



Of Caps, Radios, and Flying Men: Alternate (Hi)stories of 1947

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Abstract

The 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan has been well-documented across disciplines for its accounts of violence, separation, loss, and exile. Literature has also stood as an active witness through texts from across genres which engage with the event and the politics around it. Among the myriad ways in which literature has dealt with Partition, the general framework of my proposed article is informed by the poetics of remembrance. Memory is one of the common keywords that get taken up while discussing Partition: what are some of the characteristics of the memory which is invoked in relation to this specific event? How do we read the transformation of memory into stories? There are a host of stories that remember and relate the stories of lines and borders being drawn but, on a subterranean level, the materiality and inevitably with which they are invoked render the dividing lines even more questionable and arbitrary. Within the suggested framework, I would like to elaborate on two relatively recent texts to study the intersection of partition and children's literature. While the intended readership is a core component of my exploration, the emphasis on "recent" prompts me to contextualize the genre alongside the temporal juncture in which they were conceived and published. I will look at Nina Sabnani's (b. 1956) *Mukund and Riaz* (2007) and Varun Grover's (b.1980) *Paper Thief* (2019). Sabnani's picture book (also an animated short film) tells the story of two childhood friends who, because of one's family having to migrate to India, could not grow up together; Grover's book is a collection of short stories out of which I will focus on "Radio" and "Harihar Vichittar". The selected texts are not just stories based on Partition but picture books/ illustrated stories, dealing with Partition, intended for young readers. This triangulation warrants a recalibration of the ways in which one engages with Partition narratives owing to the visual relaying or interpellation that inflect both the verbal and the visual as the text unfolds; the moment which finds a place in the illustration, as a visual beckoner, almost flirts with the unity of the text. How two storytellers use the often-subversive genre of children's literature to suggest not just an alternate history but alternate ways of being with one's memory encloses the skein of questions I shall weave in the course of the article.

Keywords: Partition, Children's Literature, Picturebooks, Memory, Event.



“Beyond the name there lies what has no name”

Jorge Luis Borges, “Compass”

Where are you from? I am unable to name any one place as an answer to this question. Each time, my answer takes the form of a winding, story-like sentence which contains words like Punjab, Pakistan, Partition, and refugee.ⁱ

The opening lines of Varun Grover’s “Radio” carry a telling detail that hints toward the complexities that colour the ideas of belonging. The names of those places are not listed as the *names* of places; instead, the narrator categorizes his compulsive response as words (*shabd*). This way, language is invoked in a manner that underlines the difficulty of belonging to places that have stayed unchanged at the level of names but changed in and with time. Names are evocative. They bring along the corresponding sights, sounds, and emotions, thus slyly accommodating all that follows, and often precedes, the name. The narrator is too far from the places he names not just spatiotemporally but also emotionally. He seeks to make plain the gulf between him and his origins by resorting to the feverish, arbitrary words ‘each time’ when asked about his home. He is unable to concoct a testimony to his being via his origins; or, it is the narrator’s inability to name a place that really testifies to his loss, the lacuna in his personal history, even more resoundingly. This intersection of history and memory, as it unravels in testimonies mediated through select fiction based on the Partition of 1947, constitutes the general preoccupation of this essay.

My choice of texts includes three stories divided between two authors involving multiple media and collaborators. *Mukand and Riaz* (2005) is an animation-short film directed by Nina Sabnani (b. 1956).ⁱⁱ It was produced by the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad (hereafter NID-A). As is mentioned in the end credits of the short, it is based “on a real story as told by Mukand Sabnani”, her father, who had lived and grown up in Karachi till the events of 1947 forced their family to migrate to what became India after the Partition. The movie was adapted into a picture storybook in 2007 and translated into Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. The book was published in 2007 in association with NID-A. For the purposes of this essay, I shall engage with the English text of the book and its Hindi translation by Veena Shivpuri. I shall gloss upon areas such as adaptation, translation, illustrations/frames, and narrative as I connect the dots between memory and history with respect to both Sabnani’s short and book. Meanwhile, *Paper Chor* is a collection of seven short stories in Hindi penned by Varun Grover (b. 1980). Each



