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Keywords: Partition, Migrants, Subcontinent, Sense of Loss, Displacement and Coping Strategies

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Between Home and Exile: Liminal Spaces in the Narrative Literature of Partition in Sub-Continent in 1947



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Abstract

The present study is aimed to trace out the stages of liminality in the narrative literature of the partition in the subcontinent in 1947. The major theoretical insights have been taken from Homi K Bhabha's concept of postcolonial Liminality. The data has been collected through interviews from the migrants of partition, on friend a friend sampling model, currently living in Punjab, Pakistan. It has been found that all the migrants had to undergo the three stages of liminality. The present study reveals the sense of loss and displacement faced by the migrants had been long lasting. Even after the lap of Seventy Eight years since the partition most of these migrants are in the liminal stage. It also reveals that the coping strategies of trauma were adopted by these migrants to mitigate their sense of loss and longing but could never come up with the sense of loss of their home.

Keywords: *Partition, Migrants, Subcontinent, Sense of Loss, Displacement and Coping Strategies*

Introduction

The phenomenon of migration has been a constant factor in human history. The human progress from caves to dales and then to cities is definitely an example of the early history of migration. But with the invention of wheels, the history of migration and migrants got an accelerated momentum. Since both colonial and post-colonial times, the situation of migration has become an integral part of human history. Like the migratory movements in the world, the partition of the Indian Sub-Continent in 1947 remains one of the most traumatic, violent, and transformative events in South Asian history. Engineered through the hurried withdrawal of British colonial rule and the haphazard and arbitrary drawing of borders by the Radcliffe Commission, Partition divided British Raj India into two independent nation-states, i.e. India and Pakistan. This political decision unleashed one of the largest and most chaotic mass migrations in human history. Such a migration was unparalleled in human history on many grounds. In colonial times, except for the forced migration, it had been for the sake of rule as well, i.e. the English people who migrated from Britain to India as a part of the British Raj. Many of them did not move back to their home, i.e. Great Britain. In the Subcontinent, the British Raj remained for nearly ninety-seven years. A young British Army officer or Bureaucrat of the age of thirty years in the 1870s would never have imagined that the British Raj in India would end in 1947. So many army officers and Bureaucrats never moved back to England at the time of their retirement and consequently settled in India as a long-established colony of *Great Britain*. Even in the present times, there are many graves of "*the English White people*" in nearly all districts of both Pakistan and India. Fort Munro in Pakistan is a less-travelled mountainous area of the district Dera Ghazi Khan, Punjab, Pakistan, which has a graveyard where "*the English people*" are buried and is named as "*Gora Qabaristan*" (*The graveyard of the white people*). Similarly, in the district of Layyah is the grave of Col. Ras, who worked as commissioner in the district of Layyah during colonial times. During the partition in the subcontinent, there was migration on the grounds of religion. There was migration on the forced grounds as well. There was a migration in the name of cultural

homogeneity. There was migration on the linguistic affinity as well. It had been both voluntary and involuntary migration.

There were three waves of migration which took place during this partition of 1947. In the first wave, pertaining to the impending partition, the people started migrating to the proposed Pakistan and India much before the announcement of the partition of these nation-states by the British Empire. Therefore, the first wave of migration was painful but was a voluntary migration in nature. The second wave of migration happened in immediate response to the announcement of India and Pakistan as nation-states by the British Empire. It was tragic, violent and massive. Approximately, fifteen million people were displaced, and more than a million lost their lives in communal violence that engulfed Punjab, Bengal, and other regions (Talbot & Singh, 2009). Neighbours turned into enemies, friends into strangers, and homes into forbidden spaces almost overnight. The sheer scale of human suffering marked by massacres, abductions, sexual violence, and forced conversions left deep scars on the collective psyche of the subcontinent, which is a permanent mark of history similar in nature to the holocaust of the West. Whereas the third wave of migration was, though painful, safer as it took place in the escort of the army from the camps of the migrants to designated places across the borders. While a large population of “the white English people”, both serving and non-serving to the British, seeing the violent and disturbing situation in the Sub-continent, migrated back to their homeland, even after serving and settling for a long time in India. Thus, the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 comes out as an event of large-scale migration both for the coloniser and the colonised, i.e. the Muslims, the Hindus and the English. Hence, beyond its political and demographic consequences, partition profoundly unsettled the social, cultural, and emotional fabric of the subcontinent. It destroyed not only physical homes but also moral worlds, ethical certainties, and systems of belonging. Families were split across borders, women were abducted and exchanged, children were orphaned, and entire communities were uprooted from ancestral lands (Butalia, 2000). The trauma of this migration did not end with the cessation of violence; instead, it continued to haunt survivors through memory, silence, and intergenerational transmission. As Butalia (2000) observes, the history of partition in the subcontinent is as much a history of silences and suppressed pain as it is of political negotiations and territorial division.

