

Haunting Across Generations: Intergenerational Trauma and Memory in *Basti* by Intizar Hussain

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Abstract

Basti by Intizar Hussain is one of the most poignant literary responses to the trauma of the Partition of India and Pakistan. Its power lies not only in representing historical violence but also in illustrating how that trauma persists across generations. This paper examines *Basti* through the lens of intergenerational trauma and post-memory, drawing on the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch. The novel's protagonist, Zakir, becomes a carrier of inherited grief and cultural dislocation, haunted by a past he cannot fully articulate or escape. The narrative structure of *Basti*—fragmented, recursive, and non-linear—reflects the psychological disorientation caused by unresolved historical wounds. Furthermore, the silences in the text, the absence of a homeland, and the recurring cycles of violence underscore the continuity of trauma beyond the original moment of Partition. This paper argues that *Basti* encapsulates both personal and collective loss and reveals how such trauma is transmitted, remembered, and re-experienced by those who did not directly witness the catastrophe. Ultimately, *Basti* challenges the notion of Partition as a closed historical event, portraying it instead as a lingering psychological rupture in the postcolonial condition.

Keywords: Trauma, Unclaimed Experience, Partition

INTRODUCTION

Intizar Hussain's "*Basti*" (1979) is celebrated as a deeply insightful literary examination of India's Partition. The novel's brilliance lies in its portrayal of Partition not just as a historical event but as an enduring psychological state. Set against the backdrop of various national upheavals—from the 1947 Partition to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971—"Basti" delves into the life of Zakir, a thoughtful and introspective character whose experiences mirror the collective grief of the subcontinent. Through its fragmented narrative and fluid timeline, the novel captures the emotional upheaval and cultural fragmentation resulting from forced migrations, lost homelands, and the erosion of communal unity. Trauma theory provides a critical framework for the study of *Basti*'s affective undertones. Scholars like Cathy Caruth have argued that "trauma is never directly experienced at the time it happens but only reiterated through flashback, memory, and narrative interruption". Marianne Hirsch's post-memory elaborates on this by highlighting "how trauma can be inherited by successive generations through testimonies, silences, and affective heritage more than experience itself". In *Basti*, Zakir is not only a witness to the aftermath of Partition but also a repository of inherited pain, shaped by recollections of a lost world. This study argues that *Basti* illustrates that the partition trauma is not only what people experienced directly. Rather, the novel shows how that trauma is passed along through memory, silence, and cultural dislocation, and is felt by successive generations as an open psychological and emotional

wound.

Relevant Theories

Basti's trauma analysis draws on key themes of trauma theory, post-memory studies, and collective memory. All these theories work to explain the way the novel represents Partition as an ongoing emotional and psychic breakdown that keeps having a lingering impact across generations instead of a once-off historical moment. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth determines, "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, 1996, p 5). Caruth calls this the "unclaimed experience"—trauma not fully understood at the time of occurrence but manifesting too late in disordered memory and narrative form. The trauma of Partition is never described in Basti explicitly or definitively. Rather, it comes out of Zakir's disjointed memories and non-linear recollections, showing the delayed and unprocessed nature of traumatic memory. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory builds on this. "The children of survivors [...] inherit not just the stories of their parents' lives but the traumatic aftershocks of events they did not themselves experience. These aftershocks are transmitted effectively, through moods, tones, and behaviours that are often beyond words". (Hirsch, *The Generation of Post-Memory*, 2012, p. 107). In the Novel Basti, Zakir is a survivor; he carries around memories of a world that had been lost and which he never fully experienced for himself. His fierce devotion to pre-partition society, confusion in the here and now, and yearning for a secure past all testify to this inherited, second-hand trauma. Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory builds upon "The society in which people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories... Collective memory is not a given but a socially constructed notion" (Halbwachs, *on collective Memory*, 1992 [1952], p. 38). Memory in Basti is collective, not individual; loss of nation and cultural breakdown not only occurs to Zakir but also to future generations and communities. These recollections provide a shared sense of loss that bridges time, exemplifying how Partition trauma exists not merely in individual memory but also in the public mind of the postcolonial state.

