

Echoes after Rupture: Trauma, Memory, and Testimony in Aanchal Malhotra's Remnants of a Separation

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Abstract

This paper examines Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory* (2017) through the theoretical lens of Memory Studies, foregrounding how personal and collective memories shape narratives of loss, identity, and historical rupture. Drawing on key theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, Aleida Assmann, Marianne Hirsch, and Cathy Caruth, alongside the wider field of Partition Studies, the study argues that the text functions as a site of mnemonic negotiation where individual recollection intersects with cultural trauma. Structured as a collection of oral history interviews organised around material objects carried across the India-Pakistan border in 1947, the book does not merely recount separation as a historical event but preserves its lingering afterlife through remnants, silences, and embodied memory. By analysing the book's testimonial method, its treatment of objects as sites of memory, and its engagement with generational transmission, this paper demonstrates how *Remnants of a Separation* articulates post-Partition subjectivity and contributes to a broader discourse on memory, trauma, and identity formation. The study situates the text within contemporary Partition historiography and testimonial literature, arguing for its significance as both an archival and an ethical intervention.

Keywords: Memory Studies, Partition of India, trauma, postmemory, material culture, oral history, testimony, cultural memory

1. Introduction

Memory has emerged as a crucial interdisciplinary framework for understanding how individuals and communities negotiate the past. Nonfiction and literary texts that deal with separation, whether personal, social, or historical, often operate as repositories of memory, preserving what is otherwise threatened by erasure. Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory* (HarperCollins India, 2017; published internationally as *Remnants of Partition: 21 Objects from a Continent Divided*, Hurst, 2019) is precisely such a text. Originating in Malhotra's 2013 MFA thesis project at Concordia University, Montréal, conducted in collaboration with the Citizens Archive of Pakistan, the book gathers oral history interviews with twenty-one individuals from India, Pakistan, and England, each recounting their experience, or their family's experience, of the 1947 Partition through a single retained object: a yardstick, a pocketknife, a set of kitchen utensils, a notebook of poems, a refugee certificate, a string of pearls. Malhotra herself, an artist and oral historian, entered this project as a

descendant of Partition refugees, having encountered objects belonging to her own great-grandparents that prompted her search for other migrants' belongings.

This generic identity matters. *Remnants of a Separation* is not a novel with a single fictional narrator but a work of oral history and material-culture scholarship, mediated throughout by Malhotra's own presence as interviewer, listener, and, crucially, inheritor of Partition memory herself. This paper approaches the text through Memory Studies theory to explore how Partition-era separation is remembered, narrated, and transmitted across generations and borders. Rather than presenting a linear historical account of loss, the book reconstructs separation through remnants, objects, sensations, silences, and emotional residues, that persist across time and testify to an event that, as reviewers have noted, has increasingly come to define a distinct "Partition Studies" turn toward material and oral history within the broader historiography of 1947. By reading the text alongside theoretical formulations of collective memory, cultural trauma, postmemory, and oral testimony, and by situating it within the wider field of Partition scholarship inaugurated by historians such as Urvashi Butalia and Gyanendra Pandey, this study argues that *Remnants of a Separation* dramatizes the struggle between remembering and forgetting, thereby revealing memory as central to both individual and national identity formation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Memory Studies

2.1 Collective Memory and Social Frameworks

Maurice Halbwachs's foundational concept of collective memory posits that individual memory is always shaped within social contexts: memory is not an isolated psychological phenomenon but a socially mediated construct, produced and sustained through the frameworks of family, community, and nation. In *Remnants of a Separation*, each interviewee's recollection is constantly framed by familial, cultural, and social narratives, suggesting that memory of the Partition is produced relationally rather than in isolation. Separation, therefore, is not remembered solely as a personal wound but as a shared social experience, one whose meaning is continually renegotiated through retelling within the family and, in Malhotra's project, through retelling to an interviewer who is herself positioned within that same inherited frame.

