



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**Silence, Memory, and Identity in *What the Body Remembers*, *The Skeleton*,  
and *Train to Pakistan*: Socio-Cultural Representations of Partition**

**Sukhwinder Kaur**

Assistant Professor in English, Khalsa College of Physical Education, Amritsar, Punjab, India  
Email: [sukhwinderkaur2695@gmail.com](mailto:sukhwinderkaur2695@gmail.com)

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.290](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.290)



Article information

Article Received:25/02/2026  
Article Accepted:24/03/2026  
Published online:30/03/2026

**Abstract**

This paper studies how the Partition of India affected the social and cultural life of Punjab, using three important novels – *What the Body Remembers*, *The Skeleton*, and *Train to Pakistan*. While history books usually focus on political events, this paper shows that literature helps us understand the human side of Partition in a deeper and more emotional way. It looks at important themes like silence, violence, displacement, identity, gender, and memory. It explains that silence in these texts is linked to trauma, social pressure, and the suppression of certain voices, especially women. It also discusses how violence during Partition affected people in different ways, with women facing particular suffering. The paper further explains that displacement was not just about moving from one place to another, but also about losing one's identity and sense of belonging. Through characters like Puro, Jugga, and Roop, the novels show the emotional and psychological pain caused by Partition. It also highlights how literature acts as a record of personal experiences, saving stories that are often missing from official history. In this way, these texts question dominant historical views and give space to marginalized voices. Finally, the paper concludes that Partition literature is still important today because it reflects ongoing issues like communal conflict, gender inequality, and identity problems. These works not only help us understand the past but also make us think about the present and encourage feelings of empathy, healing, and understanding.

**Keywords:** Partition, Displacement, Silence, Gender, Memory.

The Partition of India is widely regarded as one of the most painful and destructive events in modern history. Its impact was especially severe in Punjab, a region that experienced intense violence, large-scale migration, and deep social and cultural breakdown. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes, communities were torn apart, and long-standing relationships between different religious groups were suddenly destroyed. This created not only physical displacement but also emotional and psychological trauma that continued long after the event itself. Most official historical accounts of Partition focus mainly on political decisions, such as negotiations between leaders, the drawing of

---

borders, and the formation of two separate nations. While these aspects are important, they often overlook the everyday experiences of ordinary people who lived through this period. In contrast, literary works provide a different and more human perspective. They act as an alternative form of archive, one that records personal stories, emotional suffering, and voices that are often left out of formal history. Through storytelling, literature captures the pain, confusion, and loss experienced by individuals and communities, offering a deeper understanding of Partition beyond political facts. In this context, novels like *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, *The Skeleton* by Amrita Pritam, and *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh become very important. These texts do more than simply tell stories about Partition; they serve as powerful sites of memory. They preserve the experiences of those who suffered and give voice to people whose stories might otherwise be forgotten. Through their narratives, these works explore how issues like gender, violence, identity, and belonging are deeply connected, especially in a society that has been violently divided. Each of these texts shows that Partition was not just a political event but also a deeply social and cultural crisis. They highlight how women, in particular, were affected by violence, how identities were reshaped under pressure, and how people struggled to find a sense of belonging in a suddenly unfamiliar world. By focusing on individual lives and emotions, these novels help readers understand the human cost of historical events. At the same time, these literary works do not simply describe what happened; they also question why it happened. They examine the social and cultural systems – such as patriarchy, communal divisions, and ideas of honour – that made such violence possible. In doing so, they encourage readers to think critically about the past and to recognize how these structures continue to influence present-day society. Through this deeper exploration, these texts show that memory is not just about remembering events, but also about understanding the forces that shape those events and their lasting impact.

An important characteristic of Partition literature is its focus on silence. This silence is not simply the absence of speaking; rather, it is something created by deep trauma, patriarchal control, and the way history often ignores certain experiences. Silence becomes a condition in which people are unable to express their pain, either because they are not allowed to speak or because their suffering cannot easily be put into words. In this sense, silence reflects both personal trauma and larger social structures that suppress certain voices. As Urvashi Butalia explains in *The Other Side of Silence*, history is shaped not only by what is remembered but also by what is deliberately or unconsciously forgotten. This idea is very important for understanding Partition literature, because many experiences – especially those of women and marginalized groups – are missing from official historical accounts. Literary texts help to bring back these hidden or silenced voices, allowing readers to engage with aspects of history that are often ignored. In *The Skeleton*, Amrita Pritam presents one such silenced experience through the character of Puro. Her story highlights how women suffered in specific ways during Partition, especially through abduction and forced inclusion into another religious community. These experiences show the gendered nature of violence, where women's bodies became sites of control and conflict. As the story develops, Puro gradually realizes that her situation is permanent and that she cannot return to her earlier life. This realization deeply affects her sense of identity. The powerful image of Puro becoming "a skeleton... without a name, without a home" captures this loss in a striking way. This metaphor suggests more than physical suffering; it represents the complete breakdown of her identity. She is no longer recognized by her family or society, and she loses her sense of belonging. The image of the skeleton is symbolic – it shows how violence and displacement strip away not only a person's physical security but also their social identity, emotional connections, and personal agency. Through this representation, Pritam powerfully illustrates how Partition destroyed not just lives, but also the very sense of self.

