

Translating Trauma: Mediating Memory in Intizar Hussain's *Basti*

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ABSTRACT

The past is not dead. In fact, it is not even past.

(William Faulkner)

The present paper discusses the role of translator as a witnessing agent within the specific context of the partition of the Indian sub-continent. The paper establishes the role of the translator as the communicator of the original testimony and examines Intizar Hussain's Basti (1979) to inquire how memory mediates experiences and translates them into text. Basti (1979), one of the significant texts in the genres of Partition literature, though, involves displacement and uprooting of people, it mainly emphasizes on the predicament of those who remain anchored to their pluralistic past. The translation of the novel Basti (W. Pritchett 1995) almost after twenty-six years not only surfaces the regional or local histories of partition but also asserts and affirms the relevance of bringing such regional texts into the realm of mainstream literature.

Key Words: *Partition, witnessing, memory, translation, regional, mainstream,*

1 Introduction:

Concepts of individual and collective memory have in recent years become the focal points in terms of partition studies. However, its remediation through translation has largely remained a neglected arena. The present paper analyzes the novel *Basti* written by Intizar Hussain and translated by Frances W. Pritchett into English to observe how memory of a traumatic event like partition is transmitted into a communicable form. In fact the transformation of memory of a traumatic event into narrative memory is a significant step to provide an accessible framework to the unstructured experiences of those who witnessed the event. The paper further discusses the role of the translator as the secondary witness and as the communicator of the original testimony. The paper concludes by highlighting some of the nuances of the Hindi and English versions of the selected text.

Scholars have emphasized the need of a framework to transcribe, to translate or transfer memories into narrative form. It becomes all the more necessary in terms of specific historical contexts such as partition of India or holocaust memories, which do not find voice in the official narratives. Translations, despite their don't and does, involve some

form of construction and thus facilitate the mediation of these original memories and bring the local or marginalized texts into the realm of mainstream literature. The translation of the novel *Basti* by W. Pritchett in 1995 almost after twenty-six years not only surfaces the local histories of partition but also ascertains the testimonial significance of the source text and affirms the relevance of bringing such regional texts into the realm of mainstream literature.

For the authors the personal experiences of Partition were often the primary trigger to write about it. Many of them have narrativized the event through the recollection of their own childhood memories or through the post-memory of survivors.

The novel *Basti* focuses on the partition as memory. The novel is deeply grounded in memories and redolent with nostalgia. Van Alphess makes a significant comment in this regard: “ Narrative memory, a uniquely human capacity consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense of experience” (Art in Mind 168).

Reconstructing partition history is, in a sense, as Ananya Jahanara Kabir observes:

(...) a self-imposed authorial task of negotiating between traumatic recall and narrative commemoration, and between different kinds of memory that inhabits and fragments not only nations and communities but also the subjectivities of the individuals who comprise these large identity-groups.(Kabir 177-78).

Where history has failed to address serious moments of dislocation in all their complexity and painfulness,” Pandey writes— “it perhaps has given an additional lease of life to memory. (Pandey 70)

Intizar Husain asserts the insertion of his personal experience in his fiction:

I can't say how much of the novel is based on memories of real experiences and how much of it is imagined; it does, however, describe the years I spent as a child in Dibai in pre-partition India. (Hussain qtd in Bhalla 79)

The novel *Basti* focuses on the partition as memory, through the reflections of the protagonist Zakir, a historian by profession who seeks to come to terms with this memory in the context of the happenings in 1971 in Pakistan leading up to the formation of Bangladesh.

The lens of memory in the novel serves to focus our attention on how local communities of people experienced trauma of partition of 1947; how they reorganized and reconstructed themselves and how the other Partition in 1971 once again disillusioned them and compelled them to hark back at their past to search for the relevancy of such divisions as well as their roots, their origin. The national-communal conflict of 1971 serves as a trigger for the recollection of memories dislocated by Partition. The central protagonist, Zakir, develops an obsessive preoccupation with his past, recalled against the backdrop of Lahore during the war for Bangladeshi independence in 1971.

Hussain has skillfully intermixed subjective memory with collective memory, and further mixed it with centuries-old historical events and with larger, non-linear cultural mythology.

The novel revolves around the life of Zakir feeling alienated and nostalgic about his village lost during the partition. Alok Bhalla opines that, "Nostalgic remembrance is for him a form of retrieving knowledge about those modes of living from the past which could be used for the redemption of 'future-time' " (Bhalla 22).

Being disturbed and disillusioned Jakir juxtaposes his present and past and tries to understand his self; in search of his roots he mediates between a tolerant and inclusive past and exclusive Muslim nationalist identity based on religious affiliation alone. To untangle the web of his tangled existence he traverses through his local spatial reality to the realms of his religious cultural identity.

Though the novel seems to cover a span of only a few months in the life of Jakir, in effect it brings into itself, in flashbacks, the cultural backdrop of centuries of Muslim history. The main historical events begin from 1857 and move on to 1947, and then to 1965 and finally to the 1971 division of Pakistan. Written in 1979, 32 years after the actual experience of Partition, the novel records the movement into time and even beyond time. The political disturbances are the backdrop for the tribulations of the characters in the novel. Being a migrant Hussain, it seems, understands the dilemma of a migrant. It was not only physical crossing over only it was the transgression of memories also. In *Basti* he even goes beyond the memory of a few individuals and digs into the vastness of racial memory. *Basti* is viewed as masterpiece in nostalgia and realism on the tragic experiences of migration and new national identity.

Jakir's nostalgia can be viewed as an attempt at creating cultural continuity and incorporating the cultural memory of the past into the present.

Memories surged along like waves, and I swam among them (*Basti* 73).