Partition literature, including short stories, novels, memoirs, and oral testimonies, does not merely document historical events but attempts to grapple with the psychic, moral, and existential dislocation produced by this migratory event. Writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bhisham Sahni, and many others presented a world in which familiar structures of meaning collapsed, and individuals were forced into states of radical uncertainty and vulnerability (Manto, 1997; Pritam, 2009; Sidhwa, 1988; Singh, 2006; Sahni, 2001). Their narratives foreground ordinary people as refugees, women, children, madmen, and marginal figures who are caught in the vortex of history and compelled to navigate a reality where ethical boundaries dissolve, and survival becomes the primary imperative.

To understand this situation of profound instability and disorientation, the anthropological concept of liminality offers a theoretical framework for the present study. The concept of liminality was first articulated by Arnold van Gennep (1960) in his study of rites of passage and later elaborated by Victor Turner (1969) refers to the threshold phase in a ritual process as a transitional state in which individuals are separated from their previous social positions but have not yet been incorporated into new ones. In this in-betweenness phase, normal social structures are suspended, hierarchies are destabilised, and identities become fluid. (Chakraborty, 2022)

Turner (1969) describes liminality as a realm of ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy, where individuals exist “betwixt and between” established categories. Although originally developed to analyse ritual transitions, the concept has since been widely applied in cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and literary criticism to examine moments of social rupture, displacement, and identity crisis.

When applied to the historical and literary context of Partition, liminality emerges as a powerful lens through which to understand both the experience and its representation (Nigam, 2025). Partition can be read as a mass liminal event, a collective passage in which millions were abruptly thrust into a state of transition without the promise of stable reintegration. Spatially, newly drawn borders, refugee camps, trains, and no-man’s lands became liminal zones where the authority of the state was uncertain, law was suspended, and violence flourished (Singh, 2006). These spaces were neither fully one nation nor the other, neither home nor entirely foreign. The train, for instance, appears repeatedly in Partition narratives as both a vehicle of rescue and a site of massacre,

functioning as a moving threshold between life and death, safety and danger, humanity and brutality (Singh, 2006). The present study is not based on the fictional short stories created by the writers but on the narratives of the migrants who passed through the process of this migration and had seen the partition and the process of this migration through their own eyes.

Research Questions

The following are the main research questions.

1. How did the migrants of the subcontinent's partition deal with the rites of separation, rites of transition (Marge) and rites of incorporation (Aggregation)?
2. Which liminal perspectives did the migrants have to face during and post-partition times?
3. Why were the migrants excluded from the status system in Pakistan?

Literature Review

Gennep (1960) opines that liminality is just one part of a larger process of migration. He divides the process of migration into three phases, i.e. rites of separation (separation), rites of transition (Marge), and rites of incorporation (aggregation). Restating this schema, he also calls these same phases “pre-liminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and post-liminal rites. Gennep is of the view “Whoever passes from one zone to the other finds himself physically and mentally in a special situation for a certain length of time, i.e. the wavers between two worlds” (Gennep: 1960). Bhabha (2012) has redefined the concepts of cultural hybridity and social liminality in his work, *The Location of Culture*, as a situation of “third space”. Instead of exclusion and rejection, the new space, thus, has the capacity and tendency to include and accept as well.

