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Once Upon a Time: Cultural Legacies, Fictional Worlds of the Partition and Beyond

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Once upon a time, and a very good time it was, there was a Partition. And a very important Partition it was too. All the scholars agree from Timbuktu to Trincomalee. All the good children were born appropriately at the exact stroke of midnight. Tryst with destiny and all that razzmatazz. Many were born later, mostly *bad-tameez desis*. We must refuse to even acknowledge them. Some were born earlier. As if in anticipation. So that they were ripe for the Partition when it came. There was a lot of to-do, pow-wow and much sob-sob. Everybody then lived unhappily ever after. Period. The credits roll and the story will continue in the next episode as we are promised more Partitions to come.

This is a story my father told me. He sowed the dragon's teeth and my generation reaps the harvest. We suffer the consequences. Partition is a story which makes Baby Tuckoo out of all of us. Brought up on such stories, I revisit all this frequently, much too often for comfort. It is only against such a background that I can read the Partition in

Urdu literature, especially fiction, which narrates the Partition through and in multitudinous texts. All said and done about the Partition, it is those literary texts which continue to haunt me. There is no getting away from it. It turns up in unexpected places. It comes in all shapes and colours. After so many years, it still lurks in the shadows and looms around the corner, waiting to grab you unawares. I would rather confront it, face it rather than flee or beat a hasty retreat.

To begin with, the Partition is History with a capital H. For my generation it is the Great Given. No need to hark back to the time before the lines were drawn and battle out the long-drawn arguments on its validity. Now that it's there, what next? How to read it in the books that it inspired and how to read the books which flowed out of and with the tumultuous events? More often than not, the Partition is seen as either a beginning or an end. The Beginners are the historians and scholars who signpost it as the emergence of the new nation-state, the dawn of a new day. The Enders deplore and lament it as the end of a secular South Asia, where different castes and creeds had lived harmoniously for thousands of years. It is the sheer dichotomy between the two positions, which I find unsettling. Clearly it's a beginning as well as an end. In my end is my beginning and in my beginning, my end. Like a serpent swallowing its tail. You don't know where to begin and can start from anywhere.

So where do you begin? From the Partition itself. I would like to start from the actual events, rather than any fixed or inviolable ideological position. The facts are well known but let me recapitulate what for me are some of the defining features. The handing over of power to local representatives in India by British authorities was a hasty affair, for one reason or another, many of the long-term consequences were not thought out by the perpetrators. Not only much unresolved business was left behind to

create a long-standing feud, the shape of the newly created dominions, as they were called, ensured the uprooting of what is described as the largest exodus in modern human history. Sheer numbers or Biblical references fail to do justice to the suffering in human terms, as the displacement was accompanied by mayhem on a scale unprecedented in a country much prone to violence. Who knows how many died, how many men subjected to brutalization and pillage, and how many women became victims of abduction and rape. But matters did not end there. A diaspora had been triggered off and the generations have continued to be indirectly affected by the announcement made at the stroke of the midnight hour. After *Midnight's Children*, came the *Children of After the Midnight*, and so on. The emotions unleashed in 1947, or the ones reaching their climax in those events, remained unabated on both sides and contributed to other partitions, most significantly to the events of 1971, a second Partition. And who knows what next? The name of Kamleshwar's Hindi novel haunts me as an unrequited but unanswered question: *Aur Kitnay Pakistan?* By all accounts, 1947 was the Mother of All Partitions.

Beyond itself, what *was* the Partition? Was it a cause or an effect? Was it the mother or a child? Certainly, it was an incision which dissected out the new inception, Pakistan, out of the parent-body of India. The analogy of a Cesarean section was used by Mumtaz Shirin in one of her short stories. This generally fine critic who studied the literature around the Partition described the large-scale violence that ensued with the events as symbolizing the loss of blood which accompanies a surgical procedure. Such symbolism seems heavy, oversimplified. It is the accompanying violence, its scope and its scale, which puts to shame the ideologically-minded scholars who would like nothing better than to describe the emergence of Pakistan as an Immaculate Conception. Not by a far cry.