story carries an illustration by Chandramohan Kulkarni. I shall engage with two of its stories viz. “Radio” and “Harihar Vichittar”. Since the collection is yet to be translated into English, I have furnished a provisional translation of the lines and words from the stories, as and when needed. The narrator of “Radio” relates the story of a few people in his family and their lives in the run-up to and after the Partition as it confusedly navigates through the questions of home, belonging, and relationships. The story works as a poignant commentary on how the structures of storytelling are contingent not simply upon interhuman relationships but also on the relationships we establish with the inanimate world around us, something stated pithily by the Pakistani Urdu writer Intizar Husain in one of his essays on the short-story genre:

The poem and the story are not solely human means of expression; they were born from the interaction of the human and the non-human. The story was born in a time when trees were many on this earth, and men few.ⁱⁱⁱ

Human relationships undergo a transformation in times of crisis. “Harihar Vichittar” works with a frame narrator. This narrator, a young man, mediates between Jhaayi ji’s account of Harihar Vichittar and us. His grandmother’s memory is on a rapid decline. The narrator keeps egging on Jhaayi ji to know who was Harihar Vichittar only to realize that perhaps he had been asking twisted questions all along. All three stories work with the Partition of 1947 as their backdrop, the context visibly betrayed by their verbal narrative. The narrators in both of these short stories from *Paper Chor* grapple with multiple roles and temporalities. They are planted as the first readers of the story they put together after quite a bit of scouring and prodding. Their responses, both as queries and realizations, are embedded in the stories that reach us in their voice. While there is no intention to sidestep the verbal detailing in any of the three texts, I am particularly interested in visual interludes, depictions, and designs/interpretations included by Sabnani and Kulkarni in the respective works. The most common images that emerge from the visual retellings of Partition, photographic, motion or portrait, are that of exodus, grief, violence and loss. While those images rightfully capture the mood of the time, we should be cognizant of the variety of responses an event can evoke depending on the age, locale, socio-economic background, and so on of the human subjects involved. It is with this intent to roll back the teleological ways in which we have grown to remember and recall Partition that I have composed the coordinates of this paper. As an event, the lexicon surrounding Partition is identifiable with words such as history, loss, migration, trauma, and memory; how these ideas manifest in the corresponding visual explications of the above works, and the ways in which



they transform the texts or get transformed themselves in the process, informs the focus of this essay.

Let us begin by considering the illustration that punctuates “Radio” (Figure 1). The composition divides the page into three panels. The parts occupying the top and bottom of the page depict the movement of people in opposite directions, implying the two-way migration caused by the Partition. The blurred and overlapping treatment of human figures and their paraphernalia seems to convey the collective plight, depicting the collapsed difference between the personal and the social. Kulkarni goes as far as painting the faces of those human figures but withholds emoting them, thus solemnly observing the inability and futility to ever testify and recover the inexplicable emotions and responses people dealt with as they turned their backs to their homes and lives. The absence of page margins accentuates movement: the innumerable steps that countless people were forced to take on their long journey to the other side of the line, reaching a place which will have to be made home. Unlike the hazy, feverish movement of the human figures, the titular radio, which sits in the middle panel of his composition, carries well-defined lines and colours. It is not merely the fulcrum of this illustration but also of its proprietor’s life in the short story. The radio’s unfading aura and its non-negotiable significance in the household are emphasized by the rather unidentifiable ground on which it has been shown to rest, further underscoring the uncertainty of those times. The illustration, thus, is in constant conversation with the constituent coordinates of the story. What does this conversation possibly entail for the readers’ engagement with “Radio”? Is it possible to land the same set of readings of the short story in contention when read without the illustration? Are there certain openings in the story that solicit the illustration or inch closer to completeness because of it? “Radio” is neither a picture-story nor an illustrated story. The illustration accompanies the story; or, the illustration punctuates “Radio”. One of the foremost things that Kulkarni’s visual interlude accomplishes seems to be embedded in its choice of the spatial and temporal frame of the story. Instead of concretizing the baffled narrator’s account (which, it may be noted, is itself a work of collaboration across generations and relations) or reviving the left-behind radio and those slain after it, the illustration carves out its own temporal niche which accommodates the past and the present, or, both the event and its memory. The space in which the elements of the composition unravel also seems like a deliberate, foregrounded artifice with no pretensions to abide by the real/realistic. Thus, the stylized treatment of space-time in the illustration wrests the story from being tethered to any one time

