

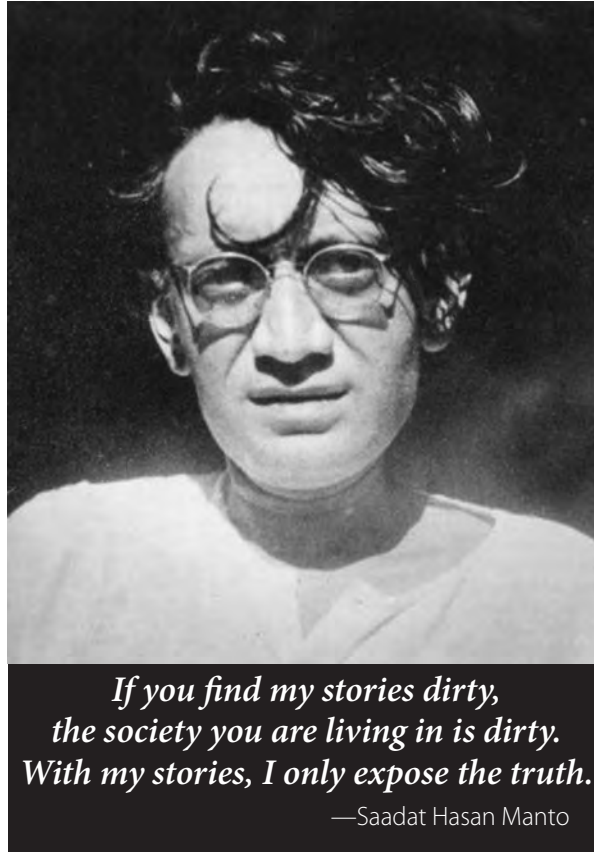
# Teaching About the 1947 Partition of British India

## *Literature and Oral History*

By Shobna Nijhawan

**H**ow do you divide a nation into two respective nation-states? Who is authorized to draw the borders, and what happens to the people on either side of these borders when they resettle due to their religion? How did South Asian literature and oral narrative come to terms with the violence that accompanied decolonization processes after 1947, and why is the history of Partition relevant today? The year 1947 marks Indian Independence from British colonial rule and the Partition of British India into two (and later three) nation-states: the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which included East Pakistan that became Bangladesh in 1971. What is annually celebrated in military parades as the victory over British imperialism in India and the creation of a new nation-state in Pakistan also carries a less glorious reality, i.e., the mass migrations and the loss of lives and families of millions of ordinary people as they left their homes in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal to resettle: Hindus and Sikhs moved from what was to become Pakistan to India, and Muslims from India to Pakistan. This essay discusses source materials for use in the classroom that go beyond the official documentation of the political events surrounding the end of colonial rule and the creation of two nation-states. It focuses on literature, ethnography, and a digital oral history project. These materials are all easily accessible for teaching purposes.

In the wake of celebrating fifty years of Indian Independence over British colonial rule in 1997, scholarship not only engaged with the history of the Indian freedom struggle from a South Asian perspective, but also with the painful and often-silenced aspects of Indian Independence. One of the most important and engaged books written about the Partition of India by the feminist historian Urvashi Butalia (1997) pushes this engagement beyond historical “facts” and official numbers, and presents a narrative on the Partition of British India that is based on oral testimony and personal history. From among the twelve million Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh migrants who left their homes to relocate in the new nation-states India and Pakistan, an estimated one million people died. Approximately 75,000 women were said to have been abducted and raped.<sup>1</sup> Butalia’s absorbing account gives voice to the individual pain and collective trauma faced especially by women such as Partition survivor Damayanti, whose captivating narrative may well be used in excerpts in the classroom; orphaned children; and the social workers involved in the recovery operations as they remember the events revolving around Partition. In her introduction, Butalia further addresses important questions of historiography and methodology useful for any student of history: Who is entitled to write the history of Partition?



*If you find my stories dirty,  
the society you are living in is dirty.  
With my stories, I only expose the truth.*

—Saadat Hasan Manto

Saadat Hasan Manto. Source: *Wikipedia* at <https://tinyurl.com/y9vszvs5a>.

Whose voices are included, and whose are left out? How does an emphasis on gender impact the writing of history, and, lastly, how “credible” is a history that is based on the memory of survivors?

