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# Symbol and Imagery of Partition in Selected Works from the Indian Sub-continent

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Partition of 1947 remains one of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of the Indian sub-continent, resulting in mass dislocation, widespread violence, and lasting emotional scars. Literary writers have employed a range of techniques to explore the complexities of this period. Symbols and Imagery, in particular, serve as powerful channels for expressing emotions that are deeply embedded and often too complex or painful to articulate directly. The research project, titled 'Symbol and Imagery of Partition in Selected Works from the Indian Sub-Continent,' focuses on the use of these literary devices in The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh and Tamas by Bhisham Sahni. Through close reading and historical-critical methods, the research examines how Symbols and Imagery function as conduits to represent the trauma, dislocation, memory, and violence of the Partition. These techniques offer a nuanced understanding of the narratives and their enduring impact on common people.*

**Keywords**: Symbol, Imagery, Partition, Trains, Blood, Borders

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## Introduction

On 15th August 1947, India got its 'independence' from British rule, forming two nations – India and Pakistan. The word 'independence' is deliberately put in quotes here, as it is doubted if it was independence from anything in any way. On the contrary, it felt more like a bad omen, a symbol of something so disastrous and frightening that it left the whole nation traumatised for decades to come. The blood, violence, trauma, and fragmentation were to be seen and felt everywhere, especially in those places where the borders were lanced, or cut open, and left to be bled to death. Not only was the country gashed, but so were the people of it. Some say that the

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Partition was the price to pay for independence. But how fair was it? An outsider, a man from England, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, was tasked with drawing the borders, which ultimately separated India from what is now known as Pakistan. The 'builders' of the nation asked him to draw a border, so he pulled one for them (Butalia 86).

About twelve million people migrated back and forth from India to Pakistan and vice versa. The reason? They went where they felt it to be safer (Butalia). Mostly, Muslims went to Pakistan, and Hindus came to India. There were other reasons, too. People went where they felt they had job security, respect and support. They went where they were welcomed and appreciated by their fellow citizens. Most importantly, they went where they were sure they would not be killed. Where their lives were spared. Where the women were not abducted, raped, or killed.

Partition literature emerged as a new genre in literature after the phenomenon. Several writers attempted to capture the essence of it and put it into words, in the form of stories, novels, poems and memoirs. They tried to encapsulate and depict various aspects of the aftermath of the phenomenon. Recurring themes of violence, blood, trauma, memory, displacement and fragmentation appeared in many creations, both fictional and otherwise.

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), Alok Bhalla's *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home* (2006), and Suvir Kaul's *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (2001), provide critical perspectives that enrich this analysis. Butalia's work, for example, provides both personal and historical perspectives, shedding light on how Symbols capture collective memory and trauma (Butalia). Bhalla's exploration of personal and communal narratives of loss and displacement enhances the understanding of how symbols articulate these experiences. Finally, Kaul's examination of Partition's enduring effects on memory and identity offers valuable insights into how literary symbols function within this narrative framework. These secondary sources, in conjunction with close readings of the primary texts, deepen our exploration of the emotional and historical complexities embedded in Partition literature.

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A symbol is defined as "a sign, object, etc. which represents something" (Oxford Languages). The Cross stands as a symbol of Christianity. Or the rose symbolises love and passion. Symbols are used in fictional works to act as a medium for things which are too complex or painful to be articulated directly. They are used as a tool to enrich the literary quality of a scene/event/ incident, or phenomenon in fiction. For example, Death is symbolised through various things or objects such as fire, skulls, vultures/eagles etc., in different cultures and communities across the world.

So, the question here is, how do symbols work in the case of Partition narratives? How do they enrich the quality of the work? Symbols, when mixed with Imagery, make the experience of reading fiction more vivid and encapsulating, which is difficult through direct descriptions. A house made of bricks and a family residing in it might seem normal when put in words, but the presence of a broken family photo on the counter may evoke a deep sense of realisation that maybe this family is not picture-perfect in reality. Here, the broken picture acts as a symbol, a medium through which readers realise the multilayers of the family dynamics. In the case of Partition literature, symbols are used heavily throughout fictional works to explain the trauma and fragmentation experienced by the people. The phenomenon itself became a symbol of relief for some and a symbol of bewilderment for others. Explaining the symbol of homes, Butalia quotes from one of her interviews, "…if this house had not been there, I think we all would have been together" (65). Houses which were once a symbol of warmth and nostalgia, became a symbol of collective loss.