Pritam's narrative reveals how women's bodies became contested sites upon which communal honour was inscribed and violated. When Puro manages to escape and return to her parental home, her family's refusal to accept her back exposes the deeply entrenched patriarchal values governing Punjabi society. Her mother's painful yet resolute declaration – "We have no daughter" (Pritam 47) –

---

illustrates how notions of honour override maternal affection and ethical responsibility. This moment is crucial in understanding the socio-cultural logic that renders women expendable in the preservation of communal identity. Scholars such as Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have argued that during Partition, “women were reduced to symbols of community honour,” and their violation was perceived as a collective loss rather than an individual tragedy. Pritam’s text dramatizes this reality with profound emotional intensity, forcing readers to confront the moral failures embedded within social structures.

However, *The Skeleton* does not merely depict victimhood; it also gestures toward resilience and ethical transformation. Puro’s eventual decision to rescue Lajo, another abducted woman, signifies a reassertion of agency that transcends communal divisions. In choosing to prioritize another woman’s safety over her own desire for reintegration into her natal family, Puro redefines the concept of belonging. Her final refusal to return to her original home, despite being given the opportunity, marks a radical departure from conventional narratives of restoration. Instead of reclaiming a lost identity, she constructs a new one grounded in empathy and moral autonomy. This reconfiguration of identity challenges rigid notions of religion and community, suggesting that humanity can exist beyond imposed boundaries.

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* offers a different yet complementary perspective on Partition, focusing on the impact of large-scale political decisions on a small rural community. Set in the fictional village of Mano Majra, the novel initially presents a harmonious coexistence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The village operates according to a rhythm dictated not by political developments but by the arrival and departure of trains. This sense of normalcy is shattered with the arrival of trains carrying corpses, transforming a symbol of connectivity into one of death and fear. Singh’s description of these trains is chilling: “The compartment floors were covered with blood... and the bodies lay piled one on top of the other” (Singh 56). This graphic imagery serves to dehumanize the victims, reducing them to anonymous bodies while simultaneously confronting readers with the scale of violence.

Unlike Pritam’s deeply interior narrative, Singh adopts a broader social perspective, examining how communal tensions are manufactured and intensified. The villagers of Mano Majra are initially unaware of the political developments leading to Partition, highlighting the artificial nature of communal divisions. As Gyanendra Pandey argues, communal identities are often “constructed through narratives of difference,” rather than inherent oppositions. Singh’s novel illustrates this process by showing how external agents – politicians, officials, and rumors – introduce suspicion and fear into an otherwise cohesive community. The transformation of Mano Majra from a peaceful village into a site of impending violence underscores the fragility of social harmony. One of the most compelling aspects of *Train to Pakistan* is its exploration of moral ambiguity. The character of Jugga, initially portrayed as a criminal, emerges as an unlikely hero through his act of sacrifice. In the climactic scene, he risks his life to stop a train carrying Muslim refugees from being attacked, ultimately sacrificing himself to save others. Singh writes, “He held on to the rope, his body taut... until the train passed” (Singh 172). This act transcends communal boundaries, suggesting that individual morality can resist collective violence. Jugga’s sacrifice challenges simplistic binaries of good and evil, revealing the complexity of human behavior in extreme situations.

While Singh’s narrative foregrounds collective experience, Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* shifts the focus to the intimate sphere of domestic life, exploring how larger historical incidents intersect with personal relationships and gender dynamics. Set in pre-Partition Punjab, the novel examines the lives of women within a patriarchal household, particularly through the characters of Satya and Roop. Baldwin’s narrative is deeply concerned with the ways in which the female body becomes a site of control, memory, and resistance. The title itself suggests that the body retains experiences that cannot be fully articulated through language. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that trauma is inscribed on the body, manifesting in physical and emotional forms. Roop’s experiences as a young

---

bride in a polygamous household reveal the complexities of female subjectivity within patriarchal structures. Her initial innocence gradually gives way to a growing awareness of her controlling agency. Baldwin writes, "Roop learns that silence is safer than speech" (Baldwin 134), highlighting how silence functions as both a survival strategy and a mechanism of control. This internalization of silence reflects broader societal expectations, where women are conditioned to suppress their desires and emotions. At the same time, the novel explores the subtle forms of resistance that emerge within these boundaries, suggesting that agency can exist even within constrained circumstances. The intersection of gender and violence becomes particularly pronounced as the narrative approaches Partition. The looming threat of communal violence exacerbates existing tensions within the household, revealing how external conflicts intensify internal struggle. Baldwin's depiction of violence is less graphic than Singh's but equally powerful in its emphasis on psychological impact. The fear of abduction, the anxiety of displacement, and the uncertainty of the future create a pervasive sense of insecurity. This aligns with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which posits that traumatic experiences are not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but return in fragmented and repetitive forms.

