's *Scars of 1947*, selected through purposive sampling, by employing Paul Ricoeur's concept of "narrative identity," developed in *Time and Narrative* and

Oneself as Another, as a critical standpoint (*Time and Narrative; Oneself as Another*). While foundational memory scholarship, such as Aleida Assmann's concept of cultural memory and Marianne Hirsch's postmemory framework, effectively addresses the collective and intergenerational transmission of historical trauma and memory, the paper employs Ricoeur's framework to study the subjective mechanisms by which the Partition survivors undergo an internal psychological reconciliation of their idea of self by constructing a stable identity amid narrative fragmentation stemming from their Partition experiences.

The research interrogates two things: first, the formation of the survivor's identity through narrative "emplotment" and, second, the complex dialectic between "ipse" and "idem". Ricoeur's mechanism of "Emplotment" is the process by which an individual reconfigures disparate and fractured events in their life into a somewhat meaningful life story. Ricoeur's distinction of two types of identity: Idem (sameness) and Ipse (selfhood), where Idem defines an individual's permanent markers of stable identity, like ancestral lineage, linguistic roots, inherited socio-cultural heritage, geographical location, and community linkages, and Ipse constitutes the dynamic, non-linear, relational self that sustains an individual's personal or communal identity, adapting over time and space despite drastic changes will be utilized to identify the thematic elements that mark the crucial distinction between the Partition survivors' idem and ipse within their narratives (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*).

By foregrounding the research methodology in Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, the study shifts the focus from the historical accuracy of the Partition to a psychological inquiry of its survivors' lived experience. Ricoeur's concepts of emplotment and the distinction between idem and ipse are both highly individualistic processes of configuration that require analysis of how Partition survivors take their discordant, fractured, and chaotic lived experiences of the Partition past and synthesize them within their recollections.

Analysis and Discussion

In "The Religion of Cricket", Shukla recounts his friendship with Taimur Bande, a staunch Pakistani nationalist, in which he incorporates the Partition story of Taimur's maternal grandmother, Minni Chowksi, who, as the author describes, was "a Pakistani by nationality" (8), but was born into a Congress supporter Parsi family in pre-Partition Bombay, and never tolerated anyone saying "anything offensive about India" (8). She fell in love with and married Mohammad Asgar Khan, a Pathan Indian Navy officer, with whom she settled in Peshawar, Pakistan, after marriage, just before the Partition. For Minni, the Partition remained the central rupture in her life, around which she has arranged her entire life story, defining who she identified as, where she belonged, and what she desired. On her very first meeting with Rajeev, Minni had only one secret request for him, to get her "a handful of soil from Bombay" (7), as she still deeply missed the land where she was born and brought up, and "harboured deep love for India in her heart" (8). Although she had spent over sixty years in Pakistan, she has "not been able to visit Bombay" (7) ever after the Partition. Minni's outright wish to "rub the soil" (8) of her homeland on her forehead underscores the essentiality of remaining connected to it to construct a meaningful life story. It showcases how, despite an irreparable temporal and spatial distance that the Partition has brought upon Minni, her emotional love for India and Bombay remained limitless, something she sustained and demonstrated throughout her life, especially while watching India-Pakistan cricket matches, where "every member of the house cheered for Pakistan, Minni cheered for India" (9).

Another facet of Minni's story alludes to her performative acts that displayed the continuity of her relationship with India and Bombay. When Shukla first met her, he was accompanied by the Indian film star Suniel Shetty, who, like Minni, was raised in Bombay. When they met, Minni

and Suniel communicated in the language they had both been raised speaking and listening to, i.e., Marathi. The surprising part of this conversation was that Minni “was speaking her mother tongue after almost sixty long years” (9). This singular act of recalling and conversing in Marathi with another Marathi-speaking Indian highlights what Ricouer calls *ipse*, Minni’s distinct sense of selfhood and identity: a Pakistani by citizenship but an Indian by heart, whose life was ruptured by the Partition.

