

## Partition Stories: Epic Fragments and Revenge Tragedies (A Review Article)

*An Epic Unwritten: The Penguin Book of Partition Stories From Urdu.*

Edited and translated by MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998. 370 pp. Rs. 250.

UNQUESTIONABLY, the one historical event of the century that relentlessly haunts the Subcontinent's psyche is the horror wrought by Partition, although the simple geopolitical fact itself has found broader acceptance, perhaps even closure. However, the very real communal polarization and mounting economic and political crises throughout India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have transformed the event into a fecund source of nostalgia, not to mention political apologetics. Although it is possible the recent surge of interest in Partition is partly ideological, works like *An Epic Unwritten: The Penguin Book of Partition Stories*, edited and translated by Muhammad Umar Memon; *Orphans of the Storm: Stories on the Partition of India*, edited by Saros Cowasjee and K.S. Duggal; the two volume *India Partitioned*, edited by Mushirul Hasan; and the three volume *Stories About the Partition of India*, edited by Alok Bhalla have certainly enabled contemporary readers to remember, if not re-examine their knowledge of Partition.

*An Epic Unwritten*, a collection of short fiction drawn exclusively from Urdu, evenly represented by Indian and Pakistani writers belonging to the old guard as well as the midnight's-children-generation, offers a vision of Partition largely bracketed from the obvious rhetoric of history, the legacy of imperialism, and de-colonization. The stories seem to privilege the personalized, domestic experience of Partition, not unlike the

modernist aesthetic of much of our regional language literatures. Not that regional literatures inevitably shy away from large scale historical themes, but it appears that fiction and poetry in regional languages seem to be more at ease with themes of domesticity and private experience. Even a desultory glance at regional literature surveys reveals that although the literatures of the past one hundred years have been shaped by the national story in substantial ways, the excitement and optimism we discern in the pre-Independence literature quickly becomes restrained, as if some traumatic event has forced the writers to flee indoors from the perilous outdoors of history.

Consider the case of Malayalam literature, although existing on the southernmost periphery of the peninsula, writers there promptly responded to the freedom struggle, the Partition, and its aftermath. The novelist Kesava Dev's famous short story "Gusthy," for instance, dramatizes a wrestling match in a small town in Kerala, where the religious identities of the wrestlers cause a pointless discord between Hindus and Muslims at a village teashop. Each side mocks the other's sacred symbols. Not even Brahma can defeat our man Hussain, argues one side. Not even your Husain and your Allah can defeat our man Mekkattu, presses the other. Faced with a Hindu mob, the Hindu youth who actually brings the news of the match to the teashop, quickly declares himself to be a Hindu brother in order to protect himself, but when he refuses to take a knife to kill the Muslims, he himself is slain, as he declares that Muslims are also his brothers. Soon the whole village burns, the main characters are all cut down. When the dust settles, we see the younger survivors starting over, resolved not to repeat the madness of their elders. It is interesting to note that in his long, distinguished career as a novelist and theoretician of socialist realism, Kesava Dev seldom revisited the theme of national history, although his concerns were never far from it.

In the final moments in "Gusthy," when the younger survivors decide to forget the inexplicable "madness" and move on, the call for the erasure of memory comes in the form of a signboard prohibiting "madmen" from entering their new teashop. Indeed the signboard seems to signify not only the utter folly of the slaughter, but also an uneasy tendency to pathologize history and declare collective helplessness to the extent of writing it (off) as "madness."

Many of the seventeen stories gathered here by Muhammad Umar Memon reiterate Kesava Dev's diagnosis that it was all a "madness." With the exception of the half a dozen powerfully developed family stories gracing this collection, few pieces offer us any more clarity about Partition

than Mr. Kurtz's final utterance in *The Heart of Darkness*, "Horror, horror," a pronouncement which in turn echoes *The Duchess of Malfi*, a revenge tragedy contrived by the Renaissance playwright, John Webster. In fact, the horror in these European classics pales in comparison to the horror of Partition and the endless revenge tragedies that came to be enacted all over the redrawn map, but such events are absent from this collection, as if the writers represented here are afraid to confront the horror more openly. Had it been possible to offer more than vague hints about the politics of Partition in order to create a true epic narrative, perhaps the writers would not have concluded their stories by posting glib "No Madmen Admitted" signs, practically giving up, electing instead to deal with limited epiphany stories.

