



## **Consciousness of time, history and myth decenter the narratives of *Basti* and *The Sleepwalkers* to create modernist texts that resist neat closures. Discuss**

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### **Abstract**

The novels that are to be talked about in this paper further are texts by writers who chose to write about Partition much later experiencing it firsthand. Intizar Husain's novel, *Basti* and Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers* are texts that portray the affect that partition caused deeply on the psychologies of the survivors and also giving us an account of the repercussions that followed.

**Keywords:** partition, history, myth, Muslims, time, modernism, settlement

### **Introduction**

Before dealing with the above-mentioned texts it's necessary to understand the concept of modernist texts in Hindi/Urdu writings. Modernism, to be very precise, is a European phenomenon in literature, originated in European countries in the twentieth century and emerged fully during the First World War. The colossal destruction and mass carnage during the war found its way in the texts of the contemporary writers. Since then, a literary era of modernist writers and their writings took shape in West. The Eastern countries, particularly India/Pakistan, has also its history of modernist writings. It would be incorrect to say that it was only because of the influence of West that the seeds of modernism were sown in Hindi/Urdu writings, however it started during colonialism and also, many Indian writers were reading the European literature in 1940s. Premchand; considered as the first modern writer, started giving modern works right from the beginning of the twentieth century itself. His Hindi/Urdu texts focus on new contexts, and the lived experiences of 'lifelike' characters in a changing society. The emphasis on the individual's psyche than the external world, non-linear narrative, going back to the blissful past and history, and leaving the text with an open-end has been found common in many European and Hindi/Urdu modernist texts. Where the WWI ensued modernism in West, the dislocation and mismatch in a new society after partition facilitated modernist works in Urdu and Hindi. Keeping all this in mind, the focus of this paper is on the two worth noting texts; *Basti* and *Sleepwalkers* by Intizar Husain and Joginder Paul respectively. Both of these writers exhibit the trauma people still trying to deal with as the consequence of the partition. The continuous back and forth movement of the narrative/time, profound use of the myths and symbols, going back to the far past and, above all the open-ending of both the texts, put them under the category of the modernist works. This paper seeks to scrutinise these elements more deeply and tries to prove the mentioned texts, in all likelihood, modernist writings.

"Today there seems to be more trouble than usual."

"Well, yesterday's rumor proved to be false."

"But yesterday people took it as an absolute truth."

"Yes, yesterday it seemed to be absolutely true."

*Basti, Chapter 2.*

Before we delve into the complex narratives of the characters in the novels *Basti* and *Sleepwalkers*, one should take time and ponder over why certain individuals at certain points in time *seems to* have grown frigid and stagnant in their imagination to an extent that the world and consequently the reality they perceive is an offshoot of that ordeal. Roland Barthes in his introduction to *Mythologies* 1957 states that, 'the starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the site of the naturalness with which newspaper, art, and commonsense constantly dress up a reality which even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history'. History then is a record from above, subject to change but naturalized under the label of culture (social customs that determine the way of life, morals and norms) which then is seen as inevitable and God-given. Titles are a horizon of expectations, a pothole to the labyrinth under -and the tiles '*Basti*' and '*Sleepwalkers*' arise in the reader's mind multiple ranges of questions such as: Settlement? Sleep walking? Amnesia? Insanity? Astral projection.

In *Sleepwalkers* the concept of a city coming to life through the consciousness or unconsciousness (which is repression of the former) of the people who've migrated from their homeland is a painful yet artistic representation of a shared, communal identity of the times. *Basti* being re-created and re-presented in tangible (Lukhnavi-style homes, food, clothes, preferences) and intangible (memories, dreams, imagination) forms, serve as the pivotal keystone in shaping a coping mechanism. Pakistan was the 'Promised Land', a land set apart for the people of Allah but on reaching there, a reincarnation had taken place. People had brought their homes with them rather than assimilate with the place! Karachi 'became' Lucknow. One wonders what Afzal means when he says 'Pakistan is a trust'. 'Pakistan' when the notion was conceived, had no geographical location but took shape based on the defining principle 'Muslims are a nation', a feeling completely different from Canaan which was the promised land of the Jews. Nonetheless when partition of 1947 happened how was a people dispersed (for

being a Muslim did not require a physical location -just as a statement that all Christians are in America is fallacious) now to create a new identity which required a division of the self and the other; a people who up till then had a shared inheritance? For a nation to thrive and live a history was imperative, for how would a nationalist feeling or a sense of belonging exist?