Shouldn't a critic as perceptive as Shirin have shown greater sensitivity to the discernable difference between hemorrhage and blood-letting? Bifurcated and dissected, Partition itself has been partitioned with different stakeholders laying claim to different parts. But who will gather the limbs of Osiris?

As we move from the topography of the events to the barest reference to a fictional artifact, we are crossing from one plane to another. The transition is swift if somewhat jerky and we do not immediately realize that we are crossing the date-line. The Partition is open to a multitude of possibilities and several readings. I would like to differentiate between two different discourses—on the one hand a socio-political analysis, and on the other, the study of the Partition as a literary phenomenon. The two are obviously related and intertwined closely so that it is not possible to artificially dissect the two, but having said that, I would also like to point out the ensuing confusion when the terms of one are admixed with those of the other. Switching one for the other is the main reason why some analysts/critics over-burden it with their pet peeves, ideological or otherwise. They read various trends and patterns in the literary texts about what they think happened or what should have/ have not taken place. Without denigrating other possibilities, I would like to focus on the Life and Times of the Partition as a literary phenomenon, particularly in the context of Urdu.

It doesn't take a literary critic to recognize the immense outpouring of fiction and poetry in Urdu focusing on the events of 1947 and the related consequences. Readers not directly conversant with Urdu can have access to representative works through a number of anthologies, out of which I would like to specially refer to *An Unwritten Epic*, the Penguin selection by Muhammad Umar Memon, and the large Urdu sampling available in Alok Bhalla's three volumes of *Stories About the Partition of India*. While

these and others amply serve the non-Urdu reader at large, what about Urdu itself? There is no such collection available in the very language these works were originally written in. Here one could refer to the sadly instructive fate of *Zulmat-e-Neem Roz*, the anthology *Mumtaz Shirin* edited but failed to see printed in her lifetime, but let me return to it later.

The Partition rode on a high wave in the Urdu short story. The social realism accentuated by the Progressive writers had prepared the ground and the traumatic events opened up a new vein by the major short-story writers of the period: Saadat Hasan Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Ismat Chughtai as well as scores of others. In stories such as '*Thanda Gosht*' and '*Khol Do*', Manto perfected his art to create taut, compact narratives going beyond the search for the lost ideals of humanism to a quest for what constituted the human, while '*Toba Tek Singh*' goes beyond political questions to what is essentially the human condition. While these stories mark an ascending point in Manto's career, for Krishan Chander, the once much-admired stories '*Hum Wehshi Hain*' and '*Peshawar Express*' now seem artistically weak, marking the beginning of this writer's decline. He returned to the theme a few years later in his short novel *Ghaddar*, better crafted than his earlier works, but his vision remains essentially political. Bedi's powerful '*Lajwanti*' was written somewhat later, and remains one of the best stories from his early period. In her few stories around this theme, Ismat Chughtai did not achieve the distinction of her best work from the same period.

Following closely on their heels were other prominent writers who have at least one remarkable short story around this theme: Aziz Ahmad ('*Kaali Raat*'); Hayatullah Ansari ('*Shukr Guzar Ankhain*'), Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi ('*Parmeshar Singh*'); Upendra Nath Ashk ('*Tableland*'); Jamila Hashmi ('*Ban-bas*'), and Ashfaq Ahmed who

authored 'Gadariya', one of the best-known stories from the period. There are other lesser-known but distinguished writers such as the enigmatic Jawaida Jafri, who authored the unusual story, 'Jagay Paak Parwardigar', but never repeated her success.