Indeed, the impossibility of the epic project is clearly advertised in the title of this collection, *An Epic Unwritten*, which, in reverse, is also the title of Intizar Husain's narrative about an epic hero whose valor, not to mention his very identity, undergoes a series of diminishments, for the partitioning of India has rendered the hero and the epic, as well as the epic writer, incapable of creating anything more than fragments that offer evasive hints at our own contemporary revenge tragedies. Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem quoted in the beginning of this collection, "The Dawn of Freedom (August 1947)," adds to the accidental aesthetic of fragmentation and sets the ambivalent mood of this enormous, complex event. It begins:

These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light—  
This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom,  
we had set out in sheer longing,  
So sure that somewhere in its desert the sky harboured  
a final haven for the stars, and we would find it.

*Translated by Agha Shahid Ali*

As a matter of fact, Pichwa, the hero of Intizar Husain's story, could not even afford to have the longing because by the time he set out across the border "the night-smudged light" had already privileged those who had education and power, and all those who possessed ancient epic attributes could only help themselves to a revenge tragedy or embrace disillusionment and a fateful return that no one will celebrate.

The narrator in "An Unwritten Epic" is a hopeless writer who wishes to create in the smithy of his soul the uncreated epic about a hero's rise and fall. Although both the hero and the writer seem eager to reject much

of the sentimentalism common among their peers, the inevitable political unfulfillment cuts into the aesthetic of the story early on when we first witness Pichwa and his men in action on the eve of Partition as they defeat an army of Jats and raise the flag of their own village-nation on a peepul tree—soon they realize that their village is located outside the newly drawn boundaries of Pakistan. As the élite and the educated leave for the promise of Pakistan, so does the poor, illiterate hero, a simple Muslim Braveheart, unaware that his call is to become a beggar in the new nation. Indeed, the new nation is beautifully metaphorized as an epic, but the epic writer as well as the epic hero undergoes a series of shrinkages and reversals, as indicated in the following statement:

Moreover, I thought, no epic poem has yet been written on the riots. Now, I am no poet—so let me try writing a prose epic. And then, this is not the time for writing great poetry. Now, when we have no great epic heroes, I am surely very fortunate to have a character like Pichwa fall right into my lap. But how could I have known then that after the first riot was over, another would break out and Pichwa would come to Pakistan? (p. 165)

The first half of the story sketches out the inchoate epic. Although somewhat humorous, the narrative doesn't claim our sympathies until too late when the somewhat farcical writerly voice takes over. The best segments of this story are the narrator's letters in the second half:

Every time I take up my pen, the slogan, 'Long Live Pakistan,' goes up with such force that I drop the pen. The cry goes up everywhere for 'constructive literature'. I can't hear anything else in this noise. What is this animal called 'constructive literature'? Things are recognized by their opposites. I've never yet seen anything destructive in literature. (p. 168)

No question that much of the story is about the sense of existential unfulfillment a middle-class, educated youth suffers in a land he had fantasized about with great longing, as Faiz puts it. Pichwa's unfulfillment, on the other hand, comes from economic displacement rather than from being uprooted from a heroic setting. In any case, the epic writer is not all that concerned about the poor chap's problems, even though we are told that it is Pichwa's sad departure that revives his plans for the novel. When the news about the reverse exodus to India forces the writer to cease his literary activities, the story shifts into farcical self-indulgence, and what happens to Pichwa is only reported as an afterthought.

I think I'll end the novel I'm writing, i.e., my Qadirpur Mahabharata, with this letter. And what a death indeed this crazy Pichwa found! His life was a drama, and so was his death. The one undramatic event in his life was his flight to Pakistan. If only he hadn't come to Pakistan. Pichwa disgraced himself by coming to Pakistan and threw a monkey wrench into the works of my novel. (pp. 176–7)

As the “epic hero” who runs east and then west is reduced to the status of a beggar, the pompous author-narrator who started out writing an epic novel ends up as a full-time mill-owner in the new nation; perhaps the transformation indicates a truer calling, if not an epilogue to a comedy about a writerly self caught in the politics of Partition. In any case, the narrator's concern for Pichwa remains passive, and the “unwritten epic” motif itself remains largely easy to reject as an expression of middle-class ideology.

