

**Indian Fiction in English**  
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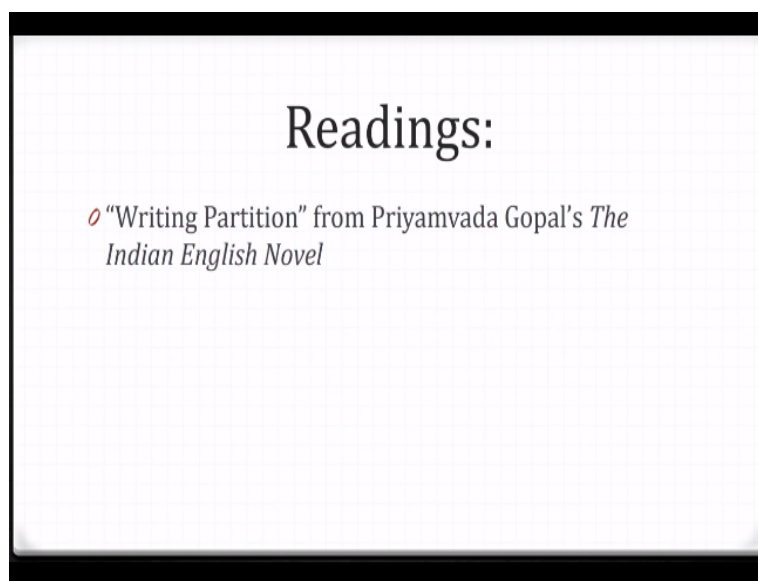
**Lecture - 28**  
**Partition Novels**

Good morning everyone. Welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course Indian Fiction in English. In today's lecture, we are taking a look at a set of novels which are generally known as partition novels and understandably these are the set of novels which narrativize the event of partition which has become a significant event in the history of independent India.

There is no consensus to what constitutes the set of novels now we come to understand as partition novels but the general understanding remains that partition novels are generally comprised of the kind of narratives which try to either recreate the history of partition or re-narrativize this forgotten and this unfortunate tragic history that is part of this nation. For this lecture, there is reading from Priyamvada Gopal's book *The Indian English Novel* is very important.

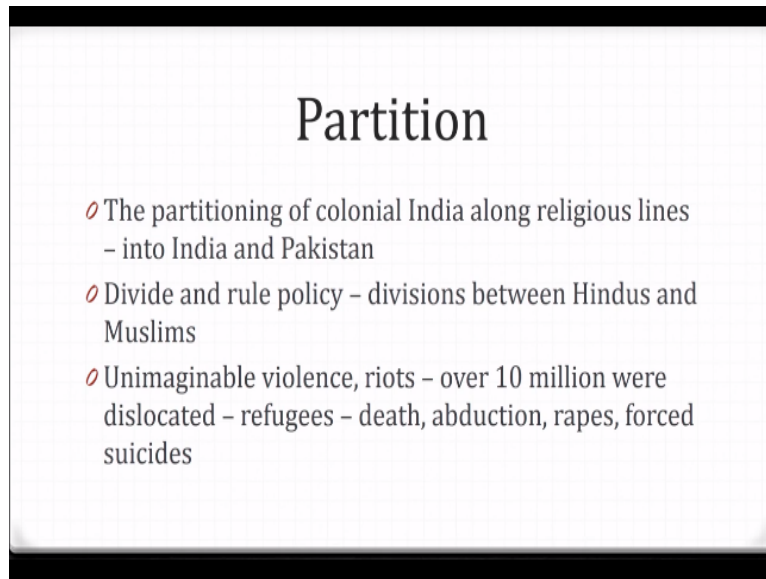
There is an entire chapter that she has on partition, which is titled *Writing Partition* and she talks about particular kinds of novels which have been narrativizing which have been recreating the story of partition from different perspectives.

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So an understanding of this chapter from Gopal's book will certainly enhance your own critical understanding of the partition writing as well.

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When we talk about partition, we primarily have in mind the partitioning of colonial India along religious lines and we all know that after this event, two nations were born, India and Pakistan. So the history of partition is also the history of the birth of two of these nations India and Pakistan and if you know your history well you also know that this was a compounding result of the divide and rule policy by the colonial administration.

And we also know that this had later when extenuated kind of divisions and differences between Hindus and Muslims in colonial India and as a result of this event and during this process of partition, there was unimaginable violence across the length and breadth of the country. There were riots all over and it is considered that over 10 million were dislocated and this is considered as a largest exchange of population ever.