While Rajeev could never fulfill her wish of bringing soil of Bombay for her, and her deteriorating health in old age made it impossible for her ever to visit the city, “despite wanting to as much as she did” (9), “a small flag of India” (9), gifted by Suniel Shetty during their meeting and some gifts sent to her by Shukla acted as material anchors for Minni to sustain the deep sense of belonging to Bombay and India, enabling her to depart on her “final journey in peace” (9). In the absence of the physical ‘soil’ of her homeland, she later clutched to “the same Indian flag” (9), which she considered as “a priceless gift” (9), considering it as a physical representative of her homeland that she could never revisit. It validates cultural memory theorist Ann Rigney’s assertion that material possessions and landscapes function as an “accidental archive” for harbouring unarticulated memories (14). For Minni, the Indian flag serves as a crucial site of material memory that transcends its tangible value, evolving into a sensory anchor of her home and pre-Partition past, sustaining her identity while maintaining a living connection with India. In “Gauri Khan’s Grandmother from Lyallpur”, Shukla narrates the Partition story of Champa Tiwari, the maternal grandmother of Gauri Khan, an Indian film producer and interior designer. Champa and her family originally hailed from Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), a city in the Punjab province of Pakistan, before migrating to India during the Partition. Champa’s recollection of the Partition memories resonates with Minni’s relationship to her Partition memories, as both evoke nostalgia for their pre-Partition lives. While Minni fondly remembered and missed Bombay, Champa felt “happiest while narrating stories related to Lyallpur” (72). Similarly, Minni’s desire to revisit Bombay is reflected in Champa’s wish “to see her house, her school, her city and her village” (72). Age-related issues made it impossible for both Minni and Champa to ever travel to the cities they originally hailed from. Just as Minni could converse in Marathi decades later, Champa could still recall small, granular details about Lyallpur despite never revisiting it post-Partition. Champa’s desire to visit Lyallpur could never be fulfilled, mirroring Minni’s unfulfilled desire to visit Bombay or touch its soil. Additionally, in both cases, Shukla acted as a catalyst, providing material anchors for Minni and Champa by bringing a part of their home and homeland to them.

For Champa, the author visited her city, Lyallpur, especially the places that Champa had spent her adult life in, from “her college and school—Queen Mary’s College” (73), “her house located in Vakilaa di gali (Lawyer’s Lane) locality” (72), to the Lyallpur clock tower that stands at the city center and old temples of Lord Shiva and Lord Rama located nearby. Not just that, Champa even recalled the people she had spent her childhood with, and could even reconnect through phone with one such person, “a kulfi vendor who would be stationed near the clock tower” (76), where she used to go frequently in pre-Partition times. This seemingly coincidental and surprising incident, in which Champa and the Kulfi vendor, who had been selling kulfis there for more than eighty years, could remember each other and reconnect over the phone, highlights the strong sense of association that seemingly mundane acts hold when faced with traumatic events like the Partition. A mere conversation had rekindled a bundle of old memories and trauma of loss, not just for Champa, but also for the kulfi vendor, both of whom had seen their lives and surroundings change drastically due to the Partition. It demonstrates what Cathy Caruth calls “belatedness” (7), proposing that their overwhelming shock of Champa suffering from the trauma of leaving her hometown, and the kulfi vendor

lament that “the faisla (decision) of Partition was not good” (77), forms a psychic wound that is understood and realized over time through their shared suffering and its expression.

The photographs of Lyallpur that Shukla brought for Champa made her the happiest, as she ‘felt content just looking at the photographs’ (77), while listening to his descriptions of his experiences of visiting the places in Lyallpur, where “her heart still resided” (72). These photos, much like the Indian flag for Minni, acted not merely as souvenirs that reconnected them to their lost homeland after decades without any physical anchors, but also transformed into what Ricoeur describes as a physical and material “trace of time” that helps to delicately bridge their lived memory of the Partition with the abstract notion of time. They were instrumental in bringing together the conflicting ideas of selfhood of the present and sameness of the past, resulting in a temporary but essential healing of the trauma of loss and separation caused by the Partition rupture. These physical objects, over time, became poignant sites of memory, or “lieu de mémoire” (Nora 7) for both Minni and Champa, where their pre-Partition memories crystallized and helped them to maintain a sense of shared history and identity with their lost homeland. Through their remembrance, long after they suffered traumatic separation from their home due to the Partition, both Minni and Champa actively reconfigured the ultimate discordance it caused into a concordant narrative identity through the employment of objects like the Indian flag or photographs of their hometown, allowing them to make sense of who they were before the Partition and who they became after suffering through it. It reveals what Marius Kwentz refers to as “open and continuing dialogue” (2) between them and those objects to synthesize the permanence of their pre-Partition past into a coherent, unified narrative identity, expressed through metaphysical engagement with those objects.