Zakir as a Vessel of Inherited Trauma

The central character of Intizar Hussain's Basti, Zakir, embodies the psychological impact of Partition not only as a survivor but as a living archive of unresolved emotional and cultural pain "The world seemed to be an endless chain of 'whens.' When and when and when." (Basti, p. 18). How Zakir imbibes and retains the emotional world of pre-Partition India—housing within himself a memory that feels older, broader, and communal than one lifetime could hold—makes him an exceptional literary subject even though he underwent migration. Rather than being emotional, his recurring memories of Rupnagar—the fictionalized town that stands in for pre-Partition India—are a testament to an obsessive revisiting of an era of evident plenitude, beauty, and community. His sense of loss and nostalgia tints these memories, but they do not give him solace; instead, they leave him even more lost in the present. Zakir's emotional numbness and failure to establish a sense of belonging within the world of post-Partition are often demonstrated. "The more the turmoil increases outside, the more I sink into myself." (Basti, p. 20). His efforts to engage with the current, particularly Pakistan's violence, disintegration, and moral complexity following independence, are mediated through rupture-shaped consciousness. He neither abandons the past entirely nor enters the present entirely. Due to this shift between two emotional and temporal spaces, Zakir becomes a vessel for

transgenerational trauma, mourning not just his losses but the disintegration of a shared cultural memory that once held communities together.

Unlike conventional trauma histories that can promote healing or catharsis, Basti eschews resolution. In a style that reflects the fragmentation of his inner life, Zakir's memories are fractured and often unreliable. His recollections of his childhood years, his teachers, his old friends, the festivals, and the multi-layered culture of his hometown are truncated by the persistent realization that none of it can be retrieved. He is reliving, which is a key distinction in trauma theory, not merely remembering. In the same way that Cathy Caruth conceptualizes trauma as an "unclaimed experience," Zakir cannot directly identify the source of his sorrow. Instead, the emptiness in his life—the people who vanish, the decaying cities, the silence that follows each act of violence—is where his anguish seeps into the crevices between his recollections. Emotional stagnation defines Zakir's present state; relationships turn sour, ideas fall apart, and even words become less lucid. This immobilization is a consequence of the weight of memory, which is too heavy, too broken, and too sacred to be reconciled with the world of disenchantment surrounding him. It is not due to inactivity.

This is where the tension between paralysis and nostalgia is most apparent. Zakir's nostalgia for a common cultural past, defined by festivals, living together, and the lovely rhythms of classical Urdu, is extremely sentimental. But this nostalgia is not empowering; it does not mobilize action or healing. Rather, it traps him in a loop of remembering, and every attempt at recalling the past serves only to reaffirm that it will never be returned. For Zakir's part, nostalgia is beset by the dawning awareness of impossibility for return, whereas it usually brings with it yearning to revisit. His own emotional life stagnates because he is unable to move on and see meaning in the here and now. As per Marianne Hirsch's theory of post-memory, the emotional life of the next generation can be influenced by the trauma of the earlier generation and how they remember, narrate, and even experience their own lives. Even though he is a witness and not merely an heir, Zakir's grief transcends his narrative and aligns with the collective mourning of a lost society. His trauma is thus both intergenerational and generational; it is rooted in his own experience of rupture but sustained by the cultural and emotional weight of memories transmitted from a pre-Partition world, both mythologised and partially remembered.

Zakir's trauma is understood in Basti as deeply cultural and historical events, and not a single psychiatric illness. His inner turmoil is a reflection of the country's external turmoil, and his paralysis of emotions is a reflection of the political and moral confusion of a civilization that still cannot confront its history. Zakir is both a character and a symbolic figure in Hussain's writing, illustrating the intense psychological impact of Partition on its survivors and how that traumatic history continues to condition identity, memory, and belonging within postcolonial South Asia. Basti's failure to offer closure highlights the possibility that certain historic wounds are endured, repeated, and reinterpreted in language, silence, and memory instead of healing. Therefore, Zakir is both a survivor of trauma as well as possessor of its enduring echo and is caught in between the debilitation of remaining in a universe that is at all times deracinated, as well as that of yearning for a lost world.