Indeed, the translator's preface, with a little help from Milan Kundera, positions the art of fiction as “a meeting ground of opposites, of contraries—a space large enough to accommodate competing versions of truth, unlike the real world where each of these versions must necessarily collide with the other, overpower and, preferably, annihilate it” (p. xii). The editor's conscious choice to avoid the ideological posturing of various nationalisms sets a proper tone, without which these stories would be deprived of the respectful silence they demand from us, for most of these stories are clearly about our existential condition, our inability to transcend a world that is absurd by any measure, and of course, about our fantasies regarding redemption. The very first story in this collection, Saadat Hasan Manto's “Sahae,” in fact, points at this absurdity right at the start:

‘Don't say that one lakh Hindus and one lakh Muslims died; say that two lakh human beings died. That two lakh human beings died is not such a great tragedy after all; the tragedy, in truth, is that those who killed and those who were killed, both have nothing to show for it.’ (p. 5)

Nothing to show for it. Nothing but a lingering unease about national identities. “Sahae” is one of those stories whose impact doesn't stop with the dramatization of a conflict. It gently nudges the readers into the complex, mind-numbing symmetry of asymmetries. Here, a Muslim man, Mumtaz, is bidding farewell to three Hindu friends at the port in Bombay; initially he is portrayed as an enigma, but he is also placed on a moral high ground since it is he who is leaving India. The foursome

apparently maintained a thick friendship in spite of the killings on both sides, until Juggal gets word that his uncle has been murdered in Lahore. When Mumtaz asks Juggal what he plans to do, Juggal replies, facetiously for sure, that he might have to kill Mumtaz. No doubt such a remark cuts deeply, silencing Mumtaz for over a week, unnerving all of the friends, rupturing their enlightened friendship. Then, Mumtaz announces that he is going away to Pakistan. Thus, those intelligent, objective individuals begin to confront their own uncertainties, not only about the geopolitical event unfolding all around them, but also about the nature of their being. Quite characteristically, they attempt to philosophize about the divided territories of body and soul, but to Saadat Hasan Manto's credit, the narrator is aware of the "emotional excess" of his performance when he claims that bullets and knives annihilate only the body, leaving the soul, the true religion intact, unassailable.

By the time Mumtaz defines his faith, his soul—"the special thing which shows that one is truly a human being"—this young Muslim man has become, in the eyes of the Hindu narrator, morally superior. Halfway into the story the central conflict rests on the bewilderment and helplessness of the narrator and his Hindu friends, not to mention their mounting sense of guilt concerning Juggal's casual remark about revenge. At this point the first phase of the redemption fantasy is complete, but in the second phase it is necessarily about returning the favor, when the Muslim man must reach back with a redemption story of his own, about a Hindu.

When a somber and brooding Mumtaz begins to open up to his friends it is regarding a murder he witnessed, the murder of Sahae, a pimp who possessed the one "special thing which shows that one is truly a human being." Sahae was a lowlife, an enlightened pimp who planned to leave the business the moment he had made another Rs. 10,000, the amount needed to open up a fabric shop. He looked after the interests of not only his "girls" but also his customers; he paid into his girls' savings accounts, even found suitable boys for them, and of course, he was very good to Muslims. The fact that he was a Hindu who functioned freely with the Muslims is what renders his murder the foundation for Manto's short story. Mumtaz tells us that this good man Sahae, as he lay bleeding on the sidewalk, obviously injured by Muslims, would not blame anyone other than fate, but he wanted to make sure that one of his Muslim girls received her jewelry and the money he was about to send her. Of course, the moral high ground claimed by Mumtaz, by virtue of his victimization, is gradually claimed on behalf of Sahae, the Hindu victim, and then Juggal himself claims it since he is the one who wants to become Sahae's

spirit, and thus the redemption fantasy of this story comes full circle.

The key events in “Sahae” take place off stage, so to speak, and the greater story of Sahae is at the service of the lesser one about Mumtaz and a sensitive Hindu narrator. In many ways this story evades the central political and economic tragedy of the Partition because the three Hindus, as well as their one Muslim friend, are clearly part of the *élite* whose interests and attitudes are made comforting in the idle chat about divisions of the body and soul. Without question, the central event in “Sahae” is an epic narrative about a heroic character who dies a grand death, giving us yet another version of the “unwritten epic” story about a good victim, but the *élitist* frame of the story leaves in the readers a feeling that the precious frame itself is more important than what it frames. Even if it is read as a story about the complex mysteries of friendship, “Sahae” leaves us baffled, for we are not certain whether the rupture caused by the violent politics of identity can be reversed by the act of narration.

