

# De-Othering the Other

Presentation by Shauna Singh Baldwin

for *Beyond the Nation: Partition in Diaspora Context*

Symposium: March 2022

Thank you to Dr Anjali Gera-Roy, Professor Amit Batra, and Professor Hariharan for organizing this symposium, and to Dr. Nandi Bhatia for this welcome and introduction. It's an honor to address this dispersed global audience under the guidance of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. I really appreciate it.

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If not for the Partition of 1947, my mother's family would still be living in Rawalpindi or Lahore, and my mother would never have met my father, who was from Amritsar, so I would not have been born in 1962. Like many others, I'm aware of but ungrateful for this fact of history.

My nana and nani believed they were exiled from Pindi and Lahore for just a few weeks. Like the rest of the millions displaced by the dismemberment of India, they never expected to live out their lives in Delhi. For them, permanent exile was not only from place, but from their deepest childhood memories.

In my childhood years in Delhi about 40 percent of the city's population consisted of Partition refugees. People would ask where you were from "peeche se," meaning from before Cyril Radcliffe drew his fateful lines in 1947. Lines drawn, said my grandfather, "like a child tearing up a newspaper."

The word diaspora used to refer to the Jewish diaspora, scattered by multiple persecutions. But when I began calling myself a diasporic writer, I meant those dispersed from the Partition, and then dispersed again as self-selected voluntary emigrants of Indian and Pakistani heritage. In my case, I have never held an Indian passport, but nevertheless carry India and Indians in my heart.

As Partition refugee children and grandchildren grew up, we began to compare the history we were taught in school with the lived experience of our elders of the Partition generation. For instance, you couldn't say *Happy Independence Day* to my grandfather or his fellow refugees – for them Aug 15, 1947 was a day of bitter

loss, sorrow and mourning. You couldn't sing Punjabi folk songs like *Heer* without someone breaking down in tears.

As Partition refugee children and grandchildren migrated overseas, we began comparing the history of the subcontinent to the histories of other nations. For instance, the idea that America too struggled and eventually shrugged off British Rule was considered a point of similarity between Indo-Pak and American history. But while Indians had struggled against racism and economic exploitation, American revolutionaries wanted the right to continue slavery of Africans and the exploitation of Native Americans in the United States without interference or taxation from England. This was -- and is -- not intuitively obvious to Indians who immigrated after 1965, gaining from all the civil rights battles fought by African Americans.

If you migrated from the subcontinent to Canada or Australia, settler colonial countries that were still dominions of the British Empire, your skin color rather than religion was a greater impediment to assimilation. When Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were all termed darkies, Hindoos and Pakis, it resulted in a solidarity against the majority culture that often transcended religion. And while Indians and Pakistanis were unable to meet, collaborate, research or safely inter-marry on the subcontinent we could become friends and even marry overseas. We could break out of our mental silos and compartments, patronize one another's restaurants and gas stations, and use the terms 'desi' and 'humzuban' to signal a sense of common culture.

I traveled to Pakistan on my Canadian passport in 1997 when I was researching my novel *What the Body Remembers*. People with third country passports could even reconnect with families left on the other side of Radcliffe's lines. Today we have the 1947 Partition Archive's Facebook group to help families reconnect. These reconnections can open the door to healing – or create fresh trauma.

Migrants to the UK find the British got away with colonization and Partition by simply denying their part in creating it. Oxford University currently doesn't offer a degree in the *History of Colonization*, but it does offer a nine-month graduate program in *Global and Imperial History*. But in the midst of Raj Nostalgia the post-colonial desi diaspora has set about researching and writing the history we need to record, a history steeped in the tears of our elders. From their research, we

learn the Empire was racist not only to Indians but to Native Canadians, Indigenous Australians, and the Irish. Aryan supremacist ideas offered self-justification to colonists, and has sadly trickled down to the colonized, reinforcing the Indian caste system.