A lot of people were forced to leave the life of refugees, there was wide spread death killing massacre, abduction, rapes, forced suicides and it was overall turbulent period in the history of India and in Pakistan and it was also a rather unfortunate way to begin the emergence of a new nation. What is the relevance of this event in the contemporary?

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## In the contemporary

- “contemporary communal violence often invokes the trope of Partition” (Gopal)
- “it was like Partition again” (Urvashi Butalia - writing in the wake of 1984 Sikh riots - *The Other Side of Silence*)

Priyamvada Gopal in her chapter on Writing Partition, she reminds us that contemporary communal violence often invokes the trope of partition. What does she mean by this? She also refers to one of the earlier books by Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* where Butalia talks about the need to revisit the event of partition and also to take into account the many personal stories and many personal histories which were also fraught within these many counts in narratives by the state.

And Urvashi Butalia’s book, *The Other Side of Silence*, it was rather written in the context of the 1984 Sikh riots and it was 84 Sikhs riots which prompted her to revisit the events of partition and just as she was witnessing the 1984 Sikh riots in Delhi, she also remembers thinking that it was like partition again. So as Gopal rightfully puts it, there is a way in which one continues to invoke the trope of partition whenever there is an instance of communal violence in the contemporary.

And what was the response of the writers to such an unfortunate event in the wake of the independence and again Priyamvada Gopal reminds us that the writers retreated into what seem to be a stunned silence.

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## Response of the writers

- o "writers retreated into what seemed to be a stunned silence"
- o Saadat Hasan Manto - Siyah Hashiye (Black Marginalia)
- o Only very few writings in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu or any other Indian languages

And obviously there was every reason for the writers to go into the stunned silence because this was not like anything that they had experienced or they had when exposed to until that point of time and it is generally agreed upon that it was Saadat Hasan Manto, the Urdu writer, who was part of the progressive writer's movement who first came into the scene with one of his telling tales which is now translated as Black Marginalia to certainly title Siyah Hashiye.

And it was Manto's writings which began to wake these writers up from the stunned silence and the lull that they were forced into; however, it is not to say that there was a prolific response from the artist and from the writers in the aftermath of this event. In fact, only very few writings have been produced in Indian languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu and any other Indian language.

We can of course come across certain anthologies which try to bring together the partition writings from different parts of the country and the number continues to be very limited. It is not as if many started responding to this event at a later point. There have been responses but they have been limited and they continue to be restricted and of very limited perspective even the contemporary.

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## The relevance of IE fiction

- o “Where the partition is concerned, the novel on the subcontinent is only now beginning to find a way to do this and a place of collectiveness from which to do it”
- o “more sustained engagement with the ugliness and pain of that moment in a historical frame” from IE fiction
- o Why? Perhaps due to its relative distance from other Indian languages and its circumscribed readership

And it is in this context that of the relevance of Indian English Fiction needs to be addressed. In Gopal’s own words, where the partition is concerned, the novel on the subcontinent is now only beginning to find a way to do this and the place of collectiveness from which they do it. So there is a certain way in which the partition novels, the writings about partition have a rather recent history.

Though the event dates back to the period of independence, though it has a colonial past attached to it, we also understand that the articulations, the writings about, the event had to wait until a few more decades and again another interesting and unique aspect about the narrativizing of partition is better. We find a more sustained engagement with the ugliness and pain of that moment in a historical frame especially from Indian English Fiction.

And this is where we situated the relevance of today’s discussion as well and why is it that Indian English Fiction seems to engage more sustainably and more focusedly with partition compared to the writings from other languages. It could be perhaps due to its relative distance from other Indian languages and also its circumscribed readership.

One is not too sure but nevertheless we continue to notice this fact that it was the field of Indian English Fiction which has responded more actively and more succinctly to this event of partition than any other language in the country.

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## The depiction of violence

- Graphic descriptions and prurience
- Horror combined with sentimental evocations of love and fellow feeling
- Exploitative than interrogate?
- "how does an anthropologist write an anthropology of violence without its becoming a pornography of violence"?

And before Gopal takes us through the series of novels which talk about the event of partition, she shares certain concerns with us that is primarily about the depiction of violence in these novels. Of course, when one proposes to talk about partition, depiction of violence is something that one cannot entirely in too away with. Nevertheless, there is this concern that the graphic descriptions and the prurience, which are part of these narratives are also their depiction of horror combined with the sentimental evocations of love and fellow feeling.