2.2 Lieux de Mémoire and Sites of Memory

Pierre Nora's notion of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) is particularly useful for understanding how the ordinary objects at the centre of Malhotra's project acquire symbolic significance. Nora argues that in a modern world where lived, organic memory (what he terms milieux de mémoire) has receded, deliberate sites, whether monuments, archives, or, in this case, domestic objects, come to bear the weight of memory that communities can no longer sustain through unmediated tradition. The yardstick, the pitcher, the bracelet, and the refugee certificate that structure Malhotra's chapters do not merely illustrate the past; they function as mnemonic anchors, actively shaping how the past is interpreted and transmitted in the present, long after the migrations they accompanied have receded from living memory.

2.3 Cultural Memory, Communicative Memory, and Trauma

Aleida Assmann's distinction between communicative memory, the informal, embodied memory sustained through everyday interaction across roughly three generations, and cultural memory, the more formalised, institutionally supported memory that persists once living witnesses are gone, helps elucidate the historical urgency of Malhotra's project. Conducted seven decades after Partition, as the generation of direct witnesses was rapidly diminishing, the book self-consciously performs the transition from communicative to cultural memory: it transforms private, familial recollection into a broader, textually fixed testimony available for collective and future engagement. Trauma, in this sense, disrupts linear temporality and

resurfaces through recurring images, objects, and narrative gaps rather than coherent chronological account.

2.4 Postmemory and Inherited Trauma

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, developed initially in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, is directly relevant to reading Malhotra's own positioning within the text. Hirsch argues that postmemory describes the relationship later generations bear to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, experiences "remembered" only through the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up, so powerfully transmitted as to constitute memories in their own right. Malhotra, who did not live through Partition but inherited its affective weight through her great-grandparents' objects, occupies precisely this postmemorial position, and the book's interviews repeatedly demonstrate how children and grandchildren of Partition refugees carry the emotional imprint of an event they never directly experienced, illustrating how trauma is transmitted materially and affectively across generations.

2.5 Trauma, Narrative, and the Limits of Language

Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an experience that resists straightforward narrative integration, returning instead through belated, fragmentary, and often somatic repetition, provides a further crucial lens. Dominick LaCapra's related distinction between "acting out" (the compulsive, involuntary repetition of traumatic experience) and "working through" (the more deliberate, narrative processing that allows a degree of critical distance) is useful for understanding the range of relationships to memory that Malhotra's interviewees display: some speak fluently and reflectively about their objects and journeys, appearing to have worked through their loss into narrative form, while others falter, repeat, or fall silent, enacting rather than narrating their trauma even seven decades on.

2.6 Oral History and the Ethics of Listening

Because *Remnants of a Separation* is constituted entirely through interview, Alessandro Portelli's foundational work on oral history theory is indispensable to any adequate reading of the text. Portelli argues that oral sources are valuable not despite their subjectivity and inconsistency but because of it: what a community believes happened, and how it chooses to remember and narrate an event, is itself significant historical evidence, distinct from but not subordinate to documentary record. Read this way, the occasional inconsistencies, embellishments, and emotional inflections in Malhotra's interviews are not flaws to be corrected against an official historical record but constitutive features of Partition memory as it actually persists in Punjabi, Bengali, and diasporic households.

3. Situating the Text within Partition Studies

Malhotra's book does not emerge in a scholarly vacuum. It belongs to a lineage of Partition historiography that, since the 1990s, has increasingly turned away from purely political and demographic accounts of 1947 toward the recovery of subjective, embodied, and often gendered experience. Urvashi Butalia's landmark *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998) was among the first major interventions to use oral testimony to recover the experiences that official nationalist historiography had suppressed, particularly the experiences of women, children, and Dalits. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998) similarly foregrounded the specifically gendered violence of Partition, including abduction, forced conversion, and the state's own troubling role in the "recovery" of abducted women. Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (2001) theorised the methodological challenge these oral accounts pose

to conventional historiography, arguing that Partition violence has been systematically written out of the nationalist historical record precisely because it resists neat incorporation into triumphalist narratives of independence.