Across all three texts, the idea of displacement stands out as a major social and cultural issue. The Partition of India led to one of the largest movements of people in history, where millions were forced to leave their homes and start new lives in unfamiliar places. This sudden uprooting not only affected their physical location but also deeply disturbed their sense of identity and belonging. In *The Skeleton* by Amrita Pritam, Puro's experience of displacement is both external and internal. She is taken away from her family and homeland, and at the same time, she is forced to give up her original identity and accept a new one, which creates a lasting sense of alienation. Similarly, in *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, the evacuation of entire villages represents more than just physical movement; it reflects the collapse of long-standing cultural bonds and shared traditions that had existed for generations. In contrast, *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin presents displacement within the domestic space, where women are moved into new households through marriage and must adjust to unfamiliar power structures and expectations, highlighting a more intimate but equally significant form of dislocation.

Another key aspect explored in these texts is the relationship between memory and history. These literary works act as powerful alternatives to official historical records, which often overlook personal and emotional experiences. Through storytelling, they preserve voices and perspectives that might otherwise be ignored or forgotten. As Urvashi Butalia argues in *The Other Side of Silence*, "the voices of women... tell us something quite different about Partition" (Butalia 14). This observation emphasizes how women's narratives bring attention to the emotional and psychological suffering caused by violence and displacement—dimensions that are often missing from formal historical accounts. By focusing on lived experiences, these texts challenge simplified or sanitized versions of history and reveal its human cost. In this way, storytelling becomes an act of resistance, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard and remembered, and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of collective memory.

The social and cultural issues presented in these texts are not limited to the time of Partition alone; they continue to connect strongly with present-day concerns such as communal tensions, gender inequality, and identity politics. The conflicts and divisions shown in these narratives reflect patterns that are still visible in contemporary society. For instance, the communal violence depicted in *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh mirrors ongoing religious and cultural conflicts, showing how deeply rooted such divisions can be. Similarly, the gendered suffering and marginalization portrayed in *The Skeleton* by Amrita Pritam highlight the continued struggles women face within patriarchal structures. In *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, questions of identity, belonging, and power remain highly relevant in a world still shaped by social hierarchies and cultural expectations. The continued presence of these issues shows that Partition literature is not only about the past but also

---

deeply connected to the present. These texts help readers understand how historical events continue to influence current social realities. By revisiting the trauma of Partition, writers reveal how its effects are carried across generations, shaping identities, relationships, and communities even today. As Urvashi Butalia suggests in *The Other Side of Silence*, personal stories and memories play an important role in understanding history beyond official records. Such narratives bring forward the emotional and human dimensions of historical events, which are often ignored in formal accounts. These literary works do more than just recount past experiences – they offer valuable insights into the lasting impact of trauma and conflict. At the same time, they open up possibilities for healing and reconciliation by encouraging empathy, dialogue, and reflection. By engaging with these stories, readers are invited to confront difficult histories and consider ways to build a more inclusive and understanding society.

In conclusion, *What the Body Remembers*, *The Skeleton*, and *Train to Pakistan* together give a deep and detailed picture of the social and cultural issues in Punjab during Partition. By showing themes like silence, violence, displacement, and identity, these works question the usual versions of history and focus on the real experiences of ordinary and marginalized people. They show that literature acts as an important record of memory, keeping alive voices that might otherwise be forgotten. In this way, these texts help us better understand the connection between history and human life, and they remind us that the impact of Partition is still felt in society today.

### References

- Baldwin, S. S. (1999). *What the body remembers*. Anchor Books.
- Butalia, U. (2000). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Duke University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Menon, R., & Bhasin, K. (1998). *Borders and boundaries: Women in India's partition*. Kali for Women.
- Pandey, G. (2010). *Remembering partition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pritam, A. (1987). *The skeleton (Pinjar)* (K. Singh, Trans.). Sterling Publishers.
- Singh, K. (1956). *Train to Pakistan*. Penguin Books.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. University of Illinois Press.
- Tripathi, S. A. (2016). *A survey of Indian women novelists in English*. Swastik Publishers.