



Narrating the Void: Storytelling and Its Limits in Intizar Husain's

An Unwritten Epic, Leaves, and City of Sorrow

1 Shashank Kumar Bharti, 2 Dr. Bindunath Jha

¹ Research Scholar, ² Assistant Professor

¹ Lalit Narayan Mithila University, ² J.K. College, Biraul

Abstract

This article examines the issues of narrative failure, allegory, and silence in Intizar Husain's short tales *An Unwritten Epic*, *Leaves*, and *City of Sorrow*, focusing on how these works address the historical trauma of India's Partition. Rather than showing blatant representations of violence and displacement, Husain creates fractured, elliptical narratives that reflect the difficulties of properly describing civilizational breakdown. Drawing on trauma theory and allegorical reading, the study contends that Husain's stories serve as reflections on language's failure and the limits of narrative in the aftermath of historical disaster. In "An Unwritten Epic," the act of storytelling itself breaks down, symbolizing the loss of cultural continuity. "Leaves" uses natural images to depict a peaceful, widespread disintegration, but "City of Sorrow" creates an allegorical environment plagued by memory and loss. Husain employs these tactics to present a distinct literary perspective on Partition, one that prioritizes silence, suggestion, and myth above realism. This research suggests that Husain's storytelling tactics allow for a more in-depth, thoughtful engagement with communal trauma, where significance is often found not in what is stated but in what is left unsaid.

Keywords: Postcolonial Memory, Partition Literature, Narrative Silence, Allegory and Trauma

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 is considered one of the most significant and painful events in South Asian history. Aside from its geopolitical effects, like the formation of India and Pakistan, it also caused significant psychological, cultural, and emotional impacts on countless individuals. The violence, dislocation, and rupture that came with Partition have been extensively examined in literature, not just as a historical event but as a deep civilizational wound that still affects both individual and collective memory. Partition literature isn't just about telling what happened; it's about trying to understand the deep pain of being separated, exiled, and experiencing loss. Writers from different languages and areas have used various storytelling methods to show their experiences. Some go for a straightforward, realistic style, while others prefer abstract and symbolic techniques to express things that are hard to say directly. Among the various voices that came forward in reaction to this trauma, Intizar Husain is one of the most significant and distinctive. In his Urdu writing, Husain didn't tackle Partition by using graphic realism or political commentary. Instead, his stories are filled with myth, allegory, and silence. His work reflects a deep longing for the lost world of Indo-Islamic culture, and his characters often appear confused about their place in time and space, struggling to come to terms with the changes they have experienced. In contrast to writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, who tackle the harsh realities of Partition head-on, Husain's stories take a different approach. They often explore symbolic landscapes and dreamlike environments, using a more indirect style of storytelling that captures a quieter, more internalised sense of trauma. This paper looks at three of Husain's most powerful short stories, *An Unwritten Epic*, *Leaves*, and *City of Sorrow*, to examine how he tells the story of the psychological and cultural effects of Partition. The stories don't follow a traditional plot or resolution. Instead, they create feelings of displacement, fragmentation, and silence, with meaning often found in what's left unsaid. The main characters usually seem unsure or aimless, moving through places that are rich in memory yet lacking in clarity or connection. In these texts, storytelling turns into a challenge: words struggle to convey meaning, histories fade away, and voices become uncertain. This paper argues that Intizar Husain employs allegory, narrative silence, and

fragmentation as intentional literary techniques to convey the inexpressibility of Partition trauma. His stories don't provide answers or a sense of relief; they instead reflect the fragmented and unfinished aspects of what it means to experience life after Partition. Husain's use of allegory helps him to approach the topic of Partition in a roundabout way, and the silence and fragmented storytelling show the struggle to completely express the feeling of loss. His work doesn't aim to control trauma through storytelling; instead, it reflects its broken structure, producing texts that connect with the ongoing feeling of civilizational breakdown felt by many in post-Partition South Asia. This paper looks at these three stories to show how Husain's approach broadens our view of Partition literature. It's not just about violence or displacement; it's also a deep reflection on the challenges of language, memory, and meaning when confronted with historical disasters.

Theoretical Framework

Partition's work is shaped in part by trauma studies, memory theory, and postcolonial narrative analysis. The 1947 rupture touched people, communities, and cultural memory; it was a deep psychological break rather than only a political or geographical one. One must anchor the debate in theoretical methods that investigate trauma's nature and literary representation if one wants to understand how Intizar Husain's stories handle the unfathomable parts of trauma.