The Collapse of Time: Memory as a Traumatic Loop

Intizar Hussain constructs a world in Basti where time is recursive, fragmented, and cyclical, not linear, and this corresponds to the psychological impact of trauma on the individual and the community psyche. In Zakir's life, the boundaries between past and present are constantly crossed as they move backwards and forwards instead of unfolding in the order of events. The traumatic nature of Partition is captured in

this disintegration of time, a historical occurrence, and a chronic emotional disturbance. The novel begins as Zakir reminisces about a serene, almost ideal India before the Partition, but his memories are never fixed or confined. Rather, they filter into his knowledge of the moment, particularly at times of contemporary social and political turmoil, such as the 1971 establishment of Bangladesh and the disintegration of East Pakistan. Rather than perceiving these as separate events, Zakir—and therefore, the narrative—perceives them as repetitions of the trauma. A cycle of historical repetition and psychological re-wounding is uncovered by the violence, uncertainty, and sorrow that marked the Partition, recurring in different forms throughout his life.

“I’m wandering, broken up through what times?” (*Basti*, p. 196). Zakir’s fractured sense of time mirrors Pakistan’s fractured geography (1947’s Partition, 1971’s secession of Bangladesh). The body and nation share the same wounds. This cyclical pattern of violence in *Basti* aligns with Cathy Caruth’s hypothesis that trauma is a “missed encounter,” or an experience that never quite gets resolved. Unresolved Partition trauma appears in several different ways, such as political disturbances, street riots, and psychological disintegration on the part of individuals such as Zakir. They signal a communal failure to talk through the original wound, and these repetitions are not random. One character who is particularly sensitive to these patterns is Zakir. He looks at history, not as a sequence of events, but as a cycle where the same social and moral collapses continue to occur. His response to the violence of 1971 is one of familiarity, not novelty. The chaos around him is similar to the turmoil of the Partition’s upheaval, involving betrayal, displacement, and the destruction of interpersonal bonds. It is in this sense that the book suggests that the unresolved trauma of the past continues to haunt the violence of the present, trapping people and nations in spirals of disintegration.

Basti’s narrative structure facilitates this blurring of timelines. Surprisingly, the language moves between periods with no difficulty, often without a clear demarcation between memory, dream, and current consciousness. This fluidity of time is like the psychological effect of trauma, which is that the past is always intruding on the present. Memories for Zakir are not linear recalls but visceral returns; his imagination involuntarily transports him from the streets of his modern city to the settings of his childhood, from present fears to innocence and disillusionment. Not only does Zakir himself get perplexed by these changes, but the reader also gets trapped in the same time confusion. Moreover, the conflation of past and present suggests that history is not only recorded in books or monuments but also marked on bodies and minds, reappearing time and again in the lives of those who carry its wounds.

Moreover, *Basti*’s intergenerational violence hints at a more severe existential problem. Zakir begins to suspect that perhaps the whole world is dying—that civilisation is failing not only politically but ethically and spiritually as well. His realization that the cultural world he once inhabited, full of language, tradition, and communal life, has fallen apart contributes to this perception of decline. Therefore, the cycle of violence is both metaphysical and historical: it is a sign that something essential has been lost, perhaps forever. Zakir comes to view the perpetual wars all around him as a continuation of Partition and not something separate from it. An overall cultural sense of hopelessness mirrors his sense of loss, suggesting trauma can seep beyond space and time when not treated or understood.

Lastly, memory is also seen by *Basti* as a place of perpetual rupture and not as stabilising. Besides being a psychological issue, Zakir’s inability to separate the past from the present is also a reflection of a society that has not yet addressed its underlying pain. There is no clear break between what was and what is in the book, therefore, it denies the comfort of closure. Instead, it reveals a cycle of trauma where violence re-emerges in different but equivalent forms, binding people to a past that they are unable to escape. In

arguing the residual impact of unmanaged grief and the frequent recurrence of its aftereffects, Basti undermines conventional Partition histories that seek to overcome Partition.