Most of these stories focus on the riots, the brutality, the barbarism, the dehumanization and the heroics of some characters against a politically charged backdrop and the pain of being uprooted as a consequence of communal violence. No wonder the Urdu critics used the label of *Fasadat Kay Afsaney*, 'Riot Literature', to describe such writings. This is the term used by Muhammad Hasan Askari and Mumtaz Shirin. Askari took up the interesting position that *fasadat* as such could not be the subject of literature and then went on to develop a reading of Manto's short stories, especially the vignettes in *Siah Hashiay*, which focus exclusively on these themes. In using the term *Fasadat Ka Adab*, the riots were highlighted as the main occurrence, rather than the Partition itself, which may have been seen as a cause rather than the effect, perhaps even a transient phase. History proved it to be the other way around.

While the short stories examined under each may remain the same, as a category Partition literature is broader than *Fasadat Ka Adab*. It is based on historicity and this makes it vulnerable to manipulation. In the Introduction to his anthology, Bhalla makes a distinction between the histories written by the apologists of Pakistan and its bitter opponents: 'If the first set of histories read like incantations, the second work like old demonologies.'

Consider this Introduction with Memon's Preface as a study in contrasting methods and the different purposes the Partition is put to. Bhalla begins by regarding 'The Partition of the Indian subcontinent (as) the single most traumatic experience in our recent history', and goes on to say that '(The) real sorrow of the Partition was that it

brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history.'

Memon's Preface records his dissatisfaction with what he calls 'ideological underpinnings' working as 'as a sort of distorting filter', without going into the details of which books he is referring to and what those pronouncements are. He complains of inadequate translations but then takes an even more tantalizing position when he terms two well-known short stories of Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi and Bedi as 'poorly written'. His vehement dismissal of narrow nationalistic aspirations is offered as a sharp contrast to the positions taken by other critics whom he does not name. The difference in their points of view is not so much a question of different temperaments but fundamentally in their ways of reading the Partition. Bhalla's complaint against the two sets of histories holds true for the anthologies, or at least their introductions.

The manipulation of literature in favour of a particular point of view is also borne out by the problem Shirin faced with her selection. Mumtaz Shirin had edited a special issue of her journal *Naya Daur* devoted to the riots, and she spent much time and energy writing about these fictions, making it her special area of study. Based on her critical analysis she put together a collection of what she considered the representative and important works of fiction, but as her selection was never printed, there is only anecdotal evidence and speculation as to its fate. The story goes that the anthology was submitted for publication to a quasi-governmental body but one of the bureaucrats reigning over there objected to the inclusion of a story by Krishan Chander on the grounds that it went 'against Pakistan' and the editor was asked to remove it. This was ironic as Shirin had singled out this particularly story as being weak in terms of its craftsmanship but as it was a representative story by one of the best-known writers of the day, she was not willing to delete it all together. The

resulting stalemate led to the anthology being shelved and even the manuscript was lost so that years later, I had to dig out all the references from Shirin's essays to assemble a loose collection on the lines that she had worked on initially.

I have often thought about what befell Shirin's selection, wondering if it amounted to a sort of censorship, an attempt to rewrite the past. An imaginary past, ideologically correct, with its *qibla* in the right direction. Call it the riots, or the Partition, the literature around this set of events has been prone to manipulation for reasons which have less to do with literature and more with ideological positioning of the critics involved. However, this brings us to another twist in the tale. In the first instance the Partition had been written as a story, a tale which needed to be told, and then we see the Partition as the frame of stories as it provides the reference for an assessment of particular stories. This change marks a turn in the fortunes of the Partition.