In 1971, there came a war that felt never-ending to my 9-year-old self. In only 11 days, a whole country called East Pakistan disappeared off the map, and an army proved that a shared religion does not prevent rape, loot and killing of co-religionists. When Bangladesh was born, it proved the quest for religious purity embedded in the very name of Pakistan was a mirage. Even so, politicians and religious leaders in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh continue to promote the religious purity as an end in itself.

Following the 1984 state-sponsored pogroms against the Sikhs, Partition refugee families truly understood how dangerous it was to be anything but Hindu in the new India, no matter how many faujis you had in your family, no matter how many members of your family had paid for Indian independence. You could be held collectively responsible for the crime of an individual Sikh. All the while, Ahmadiyya Sufi and Ismaili Muslims; Sindhis; Christians and Hindus in Pakistan were learning how dangerous it was to be anything but Sunni Muslim in the land of the Pure.

Was this a repetition of Partition violence? Only to the extent that religion provided a cover story for another backlash against the economic success of the targets. Collective responsibility became the excuse for the violence of 1984, 1992 at Babri Masjid, Godhra in 2002 and many other traumas.

Deeming individuals to be representative of their groups, and holding groups responsible for individual crimes have become ways to enforce the prevailing majoritarian hierarchy.

Why are we desis in India and the diaspora so vulnerable to these assumptions and arguments?

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In my experience, few in the diaspora allow themselves to connect across religious lines unless required by work or economic benefit. Those who do are derided as artists, impractical idealists, or just plain stupid. Willful ignorance

keeps people apart. And our willful ignorance leads to support for rabid religious and ethnic purists such as Trump and Modi.

What is the end goal? Can any region of the world be purified of minorities?

There will always be Others in our midst, strangers who come to town, people who just don't see one story, but multiple stories. History is always being told and retold from new points of view. That's a good thing because none of us, not even our gurus, know the truth in all its facets, till we die.

Telling stories is a critical step in processing and releasing the historical trauma of Partition. Collective psychotherapy, if you will. Upto now, we have been in the realms of memoir and history. When the Partition generations are gone, we'll all be solidly in the realms of history and fiction.

The difficulty lies, as I found while writing my novels and short stories, in telling a Partition story or a cross-religious story *without further othering the Other*. And to tell the truth about Partition, the way fiction often does, often means acknowledging the role of family members or fellow Sikhs/Hindus or Muslims in the violence or their part in the economic and social revolution that was Partition.

Change – both positive and negative – begins with the individual. We can't change anyone else, but we can certainly change ourselves. So what changes would help us as individuals, as readers and writers, to process The Partition?

As individuals, our willful ignorance rises not only out of a healthy pride in our own religions, but out of fear of dilution of our moral superiority. Our mutual incomprehension results in our framing other people's religions as superstitions while ours are "The Truth," The Way, the *only* way to Moksh, Sachkhand, Janaah, Heaven.

For all the inclusiveness and secularism we preached in the 1970s and 80s, my Hindu friends probably can't explain the tradition of long hair for a Sikh man or woman any more than a Sikh can tell you why Hindus avoid barber shops and beauty salons on Tuesdays. And yet, Indian law lumps Sikhs and Hindus together.

Ask a Hindu living in Delhi where Muslim monuments crown the roundabouts at intersections, to explain the difference between the beliefs of Sunnis, Shias, Ismailis and Sufi Muslims and many will be clueless. Ask a Lahori how to celebrate

Lohri, and you won't find many familiar with the bonfire festival – Post-partition, this Punjabi festival seems excised from the Pakistani experience. Was it not Muslim enough? Few Pakistanis will allow themselves to understand Hinduism beyond condemning it for idolatry.

Ask a Muslim man or woman living in Delhi the story of Ram, Sita, Draupadi or Hanuman and they may show less confusion – minorities are required to be familiar with the religions of the majority culture to survive. However, the Indian caste system seems opaque to my Pakistani-American friends – which doesn't mean they don't have one.

When first invented, film and TV were our great hope for connection with others. Maybe we didn't realize that when storytelling for TV and film, a storyteller need only display the surfaces of people and things. Screenplay writers don't *need* to be mindreaders – though the quality of their work improves if they are. A screenplay writer can rely on actors for interpretation. It is somewhat the same for playwrights.