Silence, Absence, and the Unspoken

Trauma is often evident in the Novel in silences, absences, and the unspoken—within the lives of the people, within the surroundings of the city, and the overall organization of the book, rather than in dramatic events or explicit narration. There are gaps in the narrative throughout the book, which are symbolic signs of trauma—moments when language breaks down, memory breaks down, and the act of witnessing turns silent. Since he is the author of the book, Zakir keenly feels these gaps. The most appalling incidents might be simply unimaginable to recollect or narrate, as attested by his deeply emotional yet occasionally evasive, broken, or incomplete recollections. Instead of presenting violence or loss head-on, Basti constantly circles the missing: friends who have died, lost cities, lost social peace, and devastation of an otherwise complete world. The silences here are not by chance; instead, they serve as a way that the novel describes the indescribable pain and challenges of accurately capturing what has been lost.

In the Novel, Zakir's strangely undeveloped relationships are perhaps the most striking example of silence. There are passing mentions of love and friendship relationships, but they are often left unresolved or disintegrate into ambiguity. For example, even though there is a lot of potential, his affair with Sabirah dissolves into memory without explanation. The inability to be intimate in the here and now because of a painful past may be read as a sign of trauma, as is this emotional distance. The emotional cost of historical rupture and the difficulty of forming new relationships when old ones are unresolved are therefore seen in Zakir's silences, which are both political and personal. Basti thus avoids the histrionic platitudes of curing and instead resides in the terrain of emotional loss, using narrative restraint to reveal the inexpressible.

Similarly, Basti's physical and symbolic landscapes are defined by their lack. Throughout the novel, familiar places are literally and metaphorically "destroyed." Individuals now describe formerly lively streets as being empty, deserted, or unusual. It is also supported by the imagery of empty streets, crumbling houses, and disappearing memories that the current is built upon the wreckage of the past. Aside from being physical, these ruins are also psychological leftovers of a past that cannot be remade or fixed. Basti's "city" becomes a poignant metaphor; it was once a home, but now a site of loss and alienation. This changing urban landscape is a mirror of Zakir's mental confusion and growing sense of alienation from his environment and self.

The lack of home, nation, and belonging is perhaps the deepest stillness in Basti. Zakir lacks any true haven or self in any of the various locales and political situations that the novel spans, such as pre-Partition India, post-Partition Pakistan, and the civil war that created Bangladesh. Whenever each national project collapses, he is repeatedly emotionally and culturally displaced. Someone's home is never a physical location; they recall, dream of, or long for it, but they never so live there. The setting in the novel even makes the term Basti, or home or settlement, ironic. For Zakir, there isn't a permanent Basti, but the chain of displacements that reflects the larger failure of the national imaginations to account for the emotional facts of people who lived through Partition. Basti's figurative absence of a nation, not as a political entity, but as a sense of emotional place, underscores the novel's subtext, that no political entity or state can compensate for losses in culture and humanity generated by previous suffering.

Basti's use of narrative emphasizes this notion of silence even more. By often avoiding chronology and omitting significant events or remaining silent about them, the novel resists definable plot progression. It is deliberate not to "fill in the blanks" because it shows how pain resists articulation. Much in the same

way that trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argue that traumatic memories are not wholly comprehensible during the experience itself but instead continue to recur piece by piece, Basti shares a narrative which recurs around and through the silence left by history, forcing the reader to encounter absence instead of closure. We are compelled to admit the limits of language and memory in the presence of deep dislocation by Intizar Hussain's refusal to offer solutions to certain historical and emotional dilemmas. Partition and its aftermath cast a long shadow that haunts the book, conditions its emotional texture, and reveals the unspoken as a kind of presence in itself.

Cultural Displacement and Multigenerational Wounds

In Basti, Intizar Hussain describes a nuanced image of displacement in terms of culture, illustrating how Partition's pain extends beyond the loss of land to the erosion of identity, heritage, and language. The work highlights how individuals such as Zakir are political refugees as much as they are cultural exiles, separated from traditions, languages, and common values that once defined their shared world. The disintegration of Indo-Muslim culture, which was marked by syncretic traditions, Persianized Urdu literary taste, and shared Hindu-Muslim festivals, is the unspoken backdrop for Zakir's internal bewilderment. While nations are re-named and borders changed, Hussain portrays the destruction of a civilization that flourished between boundaries and binaries as an even greater tragedy. Beyond a location, Zakir misses a cultural pace that previously characterized who he was and one that the contemporary political dispensation cannot sustain. Lacking cultural roots, he has isolated memories and an inescapable sense of dislocation. The foundation of what can be labeled as an intergenerational injury is this displacement that is culturally caused: disruption of the passage of values, recollections, and meaning, plus physical spatial disconnect.