The husband concern whether these aspects and these articulations have been more exploitative than with the intention of interrogating. In that context, Priyamvada Gopal also wonder as whether these descriptions have now become a mere pornography of violence and she quotes the anthropologist (( )) (08:27) and ask how does an anthropologist write an anthropology of violence without its becoming a pornography of violence.

It could be a possibility that even through your own reading of some of these texts you may begin to see that the depiction of violence at times becomes pornography of violence, a certain kind of a celebration, a certain kind of a technique used to invoke some kind of vicarious pleasure out of the sort of depictions but this is something which cannot be entirely escape from either.

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## Alok Rai

o “the anguished failure to understand, to stare unblinking into the glowing inferno, itself becomes a negative way of representing that which is truly horrific”

Alok Rai one of the anthologist who had tried to compile and bring together the various articulations of partition in the literary framework. He points out that the anguished failure to understand, to stare unblinking into the glowing inferno, itself becomes a negative way of representation that which is truly horrific.

So even if we find that there is an excessive kind of graphic description, there is an excessive kind of description even bordering on pornography of violence that is not something which can essentially entirely be done away with.

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## Novels referred

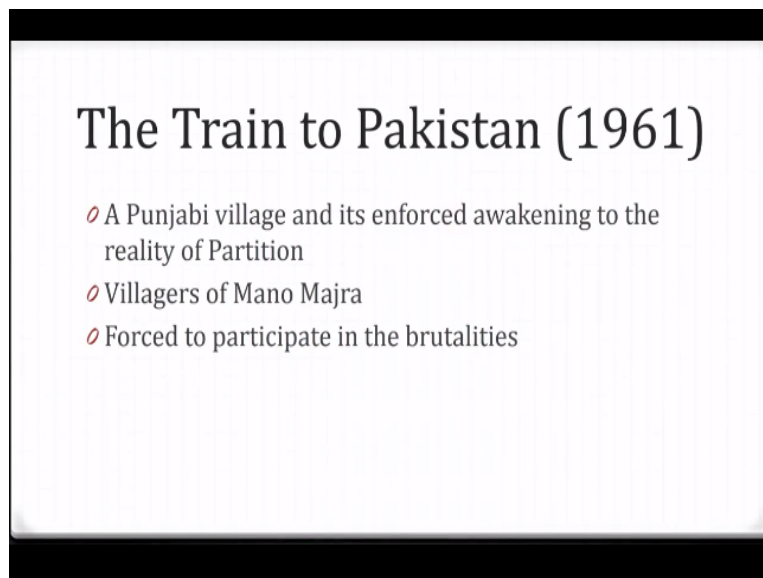
- o Azaadi by Chaman Nahal ✓
- o Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh ✓
- o The Heart Divided by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz ✓
- o Ice Candy Man by Bapsi Sidhwa ✓
- o Noor by Sorayya Khan ✓
- o Shame by Salman Rushdie ✓
- o The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh ✓
- o Looking Through Glass by Mukul Kesavan ✓

Such a context Priyamvada Gopal refers to a set of novels which she brings under the rubric of partition writing. She talks about Azaadi by Chaman Nahal, Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh, The Heart Divided by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz, Ice Candy Man by Bapsi

Sidhwa which is also part of a detailed reading, Noor by Sorayya Khan, Shame by Salman Rushdie, The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh, a novel which we have already taken a look at, Looking Through Glass by Mukul Kesavan.

This is not to say that the discussion of partition is limited to only these set of novels. There are lot of other novels which also referred to this event, for example Midnight's Children does have direct and indirect references to the event of partition. One could also come across many other works which are referred to be event of partition or the aftermath of partition and some context to the other but for the purpose of this discussion, we limit our reference to these set of novels.

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The Train to Pakistan was published in 1961, it was written by Khushwant Singh, one of the best known and best loved writers of India and the context is in a Punjabi village. The story is about a Punjabi village and its enforced awakening to the reality of partition. So it is essentially the story of the villagers of Mano Majra who are forced to participate in the brutalities though to a very large extent they fail themselves from becoming part of this dominant rhetoric of dividing the population in the name of religion.

So there are certain instances on the novel where they were pretty sure at one point that one cannot discriminate against their neighbors on account of the religion but at later point the inevitability of the political events, it forces them into a participation of these brutalities. We should not be going to the details of this.

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## The Heart Divided

- Mumtaz Shah Nawaz – published posthumously after her death in a plane crash
- “the division of India had already taken place . . . In the heart i.e., in the universe of emotions and relations”

The Heart Divided is a novel by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz. This was published posthumously after her death in a plane crash. Instantly, Mumtaz Shah Nawaz was also a member of the Muslim League and also a very prominent activist of the women’s movement of that period and the heart of this novel is this idea that the division of India had already taken place. The division had already taken place in the heart that is in the universe of emotions and relations.