Bhabha has candidly observed that the migrant experiences are full of dualities. He brings out the uncanniness of the migrant experience through a series of ideas like ‘half-life’, ‘partial presence’, ‘gathering the past’, ‘edge of foreign cultures’ and other such experiences that the migrants go through. The migrants live a ‘half-life’ in a foreign land as they are not able to accept the new land completely. Their memories of their homeland haunt them, and many times they live by reviving their past. This experience of living a partial life is sometimes very disturbing for the migrants.

According to Turner (1969), “attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.” In this way, such migrants become outsiders, in a strange sense are kept at a distance sometimes literally from the “social reality”. Similarly, Cuthell (2011) opined on the differences between the properties of liminality and those of the status system in terms of a series of binary oppositions or discriminations.

These can be ordered as follows.

Status system	Liminality
State	Transition
Totality	Partiality
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Structure	Communities
Anonymity	systems of nomenclature
Property	Absence of property
Status	Absence of status
Distinctions of rank	Absence of rank
Pride of position	Humility
Speech	Silence
Avoidance of pain and suffering	Acceptance of pain and suffering

(Cuthell, 2011, *Difference between Status System & Liminality*)

We see that liminal remains at the juncture of suffering, including identity and social exclusion. While an individual on the side of the status system enjoys the positive edge of the binary system. The same has been the case with the migrants of the partition of the sub-continent. Those who were well settled in Pakistan or India before the partition had to face a difficult situation of trauma on account of migration across the borders of the newly established states of India and Pakistan. (S., V., & Meenakshi, T. P. 2025). With the change in the status system, the migrants got the status of liminality, silence and heterogeneity.

Research Methodology

The present study is qualitative in nature. Data was collected through interviews with migrants of the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. The informants of the study were 80 years of age or older. They were approached through a friend-of-a-friend technique. The researcher travelled in person to various areas of District Layyah. The researcher contacted the informants of the study and obtained their consent to participate in the study. The researcher had a session of interviews with the informants of the study outside their home under shady trees, where they usually spend their leisure time on big wooden cots called “Hamacha” in indigenous culture. Mostly, the informants of the study were the elderly members who were around eighty years old or older. Some of them were also suffering from different diseases and hearing issues, coupled with problems of articulation. So, the researcher had to read the interview questions loudly in their languages, i.e. Punjabi. Sometimes, the researcher had to repeat the questions two or three times in order to be intelligible enough for them. The researcher got them recorded through a recorder, which was placed in a suitable place. The researcher tried to record them in a noise-free environment. For the thematic analysis of the data, the main theoretical insights have been taken from Gennep (1960) and Bhabha (1994)'s theory of liminality, with a focus on the sufferings and liminal positioning of the migrants (Zainab & Rind, 2024). The data has been transcribed and then translated into the English language for the convenience of readers across the world. The themes of liminality have been analysed and categorised from the collected data.

Practical Insights

The different chunks of the narratives related to the themes of liminality have been marked and reported in different categories. Now, we look at the major themes of liminality from the recorded narratives.

Respondent 1: Fazal Din

Respondent 2: Imam Bukhsh

Respondent 3: Muhammad Fazal

Respondent 4: Rehmat ullah

Respondent 5: Muhammad Yousif

Rites of Transition/Separation

1. Was it easy for you to leave your homes in India?

Respondent No	Statement in Punjabi	Translation in English
1	Assin bary khush see india. Chak wasda see tay sary saday dost sun. us waly hindu ve dost see tay sikh vee dost see. Tay jadwn allah nay sanwn halara ditte.	We were very happy in India. Chaks were full of life. All were our friends. Even Hindus were our friends. Even Sikhs were our friends. When God has shaken us.
2	Hindu vee see.unhan day Kathy kheyday see.Jadwn India chud k ay o othey rah gay tay unhan nu chudna asan nae see ga- mushkil see.	Hindus were there. We played with them. When we left India, they remained there. It was very difficult to leave them.
3	Nal ala pind sikhan da see. Unhan day mundian nal kheday see. O bari mushkil nal chudia see jadwn wadh	The adjoining town was of Sikhs. We played with the boys of Sikhs. We left that with a heavy heart when the massive slaughtering started. In other