The “unwritten epic” motif and the struggle for narration recur throughout the collection. For instance, Altaf Fatima’s narrator is a woman writer of a book about dairy farming who suffers from a nostalgia induced writer’s block. Gradually, as she struggles with her nostalgia, she begins to remember her childhood and education, and suddenly we are drawn into the story of an aristocratic Muslim girl who must seek out a Brahmin boy, Robby Dutt, for she needs help with Hindi. Of course, in Hindi, she recognizes her lost world, which was once defined by the Urdu language and Muslim high society. Ultimately, the Partition experience is romanticized through remembering the Hindu tradition of *rakhi* tying and the expressions of sisterly love that the narrator now misses. Unlike the other writers represented here, Altaf Fatima evades the actual subject matter of this collection. In order to deal with Partition she abandons the fiction writer’s craft and espouses the poetic craft, for she repeatedly dwells on the image of someone violently thrashing grain on a winnowing fan. Nevertheless, this is a beautiful story that dwells on lost sensations, on memories, although this story might have benefited from a greater sense of time and place, and a less fearful rendering of the actual winnowing that was Partition.

Upender Nath Ashk’s “Tableland” can be considered a variant of the “unwritten epic” motif, too—the protagonist is a minor actor from the Bombay film industry, and the farcical grandeur characteristic of this motif is firmly in place in this story. The fact that, after the Partition, Upender Nath Ashk himself switched from Urdu to Hindi and from fic-

tion to theater, lends credibility to the motif. The story begins when Dina Nath arrives in Panjgani to recuperate from TB. As if on a world stage, everyone at the sanatorium represents a worldview, an attitude. Dina Nath knows that as an artist he can't be a bigot, but he is aware of his bitterness toward Muslims, and it is obvious that he is seeking redemption through a great act, although he is only a minor actor. Of all the men at the sanatorium, only Qasim Bhai sees the hand of the British and the reactionary forces at work. Everyone else blames each other. As horror stories and revenge tragedies from Lahore reach him, the communal polarization in Dina Nath is completed and he begins to collect funds for the refugees, although he fails to take collections among his Muslim friends. Nevertheless Qasim Bhai makes a contribution and suggests that they ought to help both Hindus and Muslims, but Dina Nath reveals that he only wants to help the Hindu refugees. When Qasim Bhai lectures him on the structural injustice involved in the Partition, Dina Nath—sensitive artist that he is—becomes torn between his emotion and his goodwill. Still gripped by much sorrow, illness, and a kind of “passionate intensity,” he walks into house after house asking for money, gathering stories of flight, fire, and death, until suddenly he realizes his folly and finds personal redemption by giving all the money he has collected to an old Muslim refugee.

Anyone who ponders the fundamental dissatisfactions of the big thematic stories like “Tableland”—the epic of the nation—as well as those about private epiphanies will find a better understanding reflected in the simpler narratives of suffering, of the families, especially of the women, the children, and the elderly. Authors like Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmad Nadim Qasimi, and Jamila Hashimi reveal to us the utter shame and the horror that accompanied Partition, for they depict human beings who are caught in the fateful, unknowable political mysteries. Qasimi's “Parmeshar Singh” is the story of two such characters, Akhtar, a boy, and Parmeshar Singh, a grown man whose son Kartara was missing. As the story opens, we learn that “Akhtar was suddenly separated from his mother, like a coin falling from the pocket of someone in a great hurry—there one moment, gone the next” (p. 127).

Akhtar had left the caravan of refugees trudging toward Pakistan and slipped into a sugarcane field to grab a stalk when a gang of Sikhs surrounded him, ready to slit his throat. But they were stopped by Parmeshar Singh, who tells the other Sikhs that the same God who made them made this boy, too. However, when the other Sikhs mockingly quiz the boy about who made him, he answers that he was found on a pile of hay

inside a little barn. The same kind of answer the Sikhs had received in their youth from their own mothers, and in fact, the answer saves the boy's life. In the course of the story, this develops into a truly beautiful, metaphoric motif that illustrates the shared experience of those who are murdering each other on account of their birth stories.