Another point that connects Minni and Champa’s Partition narratives is the name of the cities they hailed from. Both these cities share a strange similarity: a Ricoeurian sense of sameness, or *idem*. While Bombay was later renamed Mumbai, and Lyallpur became Faisalabad, both Minni and Champa continued to refer to these cities by the names they had grown up with. It is a representative example of how the Partition survivors maintain a sense of selfhood, a Ricoeurian *ipse*, in which the trauma of separation from homeland is preserved through continued association with and engagement with memory.

In “The Lost Blazer of Dr. G. P. Talwar”, Shukla narrates the story of ‘Padma Bhushan awardee Dr. G. P. Talwar, aka Pran Talwar’ (34), who is credited “for eradicating the disease of leprosy” (34) in India. It describes the haunting possibility of a young man losing his family and subsequently reuniting with them during the Partition upheaval, illustrating how such events can alter a person’s sense of self and completely undermine their ability to imagine a coherent life story. A resident of Model Town in Lahore, Pran was residing in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, during the Partition. Unable to “establish any contact over the phone” (36) with his family, his decision to go back to Lahore also did not materialize initially, as upon reaching Hoshiarpur on his way to Lahore, he was advised by people there that he should “let go of the thoughts of knowing the whereabouts of his family” (36) due to worsening communal unrest in Lahore.

The idea that a young man had to accept and come to terms with the possibility of losing his family was how the Partition rupture deeply affected the psyche of Pran. Although he eventually got the information about his family’s whereabouts after reaching Lahore in search of his family, he could make it to Lahore after pleading and promising a deal with the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar, under which he was dropped off in Lahore in exchange for his identifying all the Sikh and Hindu families stuck in Lahore and sending them back to Amritsar safely. After the terrifying prospect of losing his family, he was struck by the sight of his house in Lahore being “completely vandalized and looted” (37), with no member of his family

residing there anymore. The rioters had taken away all that they could from his house, not even leaving behind “his medals and trophies” (37). The vandalized house’s “eerie silence was painful for Pran to bear” (37), expressing his emotional vulnerability after losing his home, his inability to find or safeguard his family, and the plausibility of losing them forever. Even after operating under the assumption that he might never meet his family, he still continued to perform his promised task of locating the trapped Hindus and Sikhs in Lahore and helping them move out safely.

Two elements in Pran’s Partition recollection stand out as key constitutive elements of his identity and his idea of selfhood. First, his moral and ethical responsibility in the face of personal tragedy. Pran’s remembrance, although rooted in the trauma of the possibility of losing his family, finding his home ransacked, and losing his prized possessions, emphasizes the determination and grit of many such people like him, who did all they could to safeguard the lives of as many people as possible, and not let them suffer the same fate as theirs. It can be seen as a triumph of Pran’s moral selfhood against the idea of communal sameness that had gripped people during the Partition. In recounting and emplotting the memories of his helping people, shielding them from danger, and rescuing them to safety within his narrative, Pran demonstrated the radical aspect of human will and agency that enabled him to rewrite his life story as someone whose identity was hampered but not destroyed by the Partition rupture.

Secondly, Pran’s recollection also sheds light on the intense trauma of losing one’s home or finding it vandalized. Such incidents cause deep-rooted and lingering physiological and spatial trauma in the minds of the Partition survivors, making it extremely difficult for them to reconcile with the physical ruins of a space that held deep personal memories. Pran’s reply when asked whether he visited his home on his trip to Lahore in 1992 was, “When everything is gone from there, what is the need for me to visit that place now?” (42). It signals the sudden death of everything people usually associate with home: stability, sameness, and the physical and emotional anchor a home provides. For Pran, it was no longer a home he needed to revisit. Rather, it had become only a place whose physical existence did not matter anymore to him. It is a void in Pran’s psyche, trauma of which might never be healed. Severe trauma like Pran’s often creates what Ricoeur calls ‘blocked’ or ‘wounded’ memory that resists expression in spoken or written narratives, meaning individuals are unable to translate their traumatic memories of painful events into a structured narrative, either immediately or for long periods of time (Ricoeur 69). Still, Pran had, over time, overpowered it by much stronger memories of reuniting with his family, aiding others escape the violence, being helped by friends, and most importantly, choosing to recount and narrate his Partition experience, not from a point of deep agony or disappointment, but a sense of pride in rebuilding, not just his life, but helping others too during the Partition. Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity helps us understand how the Partition survivors like Pran have processed their immense trauma of loss, death, and migration by distinguishing between the destruction of idem (sameness) caused by the Partition and ipse (selfhood), which nonetheless endures and speaks of its existence.