So once this division had been in place emotionally, there was no question of not engaging with the politics which had been imposing further divisions. So this is also a rather emotional kind of a response to the many political events in the many social cultural divisions which were taking place during this period.

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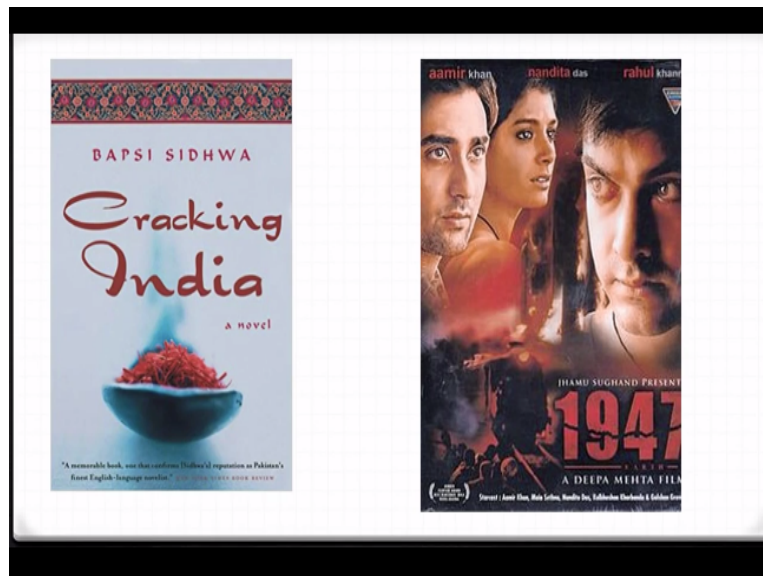
## Ice Candy Man (1988)

- Woman writer from Pakistan – 40 years after the event
- Film 1947: Earth
- A handicapped Parsi child narrator, Lenny – to provide a self-consciously marginalized and innocent perspective – a knowing authorial voice intrudes as well
- Lahore, 1940s

Ice Candy Man written in 1988 is the novel that we shall be taking a look at, at least in little more detail and this was written by Bapsi Sidhwa who is a women writer from Pakistan and incidentally this novel which perhaps has the most succinct representation of the event of partition. It was written only 40 years after the event and this silence between the event and the actual representation is very telling.

Because one can also assume that the writer, the artist also had acquired some kind of a distance from the event politically, emotionally and also temporally. This distance also serves to bring out the best in the narrative and this was a very successful novel which was also made into this film 1947 Earth which was made by Deepa Mehta.

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And the novel also had a different title when it was published in America, it was called Cracking India a novel and this title has become more telling and it has become more famous than the original one Ice Candy Man as well and the movie also had a successful run given that it had a wonderful rendition of the event of partition and the violence that ensued. There are certain changes which the movie has brought in.

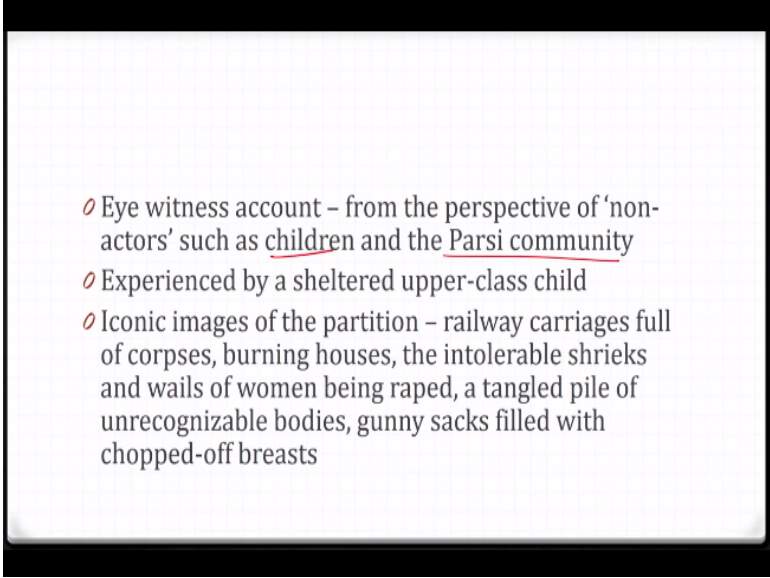
But nevertheless it stays true to the spirit of the book in terms of depicting the events of partition. The novel Ice Candy Man is narrated from the perspective of a handicapped Parsi child and her name is Lenny and this in that sense again employs to trope of a child narrator and even when we were discussing The Shadow Lines, we have already spoken a bit about the advantages of having a child narrator and the perspective of an innocent child.