Parmeshar Singh, who has lost his own son in the same chaos, brings the Muslim boy to his house, which is, of course, a house abandoned by a Muslim family who fled. The boy is brought up as a Sikh even amidst the irreconcilable familial and religious loyalties, appropriating Akhtar as a compensation for their own lost boy, Kartara, and the whole process of taming Akhtar brings them greater understanding of themselves as a grieving family. Particularly touched by the inconsolable sorrow that eats away at his wife, Parmeshar Singh decides to at least undo his own wrong by making a dangerous journey to the border to return Akhtar to his mother. At the border, Parmeshar Singh sends the boy off, advising him to recite the Qur'an to help him along the way. Confused by the boy's turban, two soldiers stop him and one jerks the turban from the boy's head, causing his long hair to come undone. When the boy cries out, the soldiers suddenly drop to the ground suspecting an intruder and one of them shoots, hitting Parmeshar Singh in the thigh. At the end of the story we hear him ask the soldiers: "Why did you have to shoot me?! I just forgot to clip Akhtar's *kes!* I only came to return Akhtar to his dharm, *yaaro!*" (pp. 151–2).

Qasimi's story evokes the child's helplessness and innocence in contrast with the perilous adult world of revenge and grief, and in the process the complex symmetries of suffering come alive vividly here, more so than in such purely "idea" driven stories as Ashk's "Tableland" and Manto's "Sahae."

Symmetry is what Rajinder Singh Bedi's short story "Lajwanti" also offers, although the third person narrator is less certain about the resolution and the impossible redemption. The translator notes that Bedi is the second most prominent Urdu writer of fiction after Saadat Hasan Manto. But "Lajwanti" has greater realistic precision and drama than Manto's "Sahae," which suffers from an exaggerated redemptive structure. In many ways, Rajinder Singh Bedi, the author of the highly regarded novel *I Take This Woman*, tells a different kind of story, with considerable psychological depth in spite of its relative technical failings as a short story.

In "Lajwanti," a wife-beater turned social activist named Sunder Lal gets elected secretary of the newly formed Rehabilitation of Hearts

Committee. The reason he won the eleven votes was that his own wife, Lajwanti, has been abducted, so Sunder Lal is in a better position to counter the likes of Narain Bawa, who opposes the rehabilitation of abducted women. Early in the story Bedi offers a tender portrait of Lajwanti, who loved the city boy Sunder Lal. After her marriage to him she quickly settled down to the fate of an abused wife, and subsequently, of course, also to her fate as the captive of a Muslim man who treated her well. When the news arrives that a group of abducted women is going to be exchanged between India and Pakistan, the conservatives oppose the move, for in their view such women ought to have died to save their honor!

The whole place is in turmoil at such astonishing news. Lajwanti is not among the women who are returned, and the Rehabilitation of Hearts Committee continues its campaign. On one occasion Sunder Lal debates Narain Bawa who offers the rusty example of Ram ejecting Sita from his “ideal Kingdom,” causing Sunder Lal to burst out, declaring Sita’s innocence and placing the blame entirely on Ravan’s ten demonic heads; he even adds an eleventh head to Ravan, “the head of a donkey” responsible for foolish attitudes. Then a villager reports sighting Lajwanti at the border; at once Sunder Lal becomes gripped by an unknown fear. When husband and wife are reunited, the husband notices her dupatta is worn in the typical Muslim fashion, and before long every detail he notices about his wife somehow disorients him, not because of his jealousy but because of his goodwill and his baffling need to be right, to be even better than Sri Ram. Also, with his wife’s return Sunder Lal is shocked into yet another awareness about his wife and about himself:

He noticed that Lajwanti was fairer and healthier than before; indeed she looked plump. Whatever he had imagined about her turned out to be wrong. He had thought that grief would have emaciated her, that she’d be too weak even to speak. The thought that she had been happy in Pakistan wounded him.... (p. 26)

The story fails when it largely evades Lajwanti’s suffering, for Bedi is still insistently focused on the eventual chastisement of Sunder Lal, who of course continues to work for the cause and starts calling his wife “Devi,” although what she really desires is a little genuine love as opposed to the worship that he proffers. On one occasion he works up enough courage to inquire about her captor, and the first thing he asks is, “He didn’t beat you?” Her answer humbles him, and in some ways one can

understand how a humbled husband can continue to ruin a woman who is only asking for a little understanding of “the secret locked in her breast”—as Khushwant Singh puts it in his own translation of “Lajwanti.”