On the other hand, oral and written Fiction offers the illusion that one can read another person's thoughts, and see another person's life from his or her point of view. Fiction is our original virtual reality, and a means of overcoming our embodiment – without dying, that is! Fiction demands that readers hear someone else's voice if only in the reader's head. Fiction can reveal the joys, cares and sorrows that make us virtually know the Other. You can turn to fiction for healing – AND you can use it to pry the scabs off old wounds to heart and memory.

Today in India, a binary narrative (“Our Tribe is All Good and the Other is Horrid”) is leading us down the old garden path to jealousy and hatred. Once again, we hear the victim-talk of the privileged, which is known to be the most reliable indicator that someone is about to justify injustice, havoc or violence. In the larger world, It is again a time of displacement, when refugees out of the Ukraine, wielding only their courage, are fleeing war for the unknown.

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How can we break this age-old pattern? Here's my **Four Step To-Do and Do-Not-Do List for storytellers in relation to Partition:**

1. **Improve our Religious Literacy.** As citizens and as writers, we need to create authentic profiles of people and characters from different religious backgrounds. Storytellers working in text become mindreaders to convey a character's inner landscape. Anytime we go wrong, the reading public (which today is also a listening public), is presented with stereotypical characters, and typical tropes vilifying the antagonists. This is particularly awful when your antagonist is from another faith.  
We storytellers need to interview people of other faiths. We need to ask people of the other faith to be our test readers.
2. **Portray the past without nostalgia.** Fiction writers in the new worlds of Divided India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 2020s have, I feel, a responsibility to portray the past without nostalgia. Seventy-five years after Partition, we don't have to wallow in nostalgia and self-pity. Our challenge now is to move past angry mourning and re-mourning. Because: WHICH imagined realm can we describe today? The gloss that familiarity held for my grandparents has faded 75 years after Partition. Raj Nostalgia, nostalgia for some supposedly golden era before Partition or to an era before the British and the Mughals only leads to more othering, more alienation.
3. **Become curious about Others.** I believe post-Partition adjustment will begin when we encourage our curiosity about others. Curiosity will help us understand the awe felt by others in the presence of their best and transcendent selves. We need to encourage curiosity that helps us to reach across boundaries and do the hard work of studying the Other -- *not* for revalidation of one's own faith, but for enlarging and enriching our lived experience. Curiosity about an Other's religion will enlarge the meaning of the Hindustani word APNA so that *everyone* becomes APNE.
4. **Support and promote friendships between people of different faiths and races:** including intermarriage between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Muslims, and Hindus and Sikhs. If our religions are so fragile they cannot handle intermarriage, then we should rethink them. The diaspora can show the way for this one, in the hope that change in India will follow.

Am I saying there is no real enemy? No.

Our belief that there can ever be Purity of religious belief and homogeneity of worship is the real enemy. We will never be Pure Hindu enough, Pure Sikh enough, Pure Muslim enough or Pure Christian enough for our self-appointed or hereditary religious leaders. And, breaking restrictions against interreligious friendships *and marriages* is, I believe, key to healing the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh-Christian divide.

Does this sound like some Indo-Pak Science Fiction?

We can decide if the ancestral inheritance that is Partition will lead us to close our hearts, armor up and retreat into cemented compartments and silos of our religions and new geographies -- or open our hearts and waken to post-traumatic growth and healing. We can simulate new ways and solutions in the crucible of Fiction, even as we describe and portray the old.

The opposite of Purity is hybridity and pluralism.

**So, I invite you to create and support stories about people who are hybrid in birth, thinking and religious affiliation. I invite you to create and support stories about the interaction of people from different religious traditions than your own.**

**Our challenge as writers is to stretch past our own tribe to write stories about strangers and Others. Our challenge as readers is to empathize, then act from that empathy.**

It's time we all set about doing the hard work of de-othering the Other.

Thank you.