And in this work which is primarily about a violent event such as partition, the perspective of the handicapped Parsi child is also to provide a self-consciously marginalized and innocent perspective because given the violent history that this event has and the violent execution that it apparently had, it is difficult to come up with an objective perspective or an innocent perspective.

And the employment of the child narrative makes it possible to do all of this and also to give a rather distanced kind of rendition given that it is a child who has not really been involved in the event at any process, who has not been involved in this event at any stage but nevertheless it is not just about the child narrator. There are certain shifting perspectives as well. We do have the intervention of a knowing authorial voice which intrudes into the narration every now and then to clarify certain things or to bring in a different kind of a perspective.

The novel is set in Lahore in 1940s almost a decade before, well within the decade when the event of partition supposed to take place, like many other historical works of this similar nature, this novel also employs the eye witness account and we find the narration being carried out from the perspective of non-actors.

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- o Eye witness account – from the perspective of ‘non-actors’ such as children and the Parsi community
  - o Experienced by a sheltered upper-class child
  - o Iconic images of the partition – railway carriages full of corpses, burning houses, the intolerable shrieks and wails of women being raped, a tangled pile of unrecognizable bodies, gunny sacks filled with chopped-off breasts

And in this context of this novel, the non-actors are children and the Parsi community. Children are not involved in the event for obvious reasons and the Parsi community continues to remain in the margins but nevertheless there is a safe distance and a certain kind of a safety net where then which they managed to not get involved in some of these turbulent affairs and

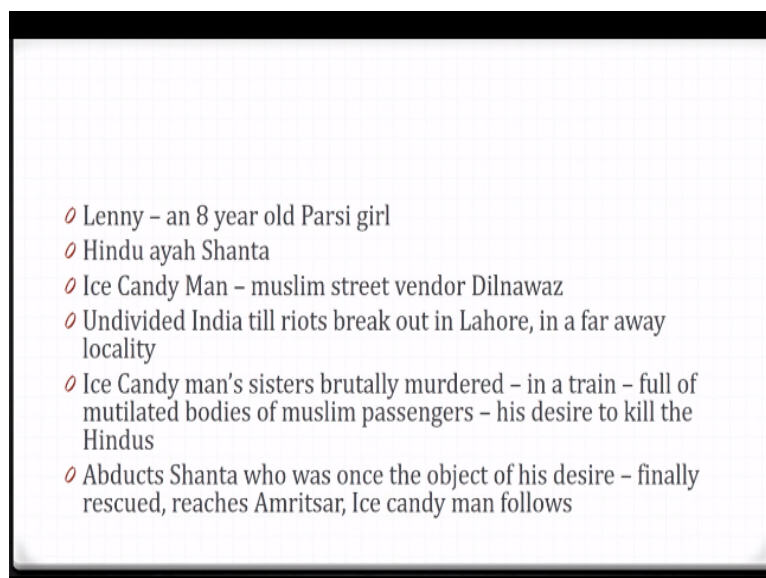
it was also the kind of an experience by a sheltered upper class child and with this Sidhwa is perhaps also trying to tell us that not all children were as fortunate as Lenny was.

Lenny was of course scared by some of the experiences and some of the things that she had to witness and she had to undergo but nevertheless there was a certain kind of a comfort zone within which she could place herself on account of her age, on account of her class and her community but this does not prevent the author for not engaging with certain iconic images of the partition though this is entirely narrated from the perspective of the child.

The novel also brings in certain iconic images of the partition which at times we may begin to wonder whether this has become too graphic or whether this is now bordering the pornography of violence. For instance, we have images such as railway carriages full of corpses, burning houses, the intolerable shrieks and wails of women being raped, tangled pile of unrecognizable bodies, gunny sacks filled with chopped-off breasts.

Why most of these things did happen in reality and why perhaps the reality was more gross and more graphic and more disastrous than how these depictions were. These sort of images continued to be seen as the iconic images of partition which again brings this back to the original concern that Gopal and many others had whether an anthropology of violence occasionally may slip into a pornography of violence.