That the readers can guess the nature of her secret and her suffering is all the more reason for them to expect a greater engagement with Lajwanti as a character. In fact, once she returns from captivity, the story that started off with so much promise begins to self-destruct, mainly because of the authorial straitjacketing of Lajwanti the character, whose name demands a certain symbolic ending for this story which is really about rape and silence and about a man’s inability to face up to a woman’s suffering. Even if the author’s aim is not to dramatize the lingering consequences of rape and large scale violence against women, what undercuts the power of this story is his insistence on explaining away such harsh realities as a rupture of the old harmony—in other words, a family life based on a wife-beating male whose peaceful domesticity is established at the expense of an uncomplaining female! At the end of the story Lajwanti is unnerved by Sunder Lal’s unsustainable, unknowable devotion to her, for she prefers the certainty of her husband’s old violence. Unforgivably, in the end, the author even goes on to conclude that “she was in fact a lajwanti, a glass object too fragile to withstand the barest touch” (p. 29), but the question remains whether she was suffering because of her peculiarly female experience of Partition or because of the naïvete of her husband whose private heroism does not match his public courage.

Ultimately this story also fails in terms of revealing the dynamic of the post-captivity, post-Partition domestic story, although it starts off with such a precise moral authority and sense of irony. References to the Sita-Ram-Ravan triangle also lend much credibility to the narrative voice—if it weren’t for Jamila Hashimi’s story, “Banished,” we might not have grasped the true potential of this motif. Even after faultlessly evoking the pre-Partition domesticity and its gendered brutality, the voice here begins to falter at the very moment the new Lajwanti emerges. It is as if the male voice is left shuddering, helpless before the bewildering image of his returned Sita, whom I believe even the author betrays at the end. Notwithstanding what the preface states about the difficulties translating this story, of all the selections in this collection what is unwritten here seems to have greater promise than what Rajinder Singh Bedi has managed to capture. Even the use of Boccaccio’s description of the Uzbek procurer, although it offers a revealing expression of a woman’s condition

of bondage, feels out of place, giving us yet another hint about so much that is unachieved in “Lajwanti.”

One point worth noting about several of the stories is an obvious eagerness on the part of the narrators to glorify the victims, when in real life, on both sides, “blaming the victims” was the order of the day. But in Jamila Hashimi’s “Banished,” arguably one of the three most accomplished stories in the collection along with Ahmad Nadim Qasimi’s “Parmeshar Singh” and Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi’s “A Land Without Sky,” the narrator almost entirely resists the Hindu/Muslim dichotomy, and the protagonist is developed so fully the story is allowed to rise above the writerly vision itself. Both Jamila Hashimi and Rajinder Singh Bedi tell the same story, of a woman’s experience of captivity, of the perplexities of bondage as well as liberation. Hashimi’s narrator, “a maid,” is an orphan of Partition. As the story opens we see her brooding over the Dasehra effigies about to be set on fire at the end of the festival, and it is Sita’s exile she contemplates. Early on, looking at Munni, her daughter, she thinks, “One destined to be lost will be lost, even in a house full of people” (p. 90).

Everything she sees triggers some fatalistic sorrow in her, memories of her childhood, her parents who would be murdered right before her eyes because, unlike the cowards who fled, they stayed put where they belonged. The fragments of her knowledge, her old self that we become acquainted with, make “The Banished” yet another “epic unwritten” story, lending this brooding woman a profound writerly voice. Particularly vexing to her is the tender pre-Partition memory of her brother’s departure on a ship heading west, and right at the start of the story, she has philosophically reconciled with the impossibility of recapturing her lost self. The rest of the story, in fact, traces a helpless woman’s regression from a philosophical wisdom to a practical logic, for a woman caught in such a nightmare of history, the richness of her emotional life promises no comfort or safety. Slowly we learn that “the maid” has become a mother in her captivity, that Gurpal had dragged her out of her house “dishonorably,” that he was one of those who murdered her parents, not to mention the enigma of her own growth as a woman and as a thinking individual who has built a sort of life of her own with whatever fragments came her way. We even hear Gurpal chastise her somewhat lovingly whenever she speaks pessimistically about the hopeless realities of her quotidian existence. Once he asks her: “Can’t you ever bring yourself to forget that incident? That was a different time” (p. 99), and the statement makes us expect that her hour of redemption is near, but she surprises us,

beautifully.