or place invoked in the narrative. While the visual treatment of the story is not as overburdened in “Radio” as it would be in a picture-story or a thoroughly illustrated story, the voiced account is rendered open on more than a few counts due to the illustration accompanying it.

Similarly, after reaching the middle of the story, the narrator of “Harihar Vichittar” transfers the reins of the story to his grandmother: ‘After that, whatever Jhaayi ji told me, I am writing it all here in her words.’^{iv} But, even before that happens, we are presented with the illustration of the story which makes for the second page of the story in the book.^v Like the illustration for “Radio”, no margins other than the end of the page have been observed. This move, to not observe margins on the page, resoundingly rejects the incorporation of a similar, dividing line in a story that preoccupies itself with the memory of an event which cut through homes, communities, cultures, and stories. This, the nonchalance with which Kulkarni’s reimagination or transcription foregoes the lines that the characters of both “Radio” and “Harihar Vichittar” contend with, each in their different ways and time, gain even more in meaning. The second part of the story’s/character’s name, “Vichittar”, poses more than a few problems not just concerning translation but also interpretation. While the word, when considered in isolation, means strange and quaint, the man who ends up being called Harihar Vichittar is much more than an infallible, magic-wielding figure. His abilities are situated right in the middle of politically decrepit and communally ravaged times before and after the Partition and derive their significance from successful and unsuccessful interventions he makes:

I have just spoken to Gandhiji. He has not yet agreed to the division. He merely nodded in agreement but has said he will meet Jinnah and some damned Englishman by the name of Mount Paatan (or some such name!) on the eve of 15th August, overturn the whole issue and put it to rest.^{vi}

However, the illustration does not wait for all these details to be listed. Vichittar is not subject to our linear, one-way chronologies anymore as he is being focalized through Jhaayi ji’s vacillating memory. His existence did not depend on the stock ideas of space and time of those around her. It is this empathetic yet unattached aspect of his personality that the illustration proposes first and foremost: the harmony with which disjunct elements have been arranged in the composition (Figure 2) embody the defiance which he exuded. Unlike the sepia wash in the illustration for “Radio”, this illustration alternates between patches of freshness and haziness. Vichittar and his feats are as fresh or as distant as Jhaayi ji remembers or does not remember them. Both her memory and its occasional lapses shape the movement of the story. Nobody knows for sure who was this Harihar Vichittar who is invoked so often yet never introduced. It



is this space, the fluidity of his personality, that colours our response to the illustration. Unlike the radio in the previous story, the frame narrator's origins are not answered by this story. The history/story of his being unfolds with the help of numerous narratives abounding the personal ways in which his family had tried to apprehend history as it unravelled. Having an illustration that seems more fixed in certain time and space, a spectacle witnessed or believed by Jhaayi ji, does not tie the story down but soars on the back of alternate ways of associating with history which is an endless document of remembering as well as forgetting.