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So we have two Partitions then. The Partition as a story. And the Partition as the frame of stories. I want to move another step and look at another stage in the literary career of the Partition. This is the stage of *Beyond the Partition*, reading through the Partition in order to take a broader view, and this is best seen in the works of two powerful fiction-writers who transcend the entire category of Partition literature. These two writers are Qurratulain Hyder and Intezar Husain. Both follow on the heels of the writers mentioned above in strictly chronological terms as the former established her reputation on the eve of the Partition and the latter, just in the wake of the Partition. And the dividing line is important to both. Qurratulain Hyder does not have any single short story which could be regarded as an example of Partition literature, while

Intezar Husain's long story 'Bin Likhi Rizmiya' (An Unwritten Epic) was much admired by Shirin Qurratulain Hyder's best-known novel, and undoubtedly the most widely read novel in Urdu, *Aag Ka Darya* can be regarded with Husain's works as the epitome of *Fasadat Kay Afsaney* or Partition literature, as they fulfil the demands of this category and transcend/break open this category by taking it beyond Partition to a broader view of history of which Partition is one component. These two writers represent the pinnacle of achievement in Urdu fiction and we can even ask if Urdu fiction has really moved beyond these two?

Unlike the earlier *fasadat* writers, a discernable political stance is not merely a balancing act in these two writers, but it develops as their narrative technique. The Partition is a part of the story, not the entire narrative in both writers. While I am taking their names together, I do not want to set them up as a contrasting pair. There is no need for another *mawazna-e-Anees-o-Dabir* between the two as the Urdu-wallahs are prone to. While I consider both to be important in their individual capacity, I am also not suggesting that they are writers of equal stature.

The differences and similarities between the two pose interesting questions. *Aag Ka Darya* also serves as a dividing line between Hyder's earlier and her more mature, later work. It consumes and transcends the early period mocked and savaged by Ismat Chughtai as Pom Pom Darling. The novel remains unmatched for the brightness and sparkle of its prose and the narrative technique based on her concept of time as a continuum. Qurratulain Hyder's fiction is derived from her reading of history as a narrative; it, therefore, takes a longer view of the Partition. Intezar Husain focuses on the Partition in his novel *Basti* in a manner which goes beyond the eternal present of the *fasadat* to situations which are derived from and based in history, so we have 1857 on the one hand and

1971 on the other. Intezar Husain's major novel, *Basti*, is a mid-career work, and bears an interesting relationship to the writer's other work. It draws on a number of themes from the writer's earlier and successful short stories in a manner where the author can be seen to be cannibalizing his own previous work to some extent. Although, in a number of instances portions of the novel cover the same ground, but the different components connect together to form a unified whole. Breaking out of the conventional framework of time, *Basti* contemplates historical time giving way to miraculous time.

Another point of contact between the two is the richness and multiplicity of their past, or pasts, as both seem to have access to more than one. Their techniques show the influence of the traditions of the ancient East as well as the modern European novel. Neither of them wants to give up one for the sake of the other and the ease with which they freely move from one to the other is especially difficult to grasp for Urdu critics who are inclined to be myopic and seem to resent the fact that these writers defy the straitjacketing of categories. Hence, some Urdu critics still discuss and debate whether *Aag Ka Darya* is written in the stream of consciousness technique and whether *Basti* can actually be called a novel in the strict sense.

As fiction writers bracketed together by the same time-period, I would like to suggest that the experience of reading one can illuminate and enrich the reading of the other and provide us with a richer and more complex perspective. For this purpose, I would like to read together the opening scenes and the conclusions of the two novels.

Let us read the beginnings. But if we can only identify them as such. The novelist Amos Oz has pondered over this question and in his book *The Story Begins* he frames this question:

But what ultimately is a beginning? Can there exist, in principle, a proper beginning to any story at all? Isn't there

always, without exception, a latent beginning-before-the-beginning? A foreword to the introduction to the prologue? A pre-Genesis occurrence?

This is how *Basti* establishes what Oz has called 'the opening contract':

When the world was still new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds, how astonished he was, looking all around, that everything was so new, and yet looked so old. Blue jays, woodpeckers, peacocks, doves, squirrels, parakeets—it seemed that they were as young as he, yet they carried the secrets of the ages.

The opening scene is rooted in the childhood of the protagonist, for whom this is a more real and intense period in his life than any other. But even before the story begins, a beginning has been made. A beginning with the world on the eve of creation.