Language itself is also one of Hussain's chief tools for depicting this cultural trauma. The poetical, lyrical, and deliberately archaic Urdu of Basti evokes a literary tradition that is itself threatened in the novel's world. Zakir's fervent identification with this language is a metaphor for his greater identification with a rapidly vanishing cultural identity. His verbal dissonance is since he speaks in a voice from the past, and such incapacitates him from communicating effectively with the present. With each succeeding generation changing regarding language, ideology, and culture, Zakir is increasingly alone. Language loss, the novel argues, involves more than a change in vocabulary; it involves a loss of vision, of the metaphors and senses that once connected people to their world. This is particularly evident in the breakdown of oral story culture. The luxuriant heritage of myth passing, tradition, and communal memory disintegrates into abstraction or silence, contributing to the novel's general sense of cultural disturbance.

Even here in this fragmentation, however, narrative presents itself as a vile and redemptive tool. Narrative, on one level, permits Hussain and Zakir to cling to that which is lost. Basti revives pieces of a past world through nostalgia, dream, and fairy-tale-sorted accounts. The reader and the narrator remain emotionally connected to a past that cannot be eliminated through such accounts. This way, retelling stories becomes a method of cultural resistance that retains intact the nuances of the past that had been attempted to eliminate. These narratives, however, are also stamped with pain. These are fractured, disjointed memories that always return to loss rather than tales of victory or wholeness. Zakir's accounts are always cut short by trauma, memory, or silence. Storytelling then becomes a double-edged sword that both reminds us of the past and highlights how lost it is. Instead of ushering in catharsis, the stories in Basti increase the knowledge of what has been lost and what cannot be regained.

The two-fold responsibility of narrative, to haunt and to heal, shows the depth of cultural trauma. For

Zakir and similar people, narrative is the only means of sharing their culture, but at the same time, it is a reminder of the broken chain linking generations. History is passed on through language, gesture, and memory in Basti society rather than being protected by institutions or documented in books. And when they fall short, shards are all that are left of stories, cities, and selves. Hussain's book thus deals with the long-term after-effects of Partition as historical/geographical and as cultural/generational. Not due to what is remembered, but due to what is no longer well defined, the trauma persists.

Conclusion

A very subtle literary representation of intergenerational trauma is found in Intizar Hussain's *Basti*, which illustrates how the effect of Partition extends far beyond the duration of political upheaval itself. Instead of representing Partition as a whole historical event, *Basti* is convinced in its view that its psychological and emotional effects are still felt by those who experienced it as well as by their descendants. Zakir is a Hussain-fashioned protagonist whose existence becomes a palimpsest of loss, silence, remembrance, and cultural displacement. Zakir is trapped in a time warp where the past and present coexist in a bleed, and he doesn't just recall Partition; he exists in its shadow of darkness. His narrative, characterized by paralysis, dislocation, and desire, contains within it the greater cultural hurt of a people unrooted not just from their physical beginnings but from a collective sense of self. The elliptical nature of the narrative and obsession with absence, avoidance of resolution, and accumulation of time replicate the circular, open, and oftentimes unspeakable nature of trauma. *Basti*, significantly, blurs the lines of distinctions between heredity and memory, showing how trauma is passed down through generations in terms of narratives and silences, fractures of identity, and cultural dissolution. By emphasizing loss of language, shared traditions, and rootedness, Hussain expands the definition of trauma from the psychological to the civilizational, from the individual to the collective. *Basti* transforms then from a Partition story into a reflection on what it is to live in the memory of a world no longer present. It challenges us to rethink Partition as an ever-pending wound that continues to inform the histories, identities, and imaginations of South Asia, and not as an event that ended in 1947. As a literary intervention, *Basti* presents a richly detailed, deeply personal account of loss that effaces boundaries of time and geography, forcing readers to recognize the emotional facts excluded from official histories and national mythologies. Hussain invites us to reimagine trauma as something that persists, not just as what happened, and haunts memory, language, and the very earth of narrative.

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