Partition and Trauma Studies

By examining how the violence of the partition was experienced on a personal, everyday basis, especially by those whose voices were formerly marginalised, women, children, and the impoverished, academics like Urvashi Butalia and Veena Das have had a significant effect on partition studies. Butalia argues in *The Other Side of Silence* that most of the actual suffering of the Partition is hidden under nationalistic history and can only be expressed via private experiences, broken memories, or silence. Veena Das's *Life and Words* similarly explores how violence is buried in everyday life and language, suggesting that trauma can stay silently in gestures, pauses, and fractured words rather than necessarily erupting in dramatic outbursts. These points of view enable us to understand Intizar Husain's works, which eschew confrontation with historical facts in favour of complex, symbolic, and usually muted depictions. Key proponent of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, contends that trauma returns later, in bits, usually outside of language, and is not accessible to awareness at the moment of occurrence. Trauma, in her view, is a recurrent, unassimilated experience that defies narrative ending rather than being only a memory of the past. This point of view fits Husain's storytelling technique, in which the suffering of the Partition is not explicitly expressed but rather hovers on the margins of the book, unresolved, incomprehensible, and often strange.

Narrative Silence and Unspeakable

Trauma literature's basic tenet is that words cannot fully express the extremity of some events. Researchers like Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman have asserted that extreme stress may overwhelm narrative ability. In literature, this sometimes shows up as silence, gaps, ellipses, or fragmentation, devices that reflect not just what is neglected but also what cannot be spoken. The silence of Intizar Husain is a notable, deliberate avoidance of trauma naming, description, or resolution. In *An Unwritten Epic*, for instance, the idea of creating a story is constantly postponed, thereby reflecting both the horror and the incapacity to give an event a defying interpretation structure. Husain's work reflects the fractured psychological state of the post-Partition subject using narrative silence as a structural and thematic tool in this approach. His stories reflect loss by their very form, not by a didactic or chronological narrative of loss.

Allegory and Myth as Narrative Strategies.

Husain regularly uses metaphor and myth, drawing on Islamic, Persian, and South Asian narrative traditions, to circumvent the constraints of straightforward representation. Allegory allows the indirect portrayal of unpleasant, challenging, or dangerous facts that are too difficult to fully explain. As Walter Benjamin notes, allegory is a way to see the world via fragments and ruins rather than only a literary device. Allegory becomes a means of encoding trauma into symbolic forms in the framework of Husain's Partition stories: falling leaves in "Leaves" symbolise civilizational decay; the unnamed city in "City of Sorrow" evokes Lahore or Delhi without explicitly naming it, so creating a dreamlike space saturated with loss and memory. Husain probes eternal issues of exile, migration, and cultural disintegration using myth. Rather than concentrating just on the events of 1947, he combines old myths and archetypes to suggest that the suffering of the Partition is part of a more general human and historical arc. While firmly anchored in a specific cultural and historical context, this mythical approach universalises suffering. Finally, this theoretical framework, based on trauma theory, narrative silence, and allegorical strategy, offers the tools to look at how Husain's works concurrently conjure and hide the experience of Partition. His stories reflect the terrible endurance of history through failing language, echoing symbols, and uttered silences, not trying to document it.

Analysis of Individual Stories

A. *An Unwritten Epic (Ek Afsana Jo Likha Nahin Gaya)*

Intizar Husain's *An Unwritten Epic* provides a deep analysis of the futility of storytelling against historical pain. The narrative revolves around a narrator who plans to create an epic story, probably of civilizational or national relevance, but is constantly blocked by doubt, indecision, and the impossibility of starting. This conscious stoppage of narrative becomes a metaphor for the psychic paralysis brought forth by the Partition. The "epic" never written represents the fall from vast narratives formerly providing coherence to memory, identity, and history. Silence, ellipses, and digressions abound in the narrative; they are literary tactics as well as trauma's expression. Language stumbles; the narrator avoids conclusions, delays meaning, and lingers in irrelevance. This reflects Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma defies complete articulation and usually resurfaces in bits. The reluctance to write indicates an internalised break, a conviction that the scope of what is to be communicated is beyond the capacity of words, not of sloth or uncertainty. and the story runs with a gentle irony as well. Usually, a figure of authority and cultural continuity, the storyteller becomes helpless and uncertain, therefore undermining the basis of storytelling. Like the displaced subject, this destabilisation captures the post-Partition reality: the narrator is caught in a world where new systems are still to develop while old ones have crumbled. "An Unwritten Epic," therefore, turns into a potent remark on the difficulties of telling history when memory itself is broken.