The opening contract of *River of Fire* is invested in an insect rich in allusions:

It was the first *beerbahauti* of the season that Gautam had seen. The prettiest of rain-insects, clothed in god's own red velvet, the *beerbahauti* was called the Bride of Indira, Lord of the Clouds.

This insect is no stranger as we encounter it in a memorable location in *Basti*, this time more symbolic than mythological, signifying the ideal of beauty that Zakir, Afzal, and their friends would like to have their country achieve:

'I'm about to have some acres allotted to me. One acre will be given over to beds of roses. One acre will be only for rain-bugs.'

'Rain-bugs?' Irfan looked at him sarcastically.

'Fellow! Be quiet! You won't be able to understand this. In the rainy season I roam around very anxiously. There don't seem to be any rain-bugs here. There ought to be rain-bugs. We have to make Pakistan beautiful.' Then, changing

his tone, he addressed them both: 'Listen! You too will stay with me. This is my command. I, and you two,'

'And the rain-bugs,' Irfan interrupted.

'Yes, and the rain-bugs. In beautiful Pakistan there will be only beautiful people.' (Chapter 9)

You don't really have to step out of the novel to realize that the impossibility of the situation: in the-less-than-beautiful Pakistan, there are no beautiful people. There are no rain-bugs either. Gautam had put the *beerbahauti* on a leaf and sent it floating down the river. Did it get left behind at the time of the Partition? Its disappearance is again taken up in a later story, *Allah Mian Ki Shehzadi*, included in the collection *Scheherzade Kay Naam*. A young girl and boy, on the edge of puberty, trade *beerbahautis* for a papaya, and the exchange turns daring as the boy touches the girl's clean tongue to see it devoid of any spittle—the closest that any character of Intezar Husain's has come to each other in physical proximity—when suddenly the story is transported and the reader is jolted into the realization that this is the realm of memory which has just been splintered by the narrator/author's wife watching television at high volume and commenting on the news. The news, too, is about strained relations between India and Pakistan, amounting to further difficulties for travellers across the border, which in the post-Partition world have solidified into the absolute, in spite of all the *beerbahautis*. The shattered memory cannot be restored, except to recollect that the *beerbahautis* have died, their death symbolizes the loss of the childhood innocence, replaced by the politically charged colourless present.

But the *beerbahauti* is a later interpolation. Or import. It is simply not there in the opening scene of *Aag Ka Darya*, which establishes its contract through different terms. This is why I want to plead the case for considering *Aag Ka Darya* and *River of Fire* as two separate books, parallel but distinct. The twain never did meet.

The beginning having been established, let us move towards the end. To come to the closure of *Basti*, which is intriguing in itself:

'Yaar,' he said to Irfan, 'I want to write her a letter.'

'Now?' Irfan stared into his face.

'Yes, now.'

'Now when...' he paused in the midst of his sentence, then took a different tack. 'Before...' confused, he fell silent.

Before—he tried to get it clear in his mind—before—before the parting of her hair fills with silver, and the birds fall silent, and the keys rust, and the doors of the streets are shut—and before the silver cord is loosed, and the golden bowl is shattered, and before the pitchers broken at the well, and the sandalwood tree, and the snake in the ocean, and—

'Why are you silent?' Irfan was gazing steadily at him.

'Silence,' Afzal, placing a finger on his lips, signaled Irfan to be silent. 'I think we will see a sign.'

'A sign? What sign can there be now?' Irfan said with bitterness and despair.

'Fellow, signs always come at just these times, when all around...' he paused in the middle of his speech. Then he said in a whisper, 'This is the time for a sign...'