Sabnani's *Mukand and Riaz* is an eight-minute animated short, crafted using applique and textile, which tells the story of two boys who grew up playing, loitering, and dreaming on the lanes of Karachi. It begins by recalling how the two friends had each other's backs. The personal is constantly in touch with the historical in the story as the names of places, lanes, and the ship that carried Mukand away from Riaz are named in a matter-of-fact way (Campbell Street, Karachi bakery, S.C. Sahni High School, S S Shirala). While the book tells the exact same story, the difference in medium introduces more than a few inflections. The animation-short works with moving visuals and a voice; the book works with still images while its voice becomes the reader's import to the story. The most significant difference, though, lies in the different tense of the short and the book. The audio-visual medium assumes a voice recounting what had happened after a certain development. The short opens with the text, "India and Pakistan were partitioned in 1947", thus situating the incoming account for viewers in a certain temporal space. When the story is adapted into the book form, the premise is not pronounced in either the original or its Hindi translation. Between the two, the account's past-ness is more palpable in the Hindi translation. For instance, consider the translation of the opening line of the story: "Mukand had (*thi*) a cricket cap".^{vii} The same line reads as the following in the original text: "Mukand *has* a cricket cap".^{viii} However, the simple present tense denoting possession of the cap does not take away the mnemonic character of the account. The past emerges in all its strength because of 'has' as it situates Mukand right in the middle of the happy times, highlighting his resistance to situate himself away from them even in-and-through language. It is like the entire chain of events unfolds right in front of his eyes and the loss, in the telling and retelling of his story, borne each time his account is invoked. Not just Mukand, but readers are also given the chance to experience, in and through language, the events as they happened as they do not have to contend with the shut doors and windows that "had" and "was" denote. Ambling in a story-world that evolves as it is read, the readers are united with the voice



that had had to lose his home, his city, and his friend. The most striking of events happens when history interrupts the personal bond they had observed for years. The story makes repeated mentions about the banter surrounding the red cap Mukand had and how Riaz desired to at least try it on himself in vain. The events of 1947 do not just lead to countless people fleeing with a handful of sustenance and valuables taking whatever mode they could such as train or steamer but it also changes the way two children teased and acknowledged each other. The end of *Mukand and Riaz* has the former, who is aboard SS Shirala, toss his cap at Riaz, something he never parted with on any account. Mukand used to obsess over his cap looking at himself in the mirror; the last time he saw his dear cap was also the last time he saw his precious friend thus collapsing it all as one heavy loss. Here, Partition did not just truncate the relationship of two friends but also reconfigured the relationships they harboured with their things.

The loss of life, home, and with the two, of innumerable stories is in no way comparable to the material and quirky fancies of the people and/or characters we have looked at so far. Yet, is the human civilization not equally the tools of living as it is about its people? Our lives are organized around sometimes tiny, sometimes bulky trinkets in rather serendipitous ways. Mukand shared the same inexplicable bond with his red cap: “Mukand feels that when he wears his cap he can do anything.”^{ix} This cap is deemed as insufficient to ensure Mukand and his family’s safe journey as they crossed the city to reach the shipping port. Hence, his red cap is layered over by a jinnah cap, the key to safe profiling in the city rendered unfamiliar by cries and bloodshed.^x The radio becomes the cynosure of Bansi Lal’s eyes:

Changing the radio’s batteries at regular intervals, cleaning it daily, playing it for just about an hour in a day, not letting children handle it and so on were put in place as the unspoken rules.^{xi}

Harihar Vichittar grows increasingly important for Jhaayi ji because he spoke the truths—or, even the lies—people had stopped telling each other: “Harihar’s stories gave us hope. When he said such things, we really thought that nothing might happen after all.”^{xii} While history and a considerable chunk of literature on the Partition of 1947 describe how people eventually made peace with the decrees and trajectories to that negotiation, fraught with hope, defiance, and fixations have remained on the fringes. What the statistics fail to accommodate finds a place in the tireless windings of story-worlds. Even within literature, these three texts that I have examined here warrant a brief commentary on the assumed vantage point, that of children’s literature/ literature(s) for children.