When the soldiers from “the other country” come looking for abducted women, we expect her to reach out for freedom, but for a woman with such a thoughtful mind, she can’t afford to forget the fact that she has become a mother, that the man Gurpal has indeed welcomed her to his house with a red carpet, a bloody red carpet, that she is no longer her old self even though she is still a captive burdened by bitter and irreversible memories. Knowing that her brothers wouldn’t come to reclaim her, she recognizes that the only option left for her is to hide from the soldiers in the land of her captors. Rather than embrace a second exile, this Sita settles down with Ravan! Again, without the resonance of the Sita story, the significance of the bold defiance in “Banished,” the many layers of rejections of identity, nation, religion, tradition, and class could have been lost in the somewhat underdeveloped details of the past and the present.

Unlike most stories in this collection, Ashfaq Ahmad’s “The Shepherd,” treats Partition as a sudden shift of fortune, a calamity without a history, an unexpected turn at the very end of a magical education narrative about an affluent Muslim youth, “the Doctor Sahib’s boy,” who is tutored by Dauji, a Pandit who is at home with the best of the Islamic tradition. When Dauji’s son and daughter move away, the poor old man takes on the task of tutoring the narrator in mathematics. The narrator is becoming a son to the Pandit, yet the subtle dynamic of the relationship also reveals issues of class. Almost the length of a novella, “The Shepherd” presents a wonderful, yet nostalgic picture of harmony between two cultures.

In a way, much of the story is an extended overture to an orchestration of horror which comes at the end, when a low-life named Ranu nearly slits the old Pandit’s throat. At the last minute Ranu spares his life even as the hate-filled *Muhajirs* scream out for his blood in retaliation for what they had suffered at the hands of the Hindus back in India. When Ranu, the small-minded inquisitor, asks the Pandit to recite the *kalimah*, the old man asks, “Which one?” This gives Ranu yet another chance to scream at him and reveals, one last time, the irony of the pointless battle being waged in the name of the ownership of traditions. Although in this story the Hindu man gets to live because of his possession of his persecutors’ tradition, it brings him no respect, just the terror of being spared from execution and the humiliating clemency that essentially turns a scholar into a goatherd. Indeed, notwithstanding his enmity toward Dauji, Ranu still might be carrying some feeling for him, even to the ex-

tent of deliberately trying to save him while appearing to be against the Hindu who doesn't "belong."

Quite an unusual and powerful narrative in many ways, and outwardly much less about Partition, "The Shepherd" ultimately seems to be a polarizing work, for the story inadequately confronts the issue of class, pinning the horror on one low-life oddity and a bunch of *lathi* wielding *Muhajir* boys, whereas the Doctor's boy, the narrator, is caught in the crowd, unable to do anything about it, even scared out of his wits the moment he is called an *Ansar*, a collaborator.<sup>1</sup> Of course, it can be argued that the author is not laying blame, but the realistic picture of the social and economic conditions of the various characters seems to reveal subtle ideological bias, favoring the upper class, the old Muslim aristocracy. It could be argued that the author's main concern is to show the bankruptcy of such terms as "Hindu" and "Muslim," and that the "The Shepherd" portrays Partition as the killing of a culture. I see both of these claims symbolized in the character of Dauji, whose love for the unteachable youth is seldom problematized. But I also want to argue that Dauji's romanticized affection for the youth is at least partly a result of class inequality, and that a narrator who dwells on this affection can be seen as yet another master who is fantasizing about the slave's love.

