


## Good Times

[Home](#) > [Features](#)

# Women who remember

 by [Ammara Ahmad](#) — August 24, 2018

in [Features](#), Latest Issue, August 24-30, 2018 Vol. XXX, No. 2

 3



In the past few years after the death of my grandfather, I started seeking information regarding the Indian Partition and its survivors. I wanted to ensure the story is recorded. I am the third generation after Partition.

And I was in for a pleasant surprise. Today, a lot of work being done to recover, record and preserve everything related to the “great divide” is being done by women.

Perhaps because they found these empty spaces in the narratives to fill with their work, to give voice to the silence and create a mark where there is none. Maybe because family members shared more stories and details with their daughters and granddaughters. And probably because women could resonate with the stories of their predecessors more.

Historian Ayesha Jalal

Most of these women, like myself, are the daughters and granddaughters of the survivors. Almost all of them are based outside the Indian Subcontinent or educated abroad. Their work often transcends borders and takes a holistic approach. Most of them have traveled between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh for work, research or just leisure.

Women are an integral part of the story of Partition. Particularly because of the violence, trauma, and silencing that they suffered during and after 1947.

Maybe because family members shared more stories and details with their daughters and granddaughters. And probably because women could resonate with the stories of their predecessors more

During the migration, American photographer Margaret Bourke-White went into the violence-ridden zones of Punjab with a British army escort. She photographed the Partition with great sensitivity. She focused on women, children and the old people. Their facial expressions, misery and every possible detail of their lives was recorded. No other photojournalist has chronicled the Indian Partition like she did.

In the first few decades after the Partition, these women could be heard in literature. Saadat Hassan

Manto, Abdullah Hussain, Amrita Preetum and Khushwant Singh gave a voice to the ringing silence of women. Eventually, cinematic classics like *Garam Hawa* did the same.

However, in the 1980s, the women's narratives from Partition started evolving. Feminist researchers like Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, and Urvashi Butalia started seeking women survivors. Urvashi Butalia's paternal grandmother had stayed back in Lahore and this influences her deeply. Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence* was published in 1998 and proved to be a seminal work on the women survivors of Partition. Their stories, their abductions, settlement and then rehabilitation were almost all enforced. And of course, their fate on both sides of the border was different. Now that Partition was a distant memory, women were willing to speak up

These three authors were the first ones to identify that the trauma of Partition had led to a "silence" which had its own significance and interpretations.

Mallika Ahluwalia at the Partition Museum

Bapsi Sidhwa published her novel *The Ice-Candy Man (or Cracking India)* in 1988. This was the first and most honest account by a woman author. The autobiographical account revolved around a Parsi family based in Lahore. The main protagonist is the polio-ridden young girl whose Hindu nanny is abducted. The book later became a film that starred Aamir Khan and Nandita Das in lead roles. Since then, several autobiographical novels and poems appeared on the spectrum of "partition literature."

In 2010, the non-profit organisation Partition Archives was formed by a Berkeley trained physicist who wanted the accounts from 1947 to be properly archived like the narratives of the Holocaust and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing survivors. Guneeta Singh Bhalla told me in an interview some years ago that "first-hand accounts validated the experience of Partition. They made it human and palatable and accessible."

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy at 'Home 1947', Lahore

Bhalla's organisation has collected thousands of Partition accounts from all over the world, including India and Pakistan. The organisation is volunteer-based. A standardised method to interview, record and archive the stories of survivors has been established. Many of those who work or volunteer for the organisation are women. The project is, of course, racing against time because Partition survivors are on the brink of extinction. In an interview to *Dawn*, Bhalla said, "we gave up our careers to give you stories of Partition."

Similarly, the first Partition Museum opened in Amritsar on the 17th of August 2017. There were two forces behind it.

One is Mallika Ahluwalia who grew up listening to the Partition stories of her mother. Ahluwalia holds an MBA from Harvard but has decided to focus on the museum instead. The museum also preserves the objects of survivors, their narratives, research and recordings done by scholars among other things.

Sonal Khullar

Aanchal Malhotra is an artist based in Delhi. She started photographing objects carried by the survivors during the exodus of 1947. The survivor often has a story related to the object that transports him or her back in time. Her book, *Remnants of a Separation*, is a unique step in the lives of those who lived through the times. Malhotra's grandparents moved from Lahore, and her paternal grandfather later established the Bahrison's Bookshop.