For the research, two texts have been chosen, namely *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, published in 1988, is set during the post-partition period. An unnamed narrator recounts a series of events and memories to his cousin Ila and uncle Robi. The Partition acts as the main antagonist of the novel, being the reason for the violence and riots that take place throughout, and the reason why Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil get killed by the mob in Dhaka. Borders play a key role and act as an important symbol throughout the narrative, questioning the notions of home and being the reason for families torn apart. *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni, published in 1973, majorly focuses on themes such as violence,

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religion and communal conflicts. Tensions arise between Hindus and Muslims when the carcass of a pig is found at the steps of a Mosque. The Muslims kill a cow in retaliation, further intensifying the conflict within the communities. Blood and trains act as major symbols in this novel as they devastatingly capture vivid images of violence, bloodshed and mass killings.

The research originates from the need to explore how Symbol and Imagery function within the selected texts to represent and interrogate the realities of Partition. In these selected texts, Symbols and Imagery express more than the emotions arising from the depths of the complexity of the characters' experiences; they serve as a narrative strategy to navigate and articulate the collective trauma of the Partition, which would remain inexpressible in direct language. These literary elements effectively encapsulate the unspeakable pain and dislocation associated with the historical event and allow readers to engage in the emotional undercurrents that shape characters' identities and memories.

The research uses the theories of Close Reading and Historical Criticism to achieve its aims. Close reading focuses on "…the formal aspects or the verbal/linguistic elements of a text such as figures of speech, images, symbols, interaction between words, rhythm and metaphor" (Mambrol). The theory proves itself to be beneficial throughout the paper, as it focuses on extracting the Symbols and Imagery of the selected texts. Historical Criticism is defined as "…a literary analysis approach that examines a text within its historical context to understand its meaning and significance" (Fiveable). The theory will allow us to delve into the circumstances surrounding the primary texts, mainly the Partition of 1947, the Civil War of 1971 and the Revolt of 1857. Making these connections will help in a cohesive study of the texts and will enable the establishment of a deeper connection with the topic of the research.

**The Symbol of Borders**

Borders act as a symbol in Partition Literature at two levels – the physical borders which divide the nations, and the metaphorical borders that divide people of different castes/religions/communities.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the title itself stands as a significant metaphor for borders. People can change or 'shadow' the lines, but they cannot dissociate themselves from their culture and identity, even if they have to move to the other side of the border. In the novel, borders act as the antagonist of the narrative, separating the protagonist's grandmother from her home in Dhaka, which she later wants to return to. But there were consequences to it, which resulted in the deaths of three characters – Tridib, Jethamoshai and Khalil. The author questions the superficial nature of borders and how they tear apart notions of home, identity and familiarity. Even for those who reject the physical boundaries, the metaphorical borders permeate not just within communities but also family members. In the novel, we see how the protagonist is deeply attached to his roots but his cousin Ila sees it as a trap, a restriction imposed which would not let one fly free.

In an interview with P.N. Rajbhog, it is stated, "…when a man told the rioters he was neither Hindu nor Muslim he was left untouched" (Butalia 313). This also makes the people question the arbitrary notion of metaphorical borders. It was established that this was a communal fight between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs only. Women, children and the Dalits emerged as the collateral damage of the difficult time.

Thus, borders, both physical and metaphorical, stand as superficial and arbitrary concepts where the existence of home and homeland are constantly questioned. The loss and trauma felt by the people during Partition are catalysed due to the false notion of borders being the determiner of someone's identity and worth.

**Trains as Symbols of Displacement and Dislocation**

Trains act as symbols of displacement and dislocation by depicting mass movements, violence and trauma. They can also act as carriers of characters' transformation or disintegration during journeys. Trains not only ensure the physical movement of the population from one place to another as a result of forced migration- but can also lead to the characters' disillusionment and instil an existentialist nature in them. Trains are supposed to be mere carriers of passengers who willingly wish to travel from one place to another. But in the context of Partition, trains became

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a symbol of unwanted means of dislocation, as people did not wish to leave their homes in the first place.