The cover-page of Sabnani's book carries a text-bubble: "Recommended by CBSE for schools". The sales webpage of Tulika books identifies it as a book fit to be read by anyone above the age of five. Meanwhile, Ektara's Jugnoo Prakashan, an imprint dedicated towards bringing out books for young readers published *Paper Chor*. While the category of children's literature bears its own problems of definition, owing to the above markers, we can assume that the implied readership of the above texts comprises children. Literature(s) for children, in both its European and Indian conceptualizations, dabble in the category of the parallel and alternative, securing a backdoor entry to new and old discourses. How do illustrations and intermediality situate themselves in such works created for children in the context of Partition? As the ethnographic and realistic stories in the aftermath by the likes of Saadat Hassan Manto and Rajinder Singh Bedi suggest with sheer force the reality of their times, violence has grown to be perceived as something attendant and commonplace when thinking or imagining those fateful years within literature as well. On the contrary, the stories in consideration take a few steps back and situate themselves at a distance from the visible, quantifiable aftermath of the said event thereby wresting themselves from the prospect of being counted as yet another account of the violence of the times. The people involved might not have known precise terms to refer to what had started to transpire but in no way were they untouched by it. In *Mukand and Riaz*, the foreboding comes when first Mukand's cricket and then the school are affected. Play and school are relatively uncharacteristic sites for politics to choose and register their presence. Or, due to extended exposure to sweeping histories that we unquestionably embrace as our history, we fail to imagine how the sinews of power pierce through the overlapping circles of our lives. Despite appearances, the intent of this essay has not been to make a case for the demarcated existence of history and story. Instead, I have argued for the novel and often subversive perspectives cast on the idea of history by stories written with children or young readers in consideration. The accurate and the inevitable do not seem to bear as much importance for them because the faculty of wonder makes them question even the concreteness of what is real instead of some inexplicable aversion to facts. Moreover, the importance of the presence of the everyday in the three stories I have engaged with cannot be overstated. Imagining military trucks, border regions, locale-specific props and practices might be fascinating but the readers' belatedness would have sooner or later come in the way of an immersive reading experience. The same exercise gains in meaning and signification when the grand and decisive events are focalized through objects like cap and radio, and fringe figures like Harihar Vichittar. Childhood involves apprehending the world not just through its vastness



and variety but along with the things, people, and places, both named and unnamed, that anchor one in it. Harihar's feats challenge the inevitability and helplessness that pervaded the subcontinent around 1947. The abandon with which he refers to political high talk as something not beyond his scope nudges us into thinking about how a few conversations, and not official roundtables, could have altered the course or at least the appearance of things that followed. Financial setbacks, loss of property, and setting off to a new city could have taken Mukand's mind off having left Karachi but, the image of Riaz waving at him with his red cap on stays with him long enough for him to testify to his own loss. He particularly recalls the name of the ship that carried him and his family but not even once are we told, either in the animated short or the book, where they are bound for. Perhaps, the detail works best through its absence since there was no place with a name that could have been reached through the layers of darkness as depicted in the final, fading panel of the short thus rendering the names as mere questions

Notes

ⁱ Varun Grover, "Radio", *Paper Chor* (Ektara, 2019), 13.

ⁱⁱ Nina Sabnani, *Mukand and Riaz* (2005). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od0G2PLCswI>

ⁱⁱⁱ Intizar Husain, "Vikram, the Vampire, and the Short Story", *Journal of South Asian Literature* (1983), 149–152.

^{iv} Grover, "Harihar Vichittar", 37.

^v Grover, "Harihar Vichittar", 33.

^{vi} Grover, "Harihar Vichittar", 40.

^{vii} Sabnani, *Mukand and Riaz*, tr. Veena Shivpuri, 3.

^{viii} Sabnani, *Mukand and Riaz*, 3.

^{ix} Sabnani, *Mukand and Riaz*, 3.

^x Sabnani, *Mukand and Riaz*, 23.

^{xi} Grover, "Radio", 16.

^{xii} Grover, "Harihar Vichittar", 39.