B. *Leaves (Pattay)*

Among Husain's most eerily symbolic tales is *Leaves*. At first glance, it seems to be a natural process, that of seasonal leaf fall. Under Husain's metaphorical perspective, nevertheless, the falling leaves start to symbolise historical degradation, existential loss, and cultural breakdown. The novel, devoid of significant human activity, emphasises stillness and silence, presenting a world in which human agency has withdrawn and history unfolds with subdued violence. Crucially important is the story's natural imagery. Leaves falling from trees imply not only transformation but also a type of death, devoid of grieving. Although the narrative does not feature any overt acts of violence, the picture of degradation reminds one of the gradual, unavoidable downfall of a once-thriving planet. In this way, nature serves as a quiet observer of civilizational trauma, observation free from intervention, endurance as human systems collapse. Lack of a defined storyline or major characters helps one to feel powerless. Like the readers themselves, people seem as docile onlookers. Time, history, and memory in "Leaves" symbolic universe help to convey the sensation of overwhelm from forces more than oneself. Within the framework of the Partition, this relates to the difficulty of reacting meaningfully to devastation and the subtle ways trauma still shows long after the occurrence.

C. *City of Sorrow (Sheher-e-Afsos)*

City of Sorrow offers a dreamlike, ghostlike city, unnamed and depopulated, haunted by ruins, shadows, and memories. The city is the protagonist; it is not only a setting. The narrative presents a strong metaphor for the emotional terrain of post-Partition South Asia, where previously cultural harmony was symbolised in cities like Delhi, Lahore, and Lucknow but today bears the marks of disintegration and loss. The scene is rather sad; buildings collapse, streets are empty, and the few people who do show seem to be ghosts. Husain's use of ruins and decay fits Walter Benjamin's conception of history as a "pile of trash." The narrative is about the residual presence of absence, of people who have departed, of lives that have ended, of meanings that have melted away, not of action or resolution. Husain externalises the psychological suffering of the Partition through this ghost city. Central is displacement. Characters are anonymous or vague; the city itself is rootless. This portrayal captures not just physical exile but also a more profound ontological dislocation—a loss of historical, spiritual, and cultural foundation. The city turns into a psychological map of loss where every monument bears a memory and every quiet echoes what once was. Intizar Husain creates a distinctive narrative style over three stories that defies realism and linearity. By use of silence, symbols, and broken narrative, he conveys the inexpressible: a sensation of loss unable to be precisely articulated, a history unable to be documented, and a trauma unresolved. These tales thus serve not just as literary masterpieces but also as live archives of civilizational breakdown and cultural grief.

Common Threads Across the Stories

Though they differ in plot, tone, and imagery, the three stories by Intizar Husain, "An Unwritten Epic", "Leaves", and "City of Sorrow", are united by their mutual participation in the profound emotional and cultural scars caused by the Partition of India. Together, they create a thematic tapestry spun with strands of pain, narrative collapse, cultural dissolution, and residual quiet. Each narrative independently opts to circumvent Partition through the use of allegory,

abstraction, and absence instead of confronting it directly. This avoidance is an intentional and significant storytelling technique reflecting the inexpressibility of horrific experience, not escape. The Impossibility of Direct Narration. One noteworthy aspect shared by all three accounts is the incapacity or denial to tell the tragedy straightforwardly. Trauma theory holds that such behaviour is commonly interpreted as a feature of unprocessed or unassimilated experience: trauma resists cohesive narrative as it transcends language and consciousness. Stories by Husain show this exactly. In *An Unwritten Epic*, the narrator literally cannot start his narrative. He pauses, resists, veers, and finally generates no story at all. This metafictional gesture implies that some historical events, especially those involving cultural disturbance and existential loss, are too significant for conventional narrative structures to hold. Likewise, *Leaves* employs natural deterioration to suggest a world gently disintegrating rather than any clear historical event or character. The quiet in this story is a narrative reaction to the enormity of loss, a realisation that words cannot adequately describe what has been lost, not only a stylistic decision. Building a dreamy, even surreal metropolis full of spectral presences and crumbling buildings, *City of Sorrow* carries on this trend. The city is plagued not by ghosts of the dead but by the lack of the living, of community, of purpose. The tragedy is incorporated into the story's architecture and mood rather than dramatised. Husain thus does not present a straightforward or realist narrative of the Partition in all three novels. He shows us how trauma alters storytelling itself, making narration erratic, fractured, and even impossible.