We ask (as most of the critics of Intizar Hussain asked), why is there a need to foreground, to revisit events, places and people – why not let it just be a memory, a ghost of the past? And why turn to fiction if at all to represent human emotion -for fiction, ethnologically refers to something not actual; even Plato calls it just a reflection of the real (ideal) world, that fiction was mimetic and twice removed from reality. However, Joginder Paul says of his writings that, “I have suffered every single one of my stories. I have experienced them in such a way that my characters often appear to be nothing but reflections of my own being. Even when I am no more, I am sure I will remain alive by virtue of my characters. The grain of life is the same, after all. And if it is so, where do people go after they have lived through their own lives? I went on slipping naturally into the open so that I may realize the desire of my own life in the lives of others.” Isabella Bruschi in her preface to *Partition in fiction: A gendered perspective* (2010) mentions, “literature as a form of Art, can work as what has been defined “post-memoery”, a means to break the barriers created by a painful past, recollecting it “through an imaginative investment and creation”. Fiction’s purpose here then helps give a more humanistic, deeply felt and experienced perspective of the Partition which greatly alters from the official discourse of it.

“The impressionists see real living lines without geometrical forms built from thousands of irregular touches which at a distance give things life” (Jules Lafarge, 1883)

The modernist movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century traced growth not in the conventional biological manner but in terms of exploration, awakenings and resistance – novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf) and *Sons and Lovers* (D.H Lawrence). In the case of Zakir, his development and growth are marked by his consciousness which at first is influenced by his immediate surroundings (Rupnagar) and then by the socio-political proceedings that require migration (to Vyaspur, to Lahore) which defines his existence. It doesn’t necessarily give him a reason for revolution (inner and outer) or prospects for the future as he feels events from Karbala, to 1857, to 1947, to 1970 are variations of the same tale of violence, death and mass migration. The story narrated to us is of a cyclic nature that begins where it ends. Time ticks when waiting for the war planes to go during curfew, time swirls when trying to take a walk – so much that Zakir even forgets for a while how to walk! Intizar Husain transcends the conventional method of viewing history in a chronological manner and engages in a dialectic discourse travelling between time, space, culture and religion. Zakir is seen trying to make sense, place his finger upon what exactly is missing, absent and he fails miserably. His present location and his formative past intermingle causing boundaries across spatial and temporal locations to blur. Zakir and Deewane Maulvi Saheb refuses to engage directly with the present (by describing a mob

faraway, by causally noticing the shop he likes burned, etc) “The rally was in full swing, and suddenly people had begun shouting slogans. Closing the window, he sat down again in his chair’. What rally? What slogan?” Memory serves rather than an escape, a form of temporary shelter because like specks and splashes of paint of the Impressionists, diverse and each distinct blotch that threaten insanity, the limit of the canvas sheet and present life draws the border.

“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...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?”

There is a ‘ruptured identity’ in the case of Zakir (the one who remembers). His self has been divided and abandoned (whether the self or the other) on a side where he can no longer return to. When something/someone is lost, almost immediately one goes back in time and recalls it- wanting to relive revive that memory and this is true of Zakir and Deewane Maulvi Saheb. And despite his intentions to reconcile his past with the present – the deliberate blurring of lines, he fails- atleast in the form of his childhood love Sabirah. A collective amnesia is insisted by the indifference in the destruction around ‘with the passage of time (pedestrian eyes) had lost its power to surprise’. Somewhere Zakir understands the importance of resolving the matters of the heart – and thus risks being labeled nostalgic (both the author and him) Intizar Husain in his interview with Aisf Farrukhi speaks of a block in the writer’s imagination and thoughts that his perception or the lens through which he sees the world is a projection of his inner turmoil and thus colored.

Husain has extensively and deliberately embedded meta-Shia narratives throughout his text. Using Zakir as his mouthpiece, Husain again and again, lays out the myths of Shia Muslims to draw a parallel with the upside-down circumstances in Pakistan. The smiting of Abel by his own brother Cain with a rock, according to Shi’ites is the first instance of fratricide. And then onwards fratricide is being committed and is still continue without any end. Reference to this myth question the necessity of partition of India. If two distinct cultures; Hindu and Muslims, were bounded to be in existence as two different nations, then what leads the disintegration of a nation (Pakistan) of the same culture? Why Bangladesh as a separate entity is needed, if it has same culture as Pakistan has? Not only Muslim, but reflection of Hindu mythology can also be noticed in this novel. Deep down in his memories, Zakir witnesses a submerging city, whose protector ‘has left this place and gone to the forest.’ It is the city of Dwarka and the protector of this city was Lord Krishna. This sinking of Dwarka is actually very similar to the inflicted violence the newly created country Pakistan faces and ironically, the ones who had demanded it as a separate country now are disappeared; they are not there to protect it anymore. This myth is equally defining the downfall Rupnagar might have faced. The progress Rupnagar should have experienced just after the advent of the electric poles and then electricity, is never highlighted. Opposite to this, the continuous death of monkeys coming in contact with the electric poles is painstakingly underlined. It foreshadows the metaphorical

death of Muslim families like Zakir's, who had to leave it for a single community i.e; Hindus. So, whether it's this side or the other side of the boundary, both are facing the same consequences. And quite reasonably, therefore, for Zakir "*Rupnagar and this city [in Pakistan] have merged together inside me, and become one town.*" [CH-VII]. There is no difference left between the two.