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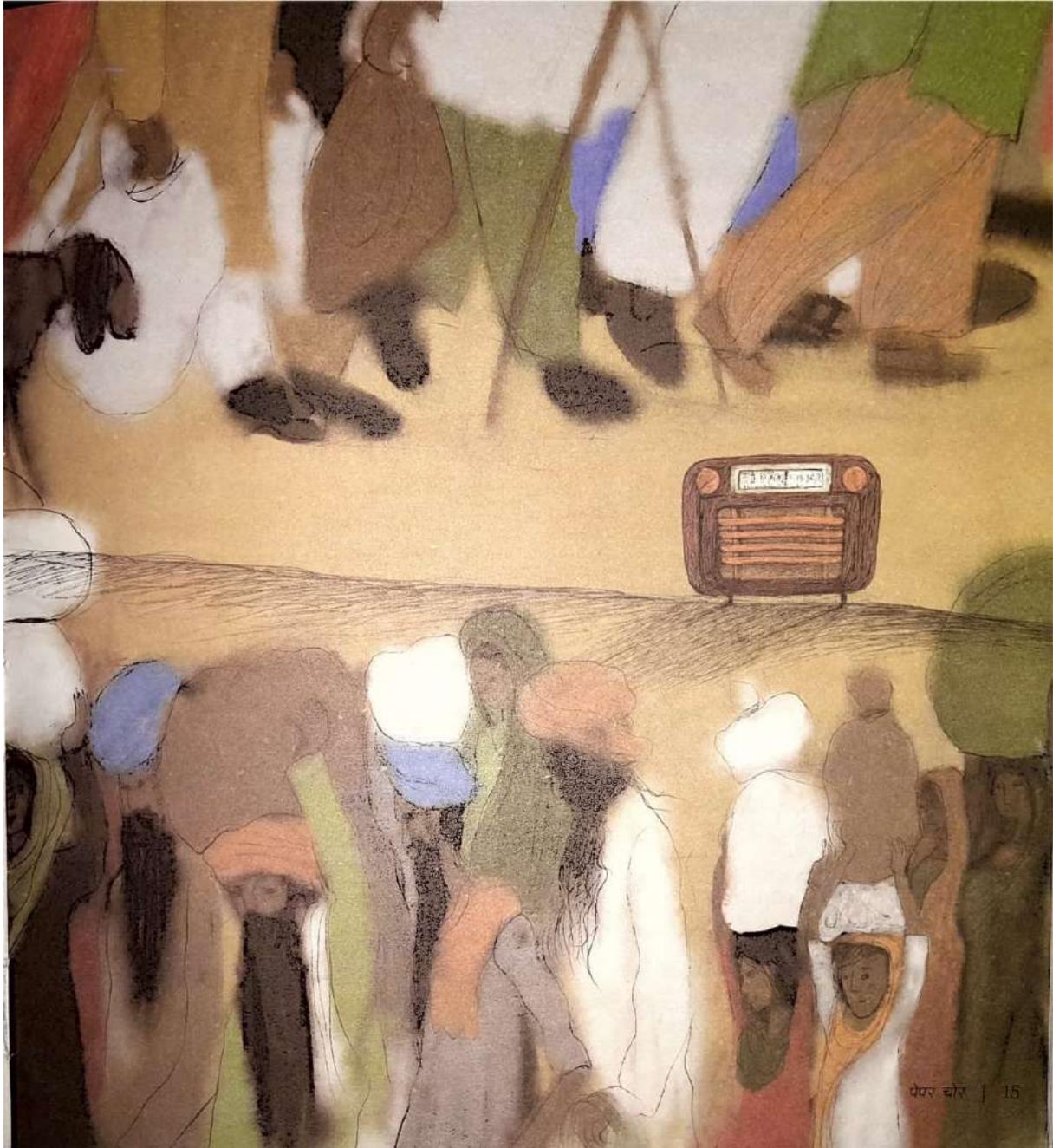


Figure 1: Illustration from "Radio"



Figure 2: Illustration from "Harihar Vichittar"