Another book published this year was Pippa Virdee's *From The Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab*. Virdee grew up in England listening to her family's stories of Partition. She has been traveling in both Punjab for many years now. Her book is readable, thoroughly researched and touches every theme related to the post-Partition Punjab – refugees, women, nationalism, resettlement and the literature that was produced in response to all this.

However, in the 1980s, the women's narratives from Partition started evolving. Feminist researchers like Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia started seeking women survivors

Ayesha Jalal, a historian and public intellectual (she also happens to be the niece of the author Saadat Hassan Manto) has played a huge role in correcting misinformation regarding Partition. She has also reassessed the contributions of Jinnah and how he had imagined what is now Pakistan. In 2013, her book *The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide* was published. This is one of the most thoroughly researched books on the impact of Partition on Manto himself.

Jalal has written extensively on the Pakistan movement and her modern analysis has influenced a whole new generation of South Asian historians.

Yasmin Khan wrote a very comprehensive book called *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* in 2007. The book gathered fresh accounts and information from locals.

Anam Zakaria recorded and evaluated the accounts of Partition in her book *Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis*. This is the first such book from Pakistan that focused on women survivor's narratives. She led the Oral History Project by the Citizens Archive of Pakistan. She used the oral histories to deconstruct the metanarratives for a deeper look into the past and many interesting observations followed. She noted that those who survived the Partition were less likely to have a hostile image of India, unlike the younger generations. The images and ideas younger Pakistanis had of their syncretic past with India were unrealistic and hostile – unlike those of the Partition survivors. She also felt that the women were less likely to share their stories because of shame and honour issues.

In her splendid book, *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*, Ananya Jahanara Kabir investigates the effects of the two Partitions on the three generations that followed in Bengal. Kabir hails from Bangladesh and her family is spread across the Diaspora. She explores a dual partition's impact on the contemporary culture of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan through the literary works, archaeological digs, photos, maps and other mementos woven together. She argues that 1947 and 1971 were linked to violence, memory and modernity. She attempts to bring a new memory study that is connected across South Asia. She has also explored the women artists' response to conflict and, in particular, the territorial dispute over Kashmir.

Vazira Zamindar did a remarkable ethnographic and archival study of India and Pakistan. Her book *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* examines the effects of colonisation on the two countries as well as the displacement caused by their eventual decolonisation. She explores the process of carving boundaries, history and politics. She examines the borders by recording stories of divided families between Delhi and Karachi.

Zamindar also studies the “Muslim question” at the core of Partition. She draws out the stories of north Indian Muslims while they were forced out and divided by the new nation-states. Her work is imperative when it comes to studying Partition. The book was published in 2007 and translated into Urdu the very next year. The Urdu version of the stories narrated in the book was later performed by the Delhi-based group Dastangoi.

Visual artists were initially reluctant to touch the Partition but as times have changed, that has too.

Sonal Khullar, an art historian based in the states, recently met me during the Lahore Biennale. She has traveled across South Asia, met artists from various parts of the Subcontinent and studied their work in great detail. Her paternal grandmother was from Lahore and Khullar felt deeply connected to the city. She wrote an essay “Everyday Partitions” about the response of South Asia to Partition in contemporary art. She compared many Pakistani artists like Rashid Rana and Risham Sayed with their Indian

counterparts like Shilpa Gupta and the Bangladeshi artist Firoz Mahmud.

Salima Hashmi is an eminent visual artist and art historian. Her father, the iconic poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, was a Partition survivor and his story left a mark on her. Hashmi has curated a Partition themed exhibition twice. The first exhibition was organised in Delhi at Satish Gujral's home in 2016. It was titled "This Night Bitten Dawn" and themed after Faiz's poem "Dawn of Freedom" or "Subh-e-Azadi." The exhibition had over 50 artists from all over the subcontinent and more women presented their work than men. Pakistani artists like Bani Abidi, Farida Batool, Roohi Ahmad, Asma Mundrawala and Risham Syed contributed, amongst others. Shilpa Gupta, Anita Dube, and Gargi Raina represented the Indian side of the Partition story.