The ideological pulse of "The Shepherd" is also palpable in Ismat Chughtai's "Roots." Translated by Tahira Naqvi, "Roots" offers a peek at the Partition experience without too much plotting or symbolism. Early on the narrator speaks rather too eloquently about the surgery on Hindustan "performed with crippled hands and blunt scalpels so that thousands of arteries have been slit" (p. 189), and then leads the readers to the fateful day, 15 August 1947, arriving in the affluent Civil Lines where children play riotously even while their parents stay indoors as if under house arrest. Not unlike previous stories about the illustrious Muslim household that has taken on way too much metaphoric weight, Ismat Chughtai tells the familiar nostalgic tale of Hindu-Muslim harmony contrasted with the anxieties of Independence and Partition. As the old matriarch sinks into a delirium thinking about all her sons and their fam-

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<sup>1</sup> The term "*anṣār*" (lit., "helpers") stands for those Muslims of Medina who welcomed and succored the Prophet Muḥammad after his migration to the city from his native Mecca in 622 CE. In the present story it refers to the local Muslims, contrasted by those Muslims who migrated there following Partition, the *Muhajirs*. —*Editor*.

ilies who have set out for Pakistan, it is the Hindu doctor who brings them back from the Colony Junction.

This collection is divided into two segments, "Partition," followed by "...and After." The second segment begins with Hasan Manzar's well-developed short story, "Kanha Devi and Her Family," which dramatizes the subtle cultural struggle of the minority community, in this case a Hindu family in Pakistan, oddly, a family stuck in the *manusmriti* even after three decades of Independence, yet the family has managed to survive among Muslims. The relatives who visit occasionally from India often gawk at the outrage of Hindu children playing with the Muslim children of Kanha Devi's neighborhood, where caste and untouchability have been temporarily overcome. Into this environment, Kanha Devi brings an Indian bride for her son. After the initial enchantment of marriage wears off, it is Damayanti who asks her husband, "Are we going to rot here forever?" (pp. 213-4).

Gradually, by refusing to use *insha'allah*, by setting apart her own cup, she drifts away from the uneasy harmony of her new home and this new country. With the next wave of BBC dispatches about communal riots in India we hear of the reversal of roles for Damayanti, who wouldn't have given a hoot about such news back in India but is now suddenly faced with all the anxieties of being in the minority. At times naïve about the nature of communal conflicts, the story nevertheless offers a beautiful symbol of a Hindu man feeding the pigeons who, of course, roost in the minaret.

Indeed, in spite of a general tendency to shy away from the political drama of Partition, all the stories included in *An Epic Unwritten* impart what the translator calls "a trans-empirical wisdom" and they take us closer to the most baffling historical event of our time. Stories like Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman's "The Thaw," Masud Ashar's "Of Coconuts and Chilled Bottles of Beer," and Khalida Husain's "The Wagon" remain vague and romanticized, but Salam Bin Razzack's "A Sheet" and Ali Imam Naqvi's "The Vultures of the Parsi Cemetery," both elaborately developed stories with urban settings, are memorable dramas of the so-called "madness diagnosis."

Also, the final story in the collection, Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi's "A Land Without Sky," certainly comes as one last surprise. Of course, it is yet another "unwritten epic" story, but this time in the voice of a woman who takes on the male business of epic storytelling. Although there are four women writers represented in the collection, it is Ilyas Ahmad Gaddi's young Rifat Jahan who has a substantial feminist point of view.

In a voice much liberated and enriched by a good understanding of the politics of gender and class, this male writer's feminist narrator tells the story of her great hero, her big brother Kalim Bhai, the first B.A. and the genius of the family, who suffered radical diminishment and eventual death when he was unable to reconcile with a world wrecked by Partition.

This story possesses much tenderness and dramatic quality, and even a sense of humor missing from the rest of the collection. Unlike in the "big aristocratic family" stories, here we have an urban neo-middle-class, joint family narrative which is beautifully textured with the private and public details of the post-Partition historical drama that ends in the death of the narrator's big brother whose life is remembered in beautifully evocative passages like the following:

In families with little or no tradition of education, if a boy takes to studies, he pulls a lot of weight, like some big officer. His clean and tidy uniform and bright face make his parents feel fulfilled. The entire household snaps to attention at the sound of his approaching footsteps.  
(p. 317)

In the manner of James Joyce's "The Dead,"—a long story appearing at the end of *Dubliners*, suddenly energizing even the weaker stories in the preceding pages—Gaddi's narrative makes us realize that all the stories in *An Epic Unwritten* do indeed merit Muhammad Umar Memon's diligent translation and critical attention, not to mention a second reading from us. □