Needless to say, both the narratives of the mentioned texts focus on a subjective self, but strikingly the experiences of the subjective selves are almost same. Where Maulvi Sahab, due to his 'insanity' relaxes in a virtual Lucknow, Zakir very consciously takes comfort in recalling Rupnagar's life. There are, however, other elements; myths, histories and temporality of the texts (as discussed above) which collectively resist any possibility of a centremost aspect of these two texts. Further, every other element provokes a reader to widen his/her subjective understanding of novels while dealing with them. And this, accordingly, provides an open-endedness to the texts instead of a cul-de-sac one.

The Novels don't directly deal with the present events the characters live in. We see glimpses of it but heavily induced with the past (like the present in Sleepwalkers is a result of its past). Memory is steeped in nostalgia and is fragmented. Progressive writers had the tendency to look back at the past as an event wrapped in melancholy with a golden tint but the novel struggles this insistence in the fact that if one relives and revives the past it is only in its horrors. One also hints a critique of the workings of the communist party in Basti for the Progressive writers seemed to have pushed for a particular Marxist ideology. In comparison to Jootha Sach which can be categorized as a nouveau historical novel – Basti and Sleepwalkers are the result of 'that official history'. Both Zakir and Deewane Maulvi live in a reality created by their memories. Their notion of what's real comes as a result of their experience hence making it seem subjective – however it wasn't because it was a collective consciousness of the people. Urvashi Butalia in her introduction to Colors of Violence dedicates her book to among others, her grandmother whom she states 'lived partition till her death'.

'...this whole world comes down to a mosquito sitting near a cow's nostrils. If the mosquito goes away, where will the world be? So we exist at the mercy and good pleasure of a mosquito, but we don't realize it, and we're vainglorious'.

Banking on the stamen of Jean-Paul Satre that, 'The imagination frees a person from inhabiting any single given reality' one seems to be able to link various contemporary events of the novel with its narrations. Basti opens with an outbreak of pustules/ disaster to the point of despair that even the doctor who is seen as the messiah (Joshi) cannot save his wife- but there is healing eventually so is there hope in the end? The infestation of monkeys in Rupnagar is symbolic of the partition times for Zakir asks, 'there was no telling what towns, what forests, the monkeys had come from. The storming of the great Himalayan monkey reminds one of the 1857 mutiny when the Sikhs from Punjab marched towards Delhi fort. People left, people came, but they always returned – even the monkeys, even electricity! Therefore, the narrator seems to bank on this phenomenon. When the narrator comes back to Rupnagar to visit Khalah Jan he views unchanged Rupnagar with

'contended wonder'. So different from today's generation of 'Did you ever make it out of that town where nothing ever happened' (Hello, by Adele). Do both the novels seek to find a resolution within the structure of the society they are in? And if so, what boundaries are they melting.

The modernist slogan 'All that is solid melts into the air' is resonant in the atmosphere inhabiting both the worlds of the novels (Basti and Sleepwalkers). Though Intizar Husain and Joginder Paul wrote decades after the partition of 1947 (in the 1970's), the psychological impact of the event has its reverberations like ripples in a pond, like vibrations of a great bell still heard though struck a long while ago. The stories of many individuals like Sain Baba who had been a 'mohajir' all his life by virtue of never belonging anywhere, like Ishaq Mizra who exhausts his mind every time he tries to write – for writing involves stating feelings and concretizing ideas, like Manwa Chowkidar who is the only witness to the midnight lives of people around him, like Azizo the chaiwala who asks, 'what do you know of the wild storms that keep raging throughout the day in these small cups?'...they fail to come to a proper conclusion. And they precisely fail not because the author has forgotten their narratives but because they resist their supposed endings. Just like Paul towards the closure of the novel 'turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast... He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly'. [SL 464] Their stories place the reader as the center, the present around which histories revolve. Time in the novel is like an ebbing river that flows in and around consciousness of characters compelling the reader to do the same. Orthodox conception of time in seconds, minutes, hours to centuries are melted down, decentered. Space and reality here come to be occupied by folktales of the old, mythical battles and origin of the world. So even though Achhi Begum of the novel who fears that her husband Deewane Maulvi Saheb would step into 'Pakistani corridors' dies – many Acchi Begums, Deewanes, Azizos, Zakirs, Abba Jans, Afzals, Salamats, Surendars still live on in the nooks and crannies of streets and metros.

'When he had finished telling everything, he told everything again, and then told everything once more. Every time, he told it as if he were telling it for the first time'.

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