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But this does not really take away the charm from this entire narrative and let me also introduce you to some of the major characters of this novel that is Lenny an 8-year-old Parsi

girl who is also the narrator. She has a Hindu ayah Shanta and the ayah is also a central figure of the novel because most of the events are also centered around her. There is the Ice Candy Man who is a muslim street vendor Dilnawaz and he also has an interest in the ayah Shanta.

And things remain quite peaceful and undivided India until the riots break out in Lahore in a faraway locality not in the place where Lenny and ayah and her friends are located but nevertheless the repercussions of those begin to affect them as well. Ice Candy Man who comes across as a happy-go-lucky fellow until that point of time. He changes entirely when he gets to know that his sisters were brutally murdered in a train.

And he also witnesses the train approaching the station where the mutilated bodies of muslim passengers and from that movement onwards we find that his entire psyche undergoes a change, the relations that he had until that point of time, the past which was undivided in terms of religion, it is completely replaced with this desire to kill Hindus. So the past friendships and the past desires and past relationships in his life, they do not matter anymore.

It is this dramatic transition that Sidhwa capitalizes on and she in some form of the other through this narration is trying to tell us that it was not necessarily about good men and bad men, it was not necessarily about the good communities and the bad communities but it was about a certain kind of a political situation which was forcing people into brutalities, which was forcing people to take sides.

And coming back to the novel the Ice Candy Man Dilnawaz, he also ends up abducting Shanta who has once the object of his desire. Shanta is finally rescued, she reaches Amritsar and there is a certainly of hope towards the end when we find Ice Candy Man following her to Amritsar. We will not go into the details of the story line.

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## Dominant themes

- Psychological effects of partition, dislocation and disintegration
- Dilemma of the Parsi community
- Women as victims and saviours
- Desire and moral legitimacy
- Good and evil in the human psyche
- Communal discord

Some of the dominant theme is that Sidhwa continues to explore through this plot structure, the psychological effects of partition, dislocation and disintegration on different individuals. The focus of Sidhwa's narration is not in particular communities and how certain communities react to respond with respect to other communities but how focus is on individuals, how the situation, how the political context determines some of the actions of individuals and ways which are beyond their control.

It also begins to show that the past ceases to be important in such an eminent context where the political context seems to determine most of the actions of the individual. The novels are quite wonderfully captures a dilemma of the Parsi community who are presented as neither here or nor there. They do not seem to be having any particular kind of loyalties and their actions are predominantly based on which side would keep them safe.

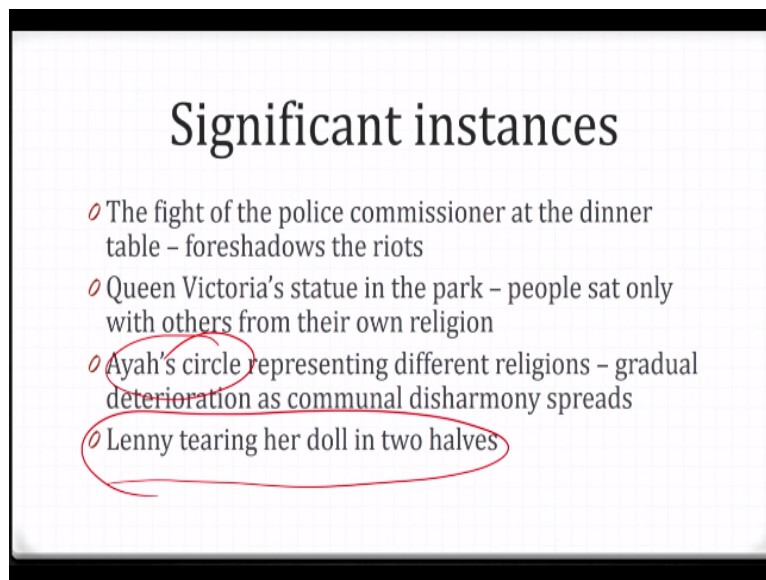
They are willing to go with which of our community which would ensure their safety and this sort of fluidity of this Parsi community, there are certain occasions in the novel where that is being made fun of but nevertheless she also manages to capture the dilemma of the community. Women in these novels come across as very interesting individuals.

They are victims and saviors at the same time and also incidentally like any instance of violence women are the ones who are also being victimized on account of political games on account of the settling scores with one another. There are also discussions of desire and moral legitimacy becomes impossible to take one position or the other and this is especially evident in the way the character of the Ice Candy Man undergoes a change.

And she also engages with the idea of good and evil in the human psyche and through by employing the child narrator. She is also able to show that there are certain inherent goodnesses which cannot be taken for granted and at the same time there are certain context which have the power to alter all kinds of human psyche and all kinds of human emotions and the communal discord it continues to be the central theme through and through the novel.