Malhotra's contribution extends this turn in a distinctive direction: where Butalia, Menon, Bhasin, and Pandey work primarily through spoken testimony, Malhotra anchors each interview in a single retained object, drawing the method closer to material culture studies. As reviewers have noted, her book helped crystallise what has since been recognised as a further methodological turn within Partition Studies, one attentive specifically to the object as a durable, portable, and affectively charged carrier of memory, distinct from but complementary to purely verbal testimony. This positions *Remnants of a Separation* alongside broader historical accounts such as Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (2007) and Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh's *The Partition of India* (2009), which provide the macro-historical and political context against which Malhotra's micro-histories of individual objects and families can be read.

4. Material Memory: Objects as Lieux de Mémoire

Memory in *Remnants of a Separation* is mediated overwhelmingly through objects: a peacock-shaped bracelet carried from Lahore, a notebook of poems brought from Lahore to Kalyan, a refugee certificate issued in Calcutta, a set of kitchen utensils, a maang-tikka, a gaz (yardstick), and a ghara (earthen pitcher), among many others. These remnants function as material witnesses to absence and displacement, resonating strongly with Nora's account of the site of memory as a place where memory "crystallizes and secretes itself." Daniel Miller's work on material culture provides a complementary framework here: Miller argues that objects are never merely passive vessels for pre-existing meaning but are actively constitutive of the relationships and identities they seem only to represent, so that the pitcher or bracelet in Malhotra's book does not simply symbolise a lost home but actively continues to produce the interviewee's relationship to that home across decades of displacement.

Susan Stewart's theorisation of the souvenir in *On Longing* adds a further dimension. Stewart argues that the souvenir functions by metonymy, standing in for an inaccessible past or place precisely because direct access has been foreclosed; its value lies not in its material worth but in its capacity to generate a narrative of loss and longing each time it is handled or displayed. The objects catalogued across Malhotra's twenty-one interviews operate in precisely this register: a set of kitchen utensils or a string of pearls carries little intrinsic value, yet each becomes, in Stewart's terms, the occasion for an entire narrative of migration, survival, and severed belonging. The book's method, moving from object to story rather than from event to object, thus performs a kind of reverse ethnography, in which materiality becomes the door through which testimony is coaxed into speech.

5. Fragmentation and the Structure of Memory

One of the defining features of *Remnants of a Separation* is its fragmented, multi-voiced structure, which closely mirrors the workings of memory itself. Rather than offering a single continuous account, the book is organised as twenty-one discrete interviews, each centred on an object and interspersed with Malhotra's own reflections as interviewer and observer. This structural fragmentation is not simply a stylistic or editorial choice; it enacts, at the level of form, what Caruth identifies as trauma's fundamental resistance to linear narration. No single chapter, and no single object, can contain the totality of Partition memory;

the book's very architecture insists that only an accumulation of partial, individually incomplete testimonies can begin to approximate the scale and dispersal of the event.

Within individual interviews, too, memory frequently surfaces non-chronologically, triggered by sensory association rather than conscious, ordered recollection, the sight of an object, the recollection of a particular scent or texture, prompting a sudden return to a moment decades removed from the present conversation. Malhotra's own authorial interjections, in which she notes an interviewee's hesitation, a trembling hand, or a long silence before an answer, register precisely this involuntary, embodied quality of recall that LaCapra associates with "acting out": the past does not simply get narrated but visibly reasserts itself in the interview room, disrupting the very testimonial encounter meant to contain it.

6. Silence and Embodied Memory

Silence operates throughout the interviews as a powerful mnemonic device in its own right. Interviewees frequently gesture toward what remains unsaid, either because the memory is too painful to articulate fully or because, within families, an unspoken agreement has long governed what can and cannot be discussed about the Partition years. This silence functions both as a protective mechanism and as a marker of unresolved trauma, signalling the limits of language in the face of a rupture of this scale. Veena Das's anthropological work on violence and the "descent into the ordinary" is instructive here: Das argues that survivors of extreme violence often reconstitute everyday life not by narrating trauma directly but by absorbing it into the ordinary texture of domestic routine, so that grief becomes legible less through explicit testimony than through gesture, habit, and the careful maintenance of certain objects and silences. The body itself emerges across the interviews as a crucial site of memory. Physical gestures, a hand resting on an old cupboard, fingers tracing the rim of a cup, carry the imprint of loss in ways that exceed verbal articulation. This embodiment of memory aligns with contemporary Memory Studies scholarship, which increasingly recognises memory as affective and corporeal rather than purely cognitive, a recognition that Malhotra's attentiveness to physical detail, gesture, and posture throughout the interviews consistently reinforces.

7. Separation, Identity, and Subjectivity

Across *Remnants of a Separation*, separation is not represented as a singular, bounded historical event but as an ongoing condition that continues to shape subjectivity decades after 1947. Identity, for many of Malhotra's interviewees, is forged and continually re-forged through the act of remembering and re-narrating loss, whether that loss concerns a specific home, a lost relative, or an entire mode of life left behind on the other side of a newly drawn border. From a Memory Studies perspective, identity is relational and temporal, continuously rewritten through acts of remembrance rather than fixed at the moment of the original event. The tension between the pain of remembering and the perceived betrayal of forgetting recurs across the interviews, revealing memory as both a burden carried by the displaced and a means of psychological and cultural survival.

This is especially visible in the book's treatment of gender. Consistent with the findings of Butalia and of Menon and Bhasin, many of the most affectively charged interviews in Malhotra's collection are with women, whose experience of Partition was frequently compounded by sexual violence, abduction, and the loss of autonomy over their own bodies and choices during and after migration. For these women, the retained object often becomes one of very few forms of continuity available to a self that was otherwise

radically reconstituted, sometimes literally renamed and reassigned a new religious or national identity, by the upheavals of 1947.

8. Testimony and Ethical Remembering

Remnants of a Separation can productively be read as a work of testimony in the specific sense developed by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their study of Holocaust survivor narrative, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). Felman and Laub argue that testimony is never a solitary act but always requires a listener who is willing to accompany the survivor into the event being recounted, and that the very possibility of bearing witness depends on this relational structure. Malhotra's own presence throughout the book, as interviewer, note-taker, and, crucially, as a member of the postmemorial generation, performs exactly this role: her listening completes the testimonial act that each interviewee undertakes, and her authorial interjections make visible the effort, and occasional impossibility, of fully receiving another person's traumatic memory.

By bearing witness to loss in this way, the text assumes an ethical responsibility toward the past that exceeds simple historical documentation. The act of narration transforms private grief into shared memory, inviting readers to participate in the process of remembering as a further extension of the listening relationship Felman and Laub describe. This aligns closely with contemporary trauma theory's emphasis on the role of the listener, or, in the case of a published book, the reader, in completing the testimonial act, a responsibility Remnants of a Separation extends outward to every reader who picks up the book decades after the events it records.

9. Conclusion

Through the lens of Memory Studies, and situated within the broader field of Partition Studies inaugurated by scholars such as Butalia, Menon, Bhasin, and Pandey, Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation* emerges as a powerful meditation on the afterlife of loss. The text demonstrates that the Partition of 1947 endures not only in historical records and political memory but in fragmented testimonies, retained objects, silences, and embodied experience passed down across generations. By engaging with theories of collective memory, cultural memory, postmemory, trauma, oral history, and material culture, this paper has shown how Malhotra's project transforms individually held, often fragmentary recollection into a form of cultural memory available for collective and future engagement.

Ultimately, *Remnants of a Separation* affirms that remembering, however incomplete or belated, constitutes an act of resistance against erasure. The objects it catalogues, and the testimonies gathered around them, however partial, testify to the persistence of memory and its central role in shaping identity and meaning for a generation that is rapidly passing beyond living memory. As Partition recedes further from lived experience and enters fully into the realm of cultural and postmemory, Malhotra's method, anchoring testimony in the durable, tactile presence of the object, offers a model for how literature and oral history together might continue to carry the weight of an event official history has too often left insufficiently mourned.

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