Celebrating seventy years of Indian Independence and the creation of Pakistan in 2017, scholarly engagement with the topic continues. Particular interest lies in a genre in South Asian literature called Partition literature. The narrative pursued in this literary genre is once again not necessarily that of freeing the subcontinent from British imperialism, but a narrative of pain, violence, and loss. It is about the forced migration and resettlement that came with the Partition of the country and reflects critically on the impact of politicians’ decisions about the lives of ordinary people. Literature is particularly suitable to give life to the impact of political decision-making. By focusing on individual characters, very often women, and their attempts to remake lives, literature also offers social and political critique based on issues of gender related to the Partition. Such critique pertains not only to the South Asian subcontinent, but may apply to other trouble spots around the world where people are prosecuted or

forced to leave their homelands, such as Syria, Ruanda, and Congo. One proponent of this literary genre is Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955).<sup>2</sup>

A prolific writer, translator, and journalist, Manto was born in the Ludhiana District of Punjab (present-day India).<sup>3</sup> Like other writers living in and writing about this period of South Asian history, such as Khushwant Singh (1915–2014)<sup>4</sup> and Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915–1984),<sup>5</sup> he gives voice to the silence around the “other” side of Partition that is not readily remembered in nationalist narratives of independence from British colonial rule. At the center of such literature are very often marginalized people. What crystallizes in this literature is the failure of colonial state officials, the police in particular, but also social workers and volunteers who misused and abused power. Manto thinks beyond the losses and gains faced by the two nation-states. At times full of almost-unbearable pain and violence, at other times satirical, but always with a clearly identifiable and yet strategically voiced critique of the politics surrounding Partition and the price paid for independence, his perspective is not on the major players in the struggle against colonial rule, such as the Viceroy of India Lord Mountbatten, representatives of the Indian National Congress (established 1885) such as Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the spokesman of the Muslim League (established 1906) Mohammad Ali Jinnah, or Master Tara Singh from the (Sikh) Shiromani Akali Dal Party (established 1925). Instead, he looks at the fate of ordinary, often-marginalized people, such as fathers and daughters, women and children, and the

RESOURCES  
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Screen capture of “Why Should High School Students Learn about the History of India’s Independence and the Partition of 1947?” Source: The Choices Program at Brown University at <https://tinyurl.com/y9ekxj4p>. For an additional map that details changes from the period of 1947–1955, please see *A Historical Atlas of South Asia*, second impression, ed., Joseph E. Schwartzberg (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1992, reprint), 77. The map is available online at <https://tinyurl.com/ybkekv9z>.

inmates of an asylum for the insane who were impacted by the decisions of political actors. Manto’s numerous short stories on the topic also mirror his own position as a dislocated Punjabi Muslim trying to make sense of Partition.

Manto’s short story “Open It!” centers on the young woman Sakina, who in the wake of the mass migrations from India to Pakistan is gang raped by a group of self-appointed social workers. It illustrates Sakina’s father’s changing attitudes toward his daughter and also asks the reader to rethink notions of honor and respect in times of crisis. Caught in the midst of riots, Sakina’s father had lost sight of his daughter as he bent to pick up her *dupatta*, a piece of cloth worn over a woman’s traditional attire to cover her breasts and head. While Sakina asks him to not bother, he is concerned

about the symbolic purpose of the dupatta, as a woman is considered naked without this piece of cloth (although she is wearing clothes). After several days in search of Sakina, he is reunited with her in the hospital. As the doctor asks to open the window, Sakina, barely alive, takes his words “open it” as a command directed toward her and opens the string of her pants.<sup>6</sup> Her father exclaims: “she is alive.” He is filled with joy regardless of the rape of his daughter.