The second exhibition was organised in June this year in the Aicon Gallery of New York. This exhibition was also curated by Salima Hashmi and was concluded in July.

Prominent names in the art world like Ghulam Mohammad, Saba Qazilbash, Waqas Khan, and Faiza Butt represented Pakistan. Shilpa Gupta and Nilima Sheikh, among many others, represented India. This display centered around mementos, personal narratives and other memories from the Indian Partition. The exhibition was cleverly titled the "Pale Sentinels: Metaphors for Dialogues" at a time when India-Pakistan ties are at an all-time low.

Hashmi's favorite exhibit was the "Two Chadar" (shawl). Shehnaz Ismail from Pakistan sent a shawl to Priya Ravish Mehra in India and vice versa. Both the artists then went to rafugars (those who mend old clothes) to have their shawls fixed. These exchanged shawls became art installations that were placed side by side. Sadly, Priya Ravish Mehra died from cancer and this artwork was exhibited posthumously.

Nalini Malani is a contemporary visual artist whose artwork deals with the Partition and enforced displacement. Malani was born before the partition in Karachi and moved to Kolkatta. She expands the concept of "painting beyond the frame" into video plays and video/shadow plays. Her oeuvre includes painting, video, and installation art which is usually about the area between two points, like between two places or two identities.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. The Ajoka Theatre based in Lahore and led by Madeeha Gauhar wrote and performed plays related to Partition like *Kaun hai yeh Gustakh* (Manto's biography), *Lo Phir Basant Ayee* and adaptations of Intizaar Hussain's short story *Shehr-i-Afsos* and Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh*, among many others. Ajoka's plays often have powerful women characters and a feminist take on their issues.

The best-known film on Indian Partition is *Garam Hawa* and Shama Zaidi, the art director of the film, captured the ethos of the North Indian Muslim family in the film.

Women filmmakers like Deepa Mehta who directed *Earth*, which was an adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa's partition novel *Cracking India*, Pamela Rooks who adapted *Train to Pakistan* for the screen and Sabiha Sumar who directed the epic – all brought their feminist mystique and sensitivity to the screen. Last year, Gurinder Chadda directed *The Viceroy's House*, a historical drama that deals with the life of Lord Mountbatten, the British Viceroy who presided over Partition in 1947.

At the Lahore Literary Festival this year, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy presented 'Home 1947' – a temporary but immersive installation of a house during Partition where one could hear the sounds and touch the pieces left behind by the migrants. These objects told the stories of those who left. In one of the rooms a short documentary directed by Chinoy was playing and survivors were giving their chilling accounts – an old man whose mother had been killed, another old man who wanted to revisit his father's grave in India and a woman who had forever been separated from her best friend to the "great divide." Chinoy is the patron-in-chief of the organisation Citizens Archive of Pakistan which is now running the National Partition Museum in Lahore. Chinoy's documentary is a part of the museum.

This piece is not exhaustive and there are still many women writers, artists, academics, museologists and activists whose work needs recognition. Particularly those women who hail from Bengal and Bangladesh or those whose work on the Partition is in languages other than English have yet to gain recognition. However, it is interesting that the "silence" of women after 1947 has now been broken and women, in fact, dominate the narrative.

*The writer is based in Lahore and tweets as @ammarawrites. Her work is available on [www.ammaraahmad.com](http://www.ammaraahmad.com)*

**Tags:** Memory



**Ammara Ahmad**

**Related Posts**

PERSPECTIVE

## Random Thoughts on a Beach Walk

🕒 AUGUST 16, 2019

FOCUS

## Working With Darra Adam Khel

🕒 AUGUST 16, 2019

REVIEW

## SLAP: Not Your Ordinary PunchLine

🕒 AUGUST 16, 2019

HERITAGE

## Picturesque Punial

🕒 AUGUST 16, 2019

## Comments 3



**Kunal Chatterjee** 🕒 12 months ago

Excellent narrative by Ammara Ahmed.



**sitara asghar** 🕒 12 months ago

a wonderful , thought provoking article Ammara.....u r a great dedicated panjaban , keep up the good work.