The backdrop of the novel *Tamas* by Sahni is set against a small communal town where tensions regarding differences in religion are increasing day by day. And then one day, the carcass of a pig is found on the steps of a Mosque, which leads to feelings of conflict and hatred in the Muslims, as their religious scriptures forbid them to eat pork. Assuming that a Hindu might have done it, they kill a cow in retaliation, which is a holy animal for Hindus. This further intensifies the external conflict between the communities and eventually leads to mass killings. Trains became carriers of dead bodies as they carried people to and from India and Pakistan. The sight of hundreds of lifeless bodies inside the trains proves to be horrifying. The medium of escape from a place where they were no longer welcomed and hoping for a safer future, that very medium proved to be the cause of their deaths. The theme of dehumanisation is also significant here. It depicts how ordinary and simple means of transport soon turn into vessels of horror.

Thus, trains symbolise fear, destruction, violence, mass killings, displacement and dislocation concerning Partition narratives, laden with vivid imagery of bloodshed and corpses arriving in India and Pakistan. They also act as a medium of transformation and disintegration of characters with time, as their rose-coloured glasses get distorted and are forced to not only face but also comply with the realities of the phenomenon.

**Blood Imagery and Collective Trauma**

Blood, like borders, acts as a symbol at two levels: it is a symbol of all the lives lost during the Partition of 1947 as a result of the mass killings and violence, as well as symbolises familial blood, a symbol of bonding, honour and solidarity. It represents both the loss of lives, as well as the communal ties which were fragmented but never wholly severed.

In *Tamas*, we see how trains carrying dead bodies arrive to and from India and Pakistan, covered with dead bodies and blood, symbolising dehumanisation and evoking terrifying images in one's mind. The butcher shop, once seen as a mundane aspect of everyday life, becomes a site of eerie noises and symbolises discord and death. Blood symbolises the ultimate verdict, the final chapter

as a result of Partition, something which was imposed by colonial powers, an outside force. It became a consequence of the artificial borders laid down by the people in power, a consequence that the common people had to face. It symbolises an irreversible change, which leads to collective trauma and ultimately results in the fragmentation of identity.

In *The Shadow Lines*, we see how the protagonist is rooted in his homeland, and his cousin, Ila, who has given up on the notion of it long back. It depicts how borders separated familial ties, but were never wholly severed. We also see how the protagonist's grandmother, Tha'mma, was separated from her original home in Dhaka, and when she tries to retrieve it and reconcile with her uncle who lives there, it results in the deaths of three of the characters in the novel. It depicts how blood was the force which pushed the urge to reconnect with one's home, and how blood itself became the result of this very urge. How blood was the ray of hope for reconciliation, and blood itself severed that very hope. This double role of blood in Partition novels plays a crucial role in depicting the harsh realities of the phenomenon.

**Incorporation of Symbols in the Narrative**

Both Amitav Ghosh and Bhisham Sahni have incorporated symbols of Trains and Borders to evoke the brutal experience of Partition. The symbols help in strengthening the articulation of themes such as dislocation, fragmentation, violence and trauma. The narrative techniques used by the authors help illuminate the harsh realities of Partition, which are often hidden in the pages of history. The techniques explain how the symbols help enrich the quality of the literary texts by conveying what words cannot.

In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh implies how 'lines,' or borders, are arbitrary. Even though they are superficial and do not separate people, they end up being the reason for severe violence and destruction. The 'shadowy' nature of the lines symbolises fear and doubt, resulting in significant trauma and distress among individuals on both sides. The author repeatedly focuses on borders being the reason for communal violence, bloodshed, and the repeated cycles of trauma faced by people belonging to multiple generations, both by the protagonist and his grandmother, as well as other characters in the novel.