It reverts and connects back to the Biblical language of the opening. The weight of the scene hangs on the sign. Our expectations aroused, we are confronted by questions: What does it mean and why now? Will it really take place? Or perhaps the sign already occurred—when Zakir wants to write a letter. This is the first indication of a stirring within him, a deeper connection with relationships and feelings. Zakir who is accused by many critics as being devoid of action, is now guilty of having thought of an action. True to his character, he has not actually carried out the act—of writing the letter—but he has spoken of it to his friends. It is also significant that he discusses this intimate or almost intimate gesture with a friend. He has this sense of urgency that he needs to this 'before...' But

before what? This he does not articulate. As this is never specified, there is a sense of foreboding, which is reinforced by the Biblical language, going back full-circle to the opening contract. *Basti* is an open-ended novel. There is no final and firm closure of the narrative sequence, indicating multiple possibilities in the ending.

The word in the original is *basharat* with its strong religious and metaphysical reference and with it is posed the question of will there be or won't there be... '*basharat ho gi kay nahin?*' The question at the end of *Basti* is the unanswered question of Partition literature—did the miracle take place or not? By not answering the question, the novel says it all.

Now read it with the closure of *Aag Ka Darya*. The mastery of the narrative form and control over technique is displayed best in the novel's conclusion as the writer brings together the various threads to weave together a final scene. It closes the long, historical narrative and its irrevocable finality contributes to the sense of tragedy it highlights. The Partition as tragedy.

As the action of the novel moves ahead, Kamal has travelled to India from Karachi after the Partition. He avoids meeting his old friends who meet again in a grotto of the Shravasti forest, in a scene which parallels their meeting in the opening scene of the novel. As they begin to talk they comment on Kamal and his visit:

'Kamal has deserted us. Betrayed his friends, gone away for good and let us down. Together, we could have challenged the galaxies.'

'We have all betrayed one another,' Gautam replied quietly. Can these Western visitors to Shravasti understand the pain in our souls? In India's, in Kamal's, in mine?'

They watched the river ripple past. Words were temporary and transitory. Languages fade away or are forced into oblivion by new tongues. Men also come and go, even the river and the jungle are not eternal. After fifty years a jungle of concrete may spring up here. The river may dry

up or shrink or change course, just as human beings disappear or change the direction of their journeys.

*Ghazalan, tum to waqif ho, kaho Majnoon ke murney ki,
Ditwana mar gaya, aakhir ko, veeranay pe kya guzri*
(O beautiful deer, please tell us about the demise of the
infatuated one,
He left but what was the fate of the wilderness behind
him.)

With this famous couplet, the scene tends to become a patch of purple prose. The two characters imagine Kamal in Karachi, with more than a touch of cynicism and certainly with less than approval, 'dancing with some lovely begum in the Karachi Gymkhana.'

Kamal is awkwardly placed here, but this sense of awkwardness was far more memorable in the Urdu version, specially the two lines which are placed quietly in the middle of the scene and are low-key and thus achieve a powerful effect:

*Shaid woh donon ikhattey soch rahey thay keh Abul Mansur
Kamaluddin kis tarah Hindustan main dakhil hua tha aur kis tarha
Hindustan say nikal gaya.*

(They were both probably wondering about how Abul Mansur Kamaluddin had arrived in Hindustan and how he had left.)

These lines present the central theme of the novel without much fanfare. These are placed in between descriptions of the scene—two men throwing pebbles in the river and watching their reflections broken into expanding circles. The Urdu version closes with:

*Woh mundair par se utra. Us nay aik lamba saans liya aur ahista
ahista qadam rakhta basti ki taraf wapas chala gaya.*
(He climbed off the boundary wall. He took a deep breath
and taking slow steps, headed back towards the town.)

Basti ki taraf. The road does lead towards Intezar Husain's *Basti* and perhaps it is what lies beyond, the next step, which was also the next step in history.

The end of *Aag Ka Darya* too is an unanswered question: How or why did he leave? *Woh kaisay chala gaya*—This is a great walk-over. Is he abdicating from his story/history?

Henceforth history will be his absence. And the River of Fire is still a sheet of scalding wet heat. We are still undecided. The Partition likes me. The Partition likes me not. The Partition has left me. The Partition has left me not. Will there be a sign?