When he could see nothing ahead of him, he set off backwards. Again the same long journey through the thicket of memories (*Basti* 29).

The more the turmoil increases outside, the more I sink into myself. Memories of so many times come to me. Ancient and long-ago stories, lost and scattered thoughts. Memories one after another, entangled in each other, like a forest to walk through. My memories are my forest. So where does the forest begin? No, where do I begin? (...) He wanted to arrive at the moment when his consciousness had first opened its eyes. But he couldn't grasp the moment. When he put his memory, dense crowds of memories drifted along its train (*Basti* 6).

He is in a perplexed disillusioned state brooding over his own existential reality.

I'm sitting in a cave. Outside stands the black night, with its jaws opened wide. Siren, whistles, the sound of dogs barking— but human voices absent. (...) I'm encircled by fear. Deep in the forest, far from my cave. Times and places are scrambled inside me. Where am I going? In What time? Every direction confused, every place disordered (*Basti* 132).

Hussain, the most prolific writer on loss and rupture, has revisited partition through myth and memory. He has preferred the older forms of narration and has assimilated fables, parables in his mode of narration to deal with the cultural disorientation and psychological implications of the partition event on people.

2 Translator as the secondary witness:

Translator enacts as a secondary witness who assists the original testifier in two ways: to be present as a listener and to support the transmission of their testimony. However, this assistance has been subject to a great debate. Dominick La Capra asking the poignant question:

“What is the relationship between the primary and the secondary witness? Is it – or ought it to be one of full identification or total ‘empathy’?” (1998, 102). The positionality of the secondary witness can be expressed as one of two possible and widely different acts: identification or empathy. It is the latter empathetic response to the survivor which La Capra himself advocates in his call for “a secondary witness [...] who resists full identification and the dubious appropriation of the status of victim” (2001, 70).

Similarly, Hirsch and Spitzer prescribe that the listener “must allow the testimony to move, haunt and endanger her; she must allow it to inhabit her, without appropriating or owning it” (2010, 402). Crucially, this empathetic engagement is to be achieved without an appropriation of the inscrutable experiences of the survivor.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub express in their influential work, *Testimony*, on the intersections between trauma, writing and witnessing:

“our ultimate concern has been with the preservation [...] both of the uniqueness of experience in the face of its theorization, and of the shock of the unintelligible in the face of the attempt at its interpretation (1992, xx). In this sense, care should be taken to ensure that the harsh and perplexing reality of original testimony is not subordinated or abstracted in the target language.

Frances W Pritchett deserves appreciation for undertaking this difficult and challenging task of translating a Urdu text into English. In her interviews and even in Translator’s introduction Pritchett herself has asserted the difficulties of translating from Urdu to English and has accepted that full range of the Urdu text just can’t be captured in English and she has remained faithful to the text.

The extensive glossary at the end of the novel is useful for the non-Urdu/Hindi readers. The Introduction by M U Memon, Translator’s Introduction and author’s Interview with Asif Farrukhi also helps in understanding the multiple layers of the text and its author. The title is retained as such. Some of the words are adopted as such like “Yar”, hai, hai, The structural changes of splitting the text into present and past time clarifies the different phases as well as

3 Lost in Translation:

Rakshanda Jalil, a literary historian who has translated Intizar Hussain’s novel *Age Samunder Hai* says, “Translating any language to another has its drawbacks. It’s like looking at a carpet from the wrong side. One would see the patterns and colours but the lustre and vividness cannot be witnessed.” Jalil adds. “A language has its own emotional expression, I don’t think everything can be translated.”

Dr Muhammad Umar Memon on an occasion states:

"It is a fact that every translator cannot feel what the author feels or writes," he said in a conversation about writing and translation at The Second Floor Café. "Every act of translation is also an act of self-discovery. For instance, when I translate I find myself lost in thoughts most of the time, no matter where I am or what I am doing." (Memon 2014)

Translation of such text deeply rooted in a specific locale and culture offers formidable problems. Local flavour of the original especially its colloquialism is lost in English translation. Pritchett is a great scholar of Urdu however has missed many times the balance between the target and the source language.

The ungrammaticality of sentences such as "In those lanes were so many houses that had no need for woven grass screens." (Basti 35), or "Since Bi Amma's passing he now asked Ammi everything." is a great loss to the original sense of meaning. The translations of the various idiomatic Expressions into the target language fails to convey the depth, ethos of the cultural connotations embedded in original idiomatic expressions.

The criterion for retaining the indigenous words also does not seem to be consistent. While some words of endearment such as 'Khala Jan', 'Ammi', 'Abba Jan', 'Mian', 'Yar', Ai etc. have been retained, Sharifan Bua has been translated as "Auntie Sharifan" (25), 'Mian' as 'Sir' (180). Culture-specific words such as roti, tawa have been very oddly translated as bread and pan. Translations such as 'burning ground' (31) for 'marghat, "Bi Amma had been called home by God" (26) for "Bi Amma Allah ko pyari ho chuki theen" or "Oh go on" (30) for "Chal chat, "Coming and going" (44) for "Aatey jaatejj". very appreciative task.

4 Conclusion:

The translation of the texts like *Basti* almost after twenty-six years not only surfaces the regional or local histories of partition but also asserts and affirms the relevance of bringing such regional texts into the realm of mainstream literature. Despite the drawbacks of the translation from one language to another we can say that the translation of such texts as *Basti* directs us to understand the marginalized aspects of the partition event, The focus on the individual as opposed to the general offers an alternative historical view that echoes Gyanendra Pandey's "debunking of master narratives as fraudulent" (Pandey 1991 559) which definitely "can fill the representational gap that political histories of such an event leave open" (Rastegar 26).

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