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Ghosh's narrative style and the nature of borders are quite similar. The narration style of the novel is non-linear and has multiple perspectives. It also depends on memory, as the novel's protagonist recounts a series of events to his cousin and uncle. Borders have a similar nature. They are unreliable, have multiple facets to them, and are shifting in nature. In an interview of Rajinder Singh with Butalia, it is stated, "Rajinder's narrative here recounts how unprepared people were to move, how they had to be convinced to do so, and, once they did, the enormous hardship and suffering they faced on the way" (Butalia pp. 100-01). Ghosh, too, encapsulates this state of confusion and disorientation among people by mirroring the narrative style to be the same, with no fixed dimension of time and space. Borders forced people to be separated from their homeland forever, whether they wanted it or not. Such was the power of the almost illusory nature of borders.

On the other hand, *Tamas* by Sahni incorporates both the physical borders as well as the borders between religions and communities. The fictional town in the novel acts as a symbol to represent the whole nation, engulfed in violence and disorientation over reasons which are exaggerated by the colonial powers. Sahni's narrative technique is intense and straightforward, as these lines from the first chapter of the novel suggest - "Nathu was already breathless. He thought, perhaps it was his heavy breathing which caused the flame to quiver so violently" (Sahni 9). This narrative technique resembles the raw nature of Partition, depicting how it left people bereft and on their own throughout the phenomenon.

Similarly, trains in both the novels depicted that what once were peaceful journeys between places which were unrestricted across regions, now became symbols of terror and uncertainty. Nobody knew if it was a safe journey, or if would they even make it to their destination alive. "Our hearts were full of fear – where were we headed? Where would we end up?" (Butalia 101). Common people feared for their well-being and were forced into building a new home, thousands of miles away. Ghosh uses trains as a symbol of dislocation and dissociation, a means through which people lose connection with their roots. We see this through Ila, the protagonist's cousin. She sees herself as an independent woman who does not want to be associated with her Indian roots, even though she hails from an Indian-origin family. Even the protagonist at times feels

frustrated with her behaviour, mostly because we see him as someone deeply rooted in his culture, even though he is living in London now. This acts as a symbol to represent the fragmented identities of people within the same extended family, which was one of the consequences of Partition. And what facilitated this change? What acted as a means to catalyse this change? What helped? Trains, of course. On the other hand, trains also acted as facilitators of connection, connecting families who were once separated due to borders. The protagonist's grandmother, Tha'mma, who wishes to meet her uncle in Dhaka, Bangladesh, signifies the urge to re-establish lost connections. She does go to Dhaka to bring Jethamoshai back, but, unfortunately, it results in multiple deaths, symbolising the legacy of Partition and depicting its brutal nature.

In *Tamas*, too, we see trains as a bad omen, a symbol of horror and terror, as trains carrying corpses of people kept arriving in India and Pakistan. Trains symbolised themes like bloodshed, mass killings, and violence. They became the harbingers of sheer horror and trauma. Imagine going to the train station to receive someone whom you have not seen in decades and finally seeing a ray of hope in having a real family, only to see a train coming filled with dead bodies. You get inside the train anyway, hoping them to be one of the few ones to make it out alive, only to never even find their body. The ray of hope turns into a dark, never-ending abyss, in which you might need to stay forever because you cannot seem to shake off the sights you saw. Trains, once a symbol of hope and intimacy, become a site of disorientation and trauma.

Thus, symbols helped in deepening the understanding of the realities of partition and how they affected common people. Weaving intimate tales of the common man in the novels helps the readers explore the phenomenon on a deeper level which evokes strong feelings of empathy and vivid mental images of the destruction.

**Conclusion**

To convey the emotional and psychological impact of Partition, the use of Symbols has proven itself to be beneficiary for both the authors and readers. The authors were able to articulate emotions which were difficult to depict directly through words, and the readers were able to feel

the true essence of such a phenomenon, something which again would have been difficult only through language.

The primary symbols of borders, homes, trains and blood helped the readers explore Partition from a different lens, leading to their disillusionment as well at some level, along with the characters of the primary texts. 15th August 1947 has always been seen as a historical achievement on behalf of the nation, but this other side, the reality of it, also needed some light, to make the nation aware of the cost that this independence had on them. It led to the unification and division of people at the same time through trains and borders, as well as led to their collective loss of memory, culture and identity through the separation of their homes from them. The mass killings and violence out of sheer conflict and hatred among communities helped them understand the nature of blood, and how quickly years of love and harmony turned into hatred in days.

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