	tuk shoro hoi. Dojahy chakan wich katal e aam shoro ho gya. Feer majboran ghar chudnay pay.	places, Chaks started massive killing. Then we have to leave our home under compulsion.
4	Ghar kon chud-da.saday kolown zaberdasti chuday gay. Gharan de judai sokhi nae hondi	No one leaves the home. We were made to leave our homes. It is not easy to separate from the home.
5	Nae jay asin ronday see gharan wal wakh k	No, we wept while seeing our homes.

According to Gennep (1960), the very first stage of liminality is disengagement. For the migrants, the partition proved to be a source of permanent separation from their long-established homes in India. Each of the five respondents was not willing to leave their home in India. As the birthplace develops an innate affection in individuals. This sense of affection was also developed among the selected participants of the study. All of the respondents reported that as Muslims, they were compelled to leave their homes in fear of the massive killing by Hindus and Sikhs. We see that the very first stage of liminality- disengagement- was a very reluctant one. Thus, the phenomenon of migration was not the sole outcome of religious nationalism and cultural configuration. We see that the migration was forced and quite traumatic. The process of disengagement from the soil of their homes in India was a very difficult one for these migrants.

Rites of transition /Marge

2. How did the people receive you when you migrated to Pakistan?

Respondent No	Statement in Punjabi	Translation in English
1	O khanday see pata nae assin kun aa gay han. Jay kisy kolwn koi shay mung vee lai tay khanday see ja agay ja gay. Loki kahnday see panahi ay nay	They (the local people in Pakistan) say, " Why did we come here. If we ask for something from them, they say go away, go away. People say that refugees have come (in a taunting manner). We were marked as refugees.
2	Itho day lokan da rawya ghalt see saday nal. Koi nae waran dainda see.	The attitude of the local people was not good toward us. No one allowed us to enter the streets and land for camps.
3	Loki sanwn ajnabi sumjhday sun	People consider us as strangers.
4	Chay maheny asan berian day thaly katy see tay sanwn koi waran nae danda see	We spent six months under the trees of " beri", and no one allowed us to enter their land or home.
5	O tay sady kolwn munh he mor lainday see	They turn their faces away from us.

The second stage of liminality is transition or Marge. In this, the migrants remain in unstable conditions. The existing culture and people do not accept the upcoming culture and people. In the present context, we observed that the migrants were not received well here in Pakistan. They were labelled as "panahi" (Refugees) in Pakistan. This label was not charged by the government but by the public in whose contact the migrants were. They considered the migrants as strangers and ultimately turned their backs on them socially. Consequently, the migrants faced the state of marge and ambiguity- the second stage of the liminal process. During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') is ambiguous" (Turner,1969)

Rites of incorporation / Aggregation

3 Do you still long for your homes in India?

Respondent No	Statement in Punjabi	Translation in English
1	Tay hun ve jadwn sanwn o ghar mal tay faslain yad aowndian nay tay sati akh khul jandi ay. Saday dil hali v othy nay.	Even now, when we remember our home, cattle and crops, our eyes are sleepless. Our hearts are still there (in our homes in India).
2	Han dil tan krda ay. Lakin hunr o thawan kithay rah gya howan.	Yes, we have strong longings. But now, where would those places have been?
3	India nu jawar da bara dil krda	We wish to go to India.
4	Did not respond	Did not respond
5	Hun tay sada ay he ghar hoya	Now this is our home.