**Bal K. Gupta** 🕒 12 months ago

Mr. Sethi, Ammara Ahmed

It is very well researched article. I would like to add following points:

1. Kashmiri women also suffered the brunt of Partition. You may read 2 books: “Kashmir 1947”, by late Krishna Mehta and “Forgotten Atrocities: Memoirs a Survivor of the 1947 Partition of India” by Bal K. Gupta. Both these books have



been translated in Urdu and Hindi.

2. Other movies on partition are Chhalia, Lahore, Khamosh Paani, Pinjar, Gadar, Hey Ram, Nastik etc. are based on the abduction of women.

## Diary of a Social Butterfly

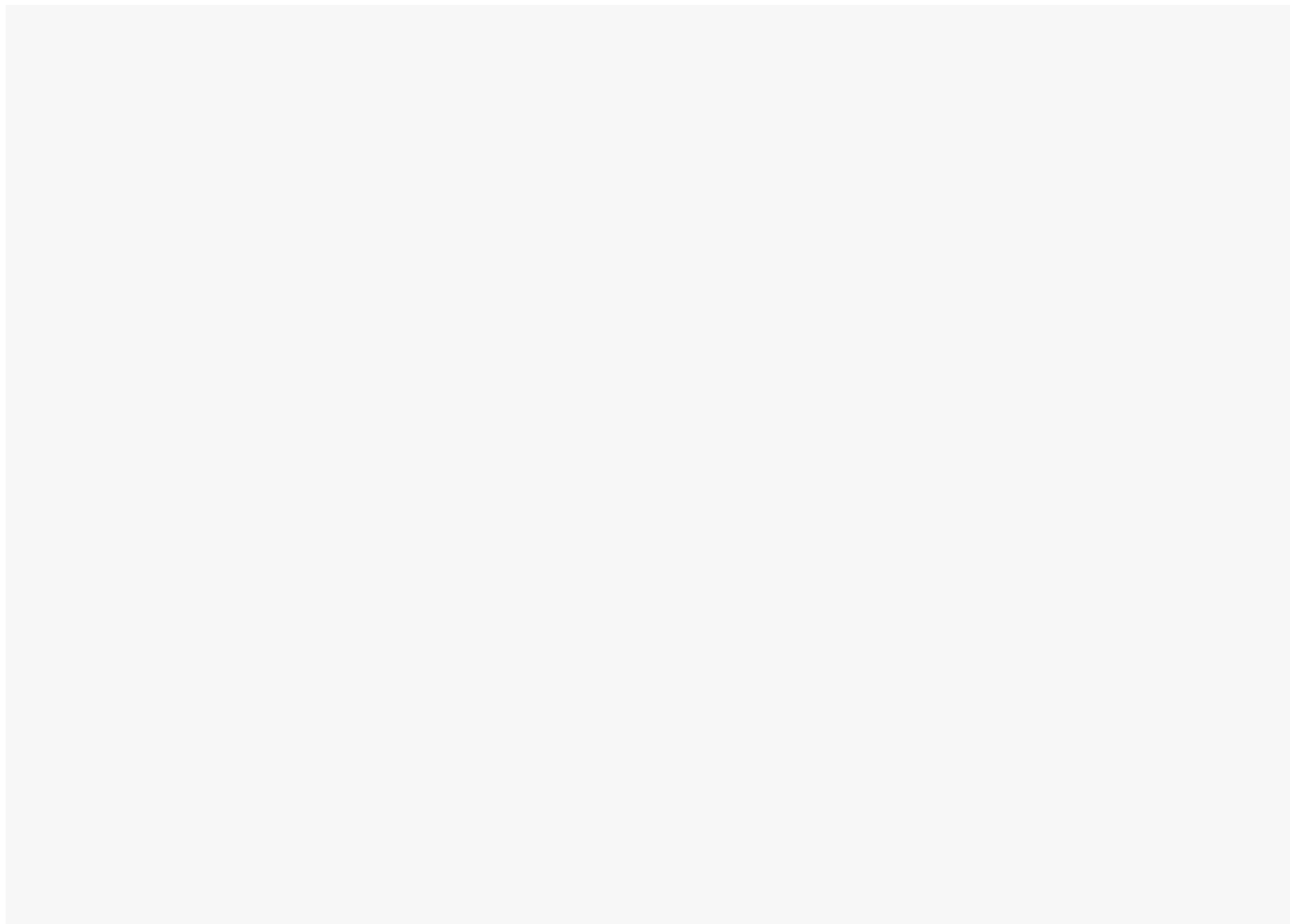


by TFT • © AUGUST 16, 2019 • 0

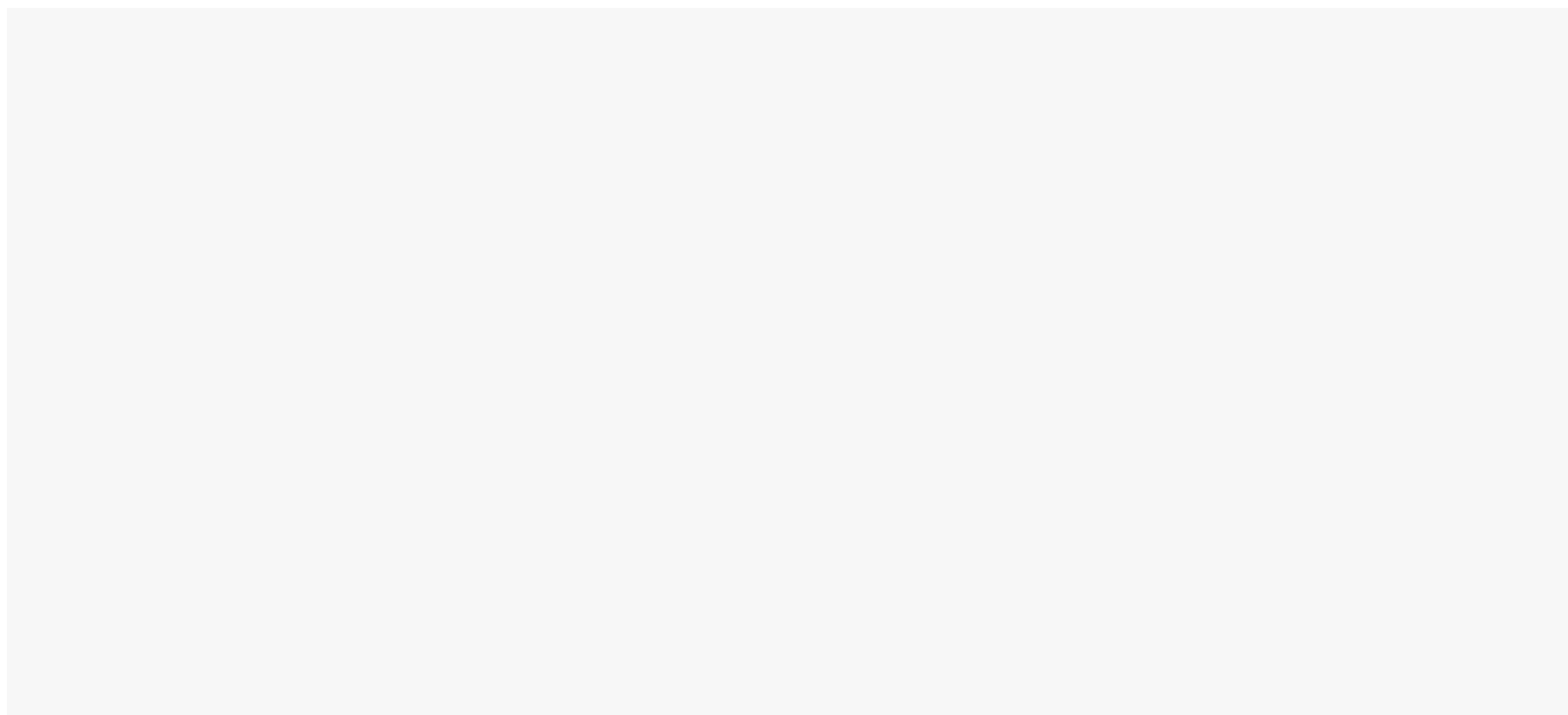
## Such Gup



## Nuggets from the Urdu press



## Letters



by TFT • 🕒 AUGUST 16, 2019 • 💬 0

[About Us](#) / [Online advertisement tariff](#)

© 2019 All copyrights reserved by The Friday Times