Students may want to engage in a follow-up discussion on questions of women’s “lost” honor and shame, as it is not only in times of crisis such as wars and feud that conflict is carried out on the bodies of women and children. Such a discussion may include contemporary contexts as promulgated through film and the media, in which women are expected to

carry the “honor” of a nation and often become “emblematic of tradition.”<sup>77</sup> In the short story “Toba Tek Singh” (1955), Manto satirizes the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, promulgated by the Indian and Pakistani states in 1949. This act was intended to regulate the relocation of lost and abducted women and children with their families. Though never voicing any explicit or overt critique of the act, his short story centers on Bishan Singh and other insane persons living in an asylum who need to undergo the process of relocation from Pakistan to India and vice versa. For Singh, however, figuring out where Toba Tek Singh, his place of origin, is located after the Partition proves to be a complicated matter that cannot be resolved in this story. His incomprehensible babbling is indicative of the incomprehensibility of Partition and its aftermath. “With wonderful subtlety and literary restraint,” writes Frances Pritchett, who has also provided a translation of this Urdu short story into English, “the author allows us—and thus also forces us—to invent our own ending.”<sup>78</sup> Teachers are encouraged to follow this appeal with their students in the classroom. This short story, like many other short stories of Manto, has also been rendered into film and is available on the internet.

Apart from literature, oral testimony is a valuable source to learn about the events of 1947: the 1947 Partition Archive was launched by a nonprofit organization in 2009 with the help of crowdsource funding and houses a collection of recorded narratives by individuals who lived through the Partition of British India and who recollect their memories as children and young adults experiencing forced migration, the loss of family and friends, and meeting nationalist politicians of the time. They may well be paired with Butalia’s account and Manto’s short stories to discuss diverse means to learn about Partition. A good starting point into the topic is the clip

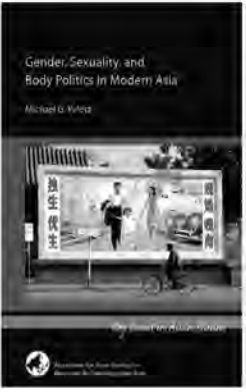
at <https://tinyurl.com/y8wh5lfp>. It includes personal narrative alongside facts on Partition and lays out the objective of the archive.<sup>9</sup> From there, students may browse other short clips in which Partition survivors tell their narratives. A short clip by a student involved with the project alerts viewers to the insufficient memorialization of the victims of Partition and is accessible online.<sup>10</sup> A discussion on the importance of memory in oral history can be based on narratives such as those of Shane Ali and Ajit Cour, which are both accessible from the webpage. Through such interviews, students get a better sense of how decisions made by politicians impacted the lives of ordinary people of the time. This Partition Archive may also encourage students, South Asian heritage students in particular, to interview family or community members who lived through the Indian Independence struggle and the Partition of the subcontinent. Final group projects by students can be uploaded to the 1947 Partition Archive.<sup>11</sup> ■

## NOTES

1. Recently, the Indian government raised this number to 83,000. See Palash Gosh, “Partition of India and Pakistan: The Rape of Women on an Epic, Historic Scale,” *International Business Times*, August 16, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/yc54tgl4>.
2. Manto’s Urdu writing has been translated by scholars and writers such as Alok Bhalla, *Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997), Aatish Taseer, *Manto: Selected Stories* (Noida: Random House India, 2008), and Tahira Naqvi, *The Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1985).
3. Ayesha Jalal, *The Pity of Partition: Manto’s Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
4. Khushwant Singh, *A Train to Pakistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).
5. Rajinder Singh Bedi, “Lajwanti.” See <https://tinyurl.com/yb7avyhe>.
6. It may be noted that the original Urdu sentence “open it” is translated in an interpretative move in the English version as “open the window.”
7. This phrase is taken from Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 88–126.
8. “Storynotes: Toba Tek Singh,” *Columbia University*, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ybjmud3p>.
9. Scholarly background information (especially for teachers) on the making of the archive are available on the *Emory University Digital Humanities Symposium* at <https://tinyurl.com/y9c7y8h5> (click on “Archives Panel”).
10. “Navneet Singh Reflects on Listening to Stories,” YouTube, “The 1947 Partition Archive,” October 10, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/y82k5vpw>.
11. Additional recommended resources: Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Duke University Press, 2000 [1997]); Saadat Hasan Manto, “Toba Tek Singh” (trans. Frances Pritchett), <https://tinyurl.com/45xnkxz>; Saadat Hasan Manto, “Open It” (trans. Alok Bhalla), <https://tinyurl.com/ydeugqvp>; *The 1947 Partition Archive* <https://tinyurl.com/yaj7dvy>; *The Digital South Asia Library* (with maps documenting the Partition process), <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/maps>.

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