It has been observed in the narratives of the migrants that they have a strong sense of going back to India, but at the same time, they have developed some sort of loyalty towards where they are settled now. Out of five respondents, three reported that they still wish to go to India to see those places of reminiscence. They have developed a fluid and dual sense of identity -liminal. This liminal space helps towards the development of connecting or belonging. We see that although social assimilation occurred, it was at a lesser level. In terms of Gennep, the migrants of the subcontinent remained “foreigners” and uprooted. The migrants could not get social incorporation in its full sense.

4 Where are the graves of your parents? If in India, do you long to go there?

Respondent No	Statement in Punjabi	Translation in English
1	Walid de qabar othay india ay tay.walida de qabar ithay Pakistan ay. Man lay aya see walida nu	The grave of the father is in India. The grave of my mother is in Pakistan. I brought my mother with me.
2	Walid sb nu hindwan wadh chudia see. Sanwn tay ay vee nae pata jo oo dafan vee hoy sun kh nae	Hindus killed my father. I am not sure whether he is buried or not
3	Walid sb see Indian army ich see. Jadu takseem shoro hoi walid sb nu unhan bola lia tay idhrwn takseem shoro ho gai asin a gay tay walid sb da nae pata.	Our father was in the Indian army. When the partition started. The Indian army called him. Meanwhile, the partition started, and we left India. We do not know about the father.
4	Unhan dian kabran ithey Pakistan nay	Their graves are in Pakistan.
5	Man yateem ho gya see. Mery walidain dian kabran othay india nay. Tay jan nu ve dill krda.	I was an orphan. The graves of my parents are in India. I strongly wish to go there.

All five respondents reported that they still remember their home and belongings in India.

Even the graves of their parents are in India. They have had a strong desire to visit the graves of their forefathers in India. We see that these migrants have had half their history in India and half their history in Pakistan. It was a strange situation for these Mohajirs(Migrants of the partition) that they had never imagined that a historical event(Event of partition) would compel them to leave their home forever. They would have never imagined that they would never come back to their long-established home. In case of post colonial migration/s, the immigrants can visit their homeland whenever they wish, but the case of migration in the partition was unparalleled and unprecedented, as it was a situation of never “Return”.

Discussion

From the analysis of the data, it has been found that partition proved purely a liminal phenomenon for the migrants of the Sub-continent, not only to the Hindus and the Muslims but also to other minority groups like the Sikh and Parsee (Zurtasht) community living in India at that time. The groups in the majority moving across the borders, though, were homeless but having at least a sense of association and affinity on account of religious grounds. But those who were in the minority, as in the case of Sikhs and Parsees, had to face a more grievous situation of social exclusion and discrimination. They had to face not only the trauma of murder and migration, but also all the sorts of discursive strategies that were practised on them. This identifies their state of social exclusion and minimisation. These migrants had continually been shifting from one place to another, which refers to their failure of social incorporation in Pakistan. All the informants of the study to whom the researcher contacted had been continuously shifting from India to the Muhajir camps, from Muhajir camps to their relatives and from relatives to the present place of residence. Furthermore, we find that the attitude of the people of Pakistan towards the migrants resulted in negative integration. These negative experiences include the opposing outlook of the public towards refugees, incidents of conflict, and the development of fear and insecurity in the social situation. We see that the narrative truly represents the experience, the suffering, and the feelings of the people who were the innocent victims of the partition (Khan, Riaz & Aslam, [2025](#)).

Conclusion

So, we come to the conclusion that these migrants had evolved as liminal individuals in Pakistan. Their social position was socially disturbed as the ones who do not hold clearly defined positions within their social system, feel marginalised, excluded and without identity or influence. As being in the initiate state of liminality (the person undergoing the ritual) is first stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual, inducted into the liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and reincorporated into society. In the case of the migrants of partition in the subcontinent, we see that their disengagement and social stripping away were compulsory; the transitional stage was full of suffering, and their new social status proved liminal.

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