Disintegration of Coherent The fall of solid identities, personal as well as cultural, is another uniting thread running throughout the stories. The narrator of *An Unwritten Epic* is confused in goals as much as in time. He represents the intellectual or cultural person failing to find continuity or significance in a post-Partition environment. His incapacity to write reflects a larger loss of selfhood and power, symptomatic of the confusion experienced by those who were displaced or who saw the disintegration of a shared Indo-Islamic cultural legacy. *Leaves* develops this idea by making the human presence nearly undetectable. The emphasis moves to the natural world, which keeps on its cycle of deterioration, unconcerned with human wishes or behaviour. Lack of human agency implies that those impacted by the Partition have turned into onlookers to see their erasure. There is merely a peaceful acceptance of dissolution; no struggle or revolt. In *City of Sorrow*, place defines identity; hence, as the city falls, so too does the feeling of belonging. Rootless, anonymous, and unconnected, the protagonist (or viewer) of the narrative reflects the general loss of cultural roots that accompanied Partition. The city itself is a figurative body, once alive with purpose, now a husk resonant with memory and loss. Here, identity is not just fractured but also ghostly, flickering at the brink of memory and oblivion.

Lingering Silence and Persistent Trauma. Their absence of resolution ties all three stories together, maybe in the most eerie way. These are stories not headed towards catharsis or resolution. Rather, they leave the reader with unresolved grief, anguish that remains in the pauses and gaps of the narrative between words. Like the histories Husain seeks to inspire, his stories fall into quiet rather than ending. This residual stillness is a presence rather than a blank; it is a disturbing leftover of what was lost and cannot be rebuilt. Husain asks the reader to face trauma as a continuous condition rather than as a past occurrence by postponing closure. The civilizational collapse represented in his novels is not only a historical event but also a continuous condition of existence for individuals stuck between memory and forgetfulness, exile and yearning, speech and silence. His people wander; they do not heal. The worlds they live in fade rather than flourish. Intizar Husain's works, therefore, create a unified corpus of Partition literature not by obvious links of story or character but by their shared aesthetic of incompleteness, erasure, and sorrow. They tell us, again, not what occurred but rather what it feels like to live under the shadow of something too big, too awful, too holy to define.

Conclusion

Intizar Husain's Partition stories, *An Unwritten Epic*, *Leaves*, and *City of Sorrow*, provide a singular and very moving prism through which one of the most horrific episodes in South Asian history could be seen. These stories expose Partition's emotional and cultural legacy through fragmentation, metaphor, and silence; therefore, they transcend any attempt to offer a clear, chronological narrative of Partition. By choosing to convey the bewilderment, helplessness, and existential sadness felt by individuals who lived through the fall of a once-coherent civilizational fabric, they avoid the need to explain or rationalize. Among the canon of Partition writing, Husain's work distinguishes itself for its mythological resonance, symbolic depth, and narrative restraint. For him, the agony of the partition is profoundly civilising and spiritual, not only political or historical. His stories lament the loss of motherland and human life and the degradation of a cultural ethos that had defined a whole way of life. By doing this, Husain redefines the concept of trauma writing, transforming his pieces into echo chambers of stillness, decay, and desire, rather than mere testimonials or records. Husain's fiction ultimately does not try to atone for the sorrow of the Partition or offer closure. Rather, it concentrates on the ongoing presence of absence, the emptiness trauma leaves behind, and the imaginative, sometimes mythological, techniques literature tries to talk around what it cannot tell straightforwardly. His writings remind us that for certain historical events, the most accurate accounts stay unwritten, helping us see the boundaries of language and the power of suggestion.

Acknowledgement

I sincerely thank my elder brother, Saurabh Kumar Bharti, for his generous financial support, which made this work possible. I am also deeply grateful to my mentor, Pintoo I. Mishra, for his constant motivation and encouragement, which inspired me to complete this article with dedication and confidence. Their support means the world to me.

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