Syyed Imtiaz Humayun’s experience, as narrated by Shukla in the chapter titled “A Journey to Lahore”, mirrors Pran’s in the sense that its central vein also runs on the inter-communal bonds and acts of help and rescue by the “other”, bypassing the hatred and animosity the Partition had triggered between various religious communities. In 1947, while Imtiaz was living in Bombay, his family was residing in Jalandhar (in present-day Punjab, India), which eventually left “for Pakistan under the mounting pressure” (46) of family and friends as communal tensions flared up there, with Imtiaz only leaning through “a letter from his father” (47) that the family had suddenly departed for Lahore, Pakistan. Similar to Pran’s experience, Imtiaz felt deeply anxious and stressed, with no exact information about his family’s whereabouts, brooding whether they

had reached Lahore safely or ... massacred on the way?" (47). Just as people advised Pran to forget about his family, Imtiaz was advised by his relative in Bombay "to forget about his family and move on" (47). While the Deputy Commissioner helped Pran, Imtiaz, on his way to Delhi from Bombay in a train, was helped by a Hindu businessman named Gopal Das, who saved him from a crowd of rioters looking for Muslim passengers, by recognizing Imtiaz from his "Peshawari slippers" (48), and introducing him to the rioters "as his son, Shyam" (48). Moreover, akin to Pran reuniting with his family, Imtiaz rejoins his family at one of his distant relatives' homes in Lahore, where "Imtiaz's wife came rushing out of the house and embraced him" (51) upon finding him alive.

Explicitly choosing to recollect and share certain memories of their Partition past suggests that Pran and Imtiaz have reconstructed their idea of Ricoeurian selfhood, not by fixating on communal lines or traumatic scenes witnessed, but by emphasizing their personal memories of inter-community help, rescue, and care during the Partition. They have chosen these memories amongst their chaotic, violent, traumatic, and deeply painful memories of the Partition to construct a meaningful and coherent story out of their fractured Partition experience. Their sense of belonging is deeply tied to their shared vulnerabilities, events of personal atrocities, collective trauma, and their strength to survive and rejuvenate despite the challenges they faced due to the Partition tragedy. These key markers of stable identity, idem, for both Pran and Imtiaz, within their recollective narrative emplotment, highlight how they, through their morality, ethical responsibility, belief in intercommunal values, personal agency, and will to live, sustained their idea of selfhood, ipse, despite the disruptive trauma of the Partition.

Ricoeur describes the narrative process of identity as 'discordant concordance', a continuous battle between chaos and order to synthesize the fractured and heterogeneous elements of memory into a coherent, whole story (Ricoeur 73). The struggle between discordant Partition experiences and the concordant sense of self, as it emerges through narrative emplotment in both nostalgia-soaked remembrance and traumatic memories of loss, suggests that fragmented and painful remembrance of the Partition is not, in itself, a failure to have a coherent life story. Rather, these act as living evidence of how these individuals have attempted to survive and protect their identity, despite the pain and trauma the Partition brought upon them. Instead of overlooking their trauma, the analysis puts the focus on the processes they have adopted to stitch their lives together and make sense of who they were and what they became post-Partition experience. The emplotment of such painful and traumatic memories displays an active attempt by them to heal and bring order to their fractured Partition trauma. Thus, their recollective narratives can be seen as what Jan Assmann called 'communicative memory', actively transforming their Partition memory into narrative identities.

Conclusion

A Ricoeurian analysis of the selected narratives revealed the varied strategies employed by Partition survivors to navigate the painful and anguishing events of the past across time and space, crafting stories that reflect their ideas of moral and ethical continuity and consistency, despite the changes the Partition rupture brought to each of them. It suggests that the Partition trauma does not always destroy the survivor's sense of identity; rather, it recalibrates it. It manifests through the emplotment of discordant memories, ranging from nostalgic to traumatic, into a coherent narrative structure. For them, the remembrance of their past becomes, in itself, an identity-making act, revealing how they have amalgamated and emplotted their lived experiences of the Partition with their present sense of belonging and future outlooks. The analysis identified instances, events, objects, and symbols within the narratives that served as key markers of stable identity, idem for the Partition survivors, as well as the dynamic identity

and sense of selfhood, ispe, they sustained through the recollection of those experiences. The research also underscores how documenting and archiving the Partition oral narratives, by themselves, becomes an act of therapeutic and traumatic unlocking. Such narrative transmission of the wounded Partition past turns the unspeakable, but unforgettable memories of its survivors into active processes of healing and identity formation.

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