The novel is in multiple ways trying to show us that the communal discord which was at the heart of partition was always already there and hence it becomes almost difficult for the individual to surpass some of these feelings of hatred and the feelings of disharmony and in multiple ways I reiterate Sidhwa is trying to showcase the helplessness of the individual in the context of such tragic situations.

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There are certain significant instances which deserve particular attention from our side. For example, the outset of the novel itself there is an instance where we because a fight of the police commissioner at the dinner table and we also get to know that this foreshadows the event of riots in some form or the other and the Queen Victoria statue in the park which remains as an imposing symbol of the colonial empire.

It is an important iconic symbol throughout the novel and we also notice that initially the park used to be a place where people from different communities used to throng together but as a writer situation progresses people choose to only set with other members from their own

religion. We do not find them intermingling in the way that they used to before and in that context the ayah's circle of friends they are presented as a foil to the rest of the community.

Ayah's circle of friends mostly her admirers, they represent different religions and we also notice that even when the communal disharmony begins to spread at least for a while, she is able to maintain the circle. They come together, meet and try to have a good time irrespective of what was happening in the background but the gradual deterioration of her own circle of mostly admirers that also begins to deteriorate as the communal harmony spreads.

So it is an inevitable thing which had to somehow come in regardless of the past instances and the regardless of the past relations and friendships that one had with each other and there is also this extremely telling instance where Lenny the child she tears her doll in two halves after having witnessed a similar instance and the tragedy of this episode is that Lenny is doing this as part of her playtime.

We do not find her being traumatized in the way that one would expect her to but it almost becomes a kind of an imitation of a deed that she witnessed for some reason or the other and this loss of innocence in Lenny at this point is extremely telling and we also realize that through these many, many instances and she also witnesses ayah being dragged away by the abductors.

And these many, many instances frame her understanding of the nation, communal harmony about individuals and her narration was also rather marked by these many instances which inform the telling which inform retelling of this event in multiple ways.

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## Shame

- Read as a companion text to *Midnight's Children*
- Focus on the making of postcolonial Pakistan – in the mode of a 'modern fairy tale'
- "The country in this story is not Pakistan, not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space"

So moving on we also briefly refer to one of the text by Salman Rushdie *Shame* which is often read as a companion text to *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* is considered as one of Rushdie's best renditions of the event of partition while the focus of *Midnight's Children* was on the making of post-colonial India. The focus of *Shame* is on the making of post-colonial Pakistan and it is narrated in the mode of a modern fairy tale.

And Rushdie in his typical playful way talks about the setting. The country in this story is not Pakistan, not quite. There are two countries real and fictional occupying the same space or almost the same space. So it is a playful account of the making of post-colonial Pakistan where he also tries to reinvent and re-narrativize the story of partition and the story of the creation of Pakistan.

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## Shame and women

- The humiliation and shame suffered by women – sexual violence – the most predictable aspect – women's bodies treated as 'territory to be conquered claimed or marked' (Menon and Bhasin)
- "In that generation many women, ordinary decent respectable ladies of the type to whom nothing ever happens, to whom nothing is supposed to happen except marriage children death, had this sort of strange story to tell. It was a rich time for stories if you lived to tell your tale" (*Shame* 72)

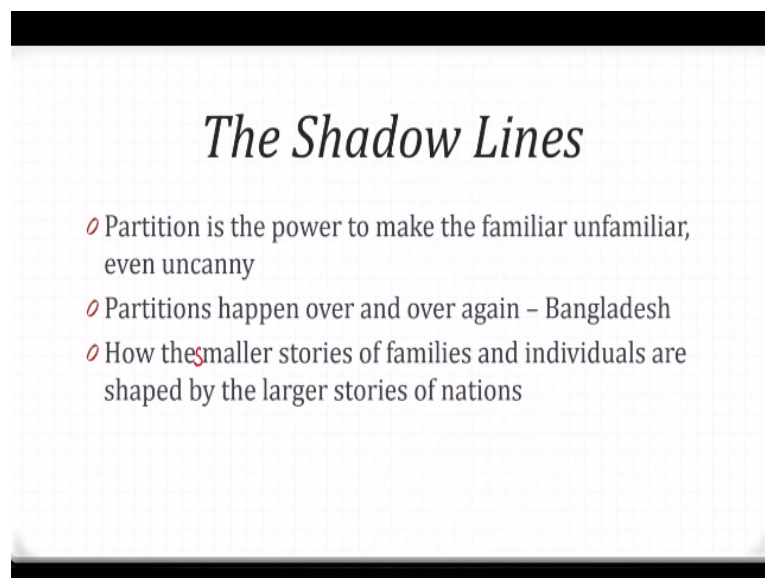
And here there is a gendered connection with the idea of Shame. The novel foregrounds how the idea of Shame in the context of partition is inherently gendered and women are almost always a victim of this set of inevitable events, so much of the focus of the novel *Shame* is also under humiliation and shame suffered by women during partition particularly he refers to sexual violence as that was the most predictable aspect in the context of partition.

And Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in their remarkable work on partition they also pointed out that women's bodies were treated as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked. It was this sort of violence which also had provoked Saadat Hasan Manto to respond in the first place to write against partition and also to foreground the many different kinds of violences which were being perpetrated against women.

I also read out this excerpt from *Shame* by Rushdie. In that generation many women, ordinary decent, respectable ladies of the type to whom nothing ever happens, to whom nothing is supposed to happen except marriage, children, death, had this sort of strange story to tell. It was a rich time for stories if you lived to tell your tale.

Incidentally, these stories were most often not allowed to come out on the forefront because there was a state narrative, there was a state version which totally had surpassed all these personal and minor stories and it is in such a context that most of these narrativizations and these personal histories about partition begin to assume a lot of relevance.

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The Shadow Lines a text which we have already taken a look at. It is one of the most important text in the context of understanding partition because the lines drawn across borders, they are imaginary, they are like a shadow and they are also very arbitrary in nature and Shadow Lines has been already discussed reminds us that partition is a power to make the familiar unfamiliar even uncanny.

And The Shadow Lines is the discussion of a different kind of a partition where yet another nation is created Bangladesh after the partition of East Bengal and we are also reminded that partitions happen over and over again. So we find an uncanny repetition, an almost a prophetic repetition of what Saadat Hasan Manto had wondered in the 1940s in the aftermath of partition.

And Shadow Lines is also yet another reminder that the smaller stories of families and individuals are shaped by the larger stories of nation. Again, we can connect this to the narrative of Bapsi Sidhwa, we find how powerless the individuals are and in Midnight's Children we find how powerless the individual Saleem Sinai is to dictate the terms of his own life because his life is inextricably and intricately tied up with that of the nation.

He is handcuffed to history in multiple ways, so what perhaps differentiates most of these narrations and the protagonist is that their life is inextricably tied to that of the story of the nation, so the smaller story of the families in individuals even when we are told, they lose relevance in the larger context of the nation and even when they are able to articulate their own stories, it is impossible to tell their tale without the background of the nation.

Their life and their tales they assume a lot of relevance; they assume a lot of significance only because they were also shaped by the largest stories of the nation. At least, in the work set we have been taking a look at, at least in the context of which we have been having this discussion, we find that this remains rather interestingly true.

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## *Looking Through Glass*

- o What if Partition hadn't happened?
- o A deceptively simple counterfactual question: what might have happened if in 1942, Gandhi had not famously called on the British to 'Quit India'?

And finally this work by Mukul Kesavan *Looking Through Glass*, it wonders what if partition had not happened at all and the novel begins with the deceptively simple counterfactual question, what might have happened if in 1942 Gandhi had not famously called on the British to Quit India?

This is of course an imaginative retelling and it also tries to envision that future which would have perhaps unfolded before us if the Quit India Movement and the event of partition had not happened at all in this problematic history. So without going into further details of this, I would like to wrap up this discussion. We have now taken a look at series of novels which talk about partition within this field of Indian Fiction in English.

And we have also realize that unlike the regional languages where there is a certain kind of distanciation from national event such as partition we find that Indian English Fiction had been actively engaging with the stories of partition, the stories of emergency and the many events of national importance in that respect. So let me also leave you with this conclusion from Priyamvada Gopal's work where she tries to sum up the discussion on writing partition.

So I read out to you, 50 odd years later writers like Amitav Ghosh and Mukul Kesavan would attempt another sort of archeology deploying both imagination and intellect with the measure of world optimism in the face of pessimism engendered by the times. There is a project necessarily situated at the interstices of a literary and historical endeavors.

Lost possibilities and truths have to be reconstructed through the imagination and the imagined made precise by what we already know of the real. This job is not one of rewriting history commanded by the Mohajirs of Shame but the task of painstakingly honoring fragments of stories, slivers of the psalmist and without imposing a false wholeness or plenitude undoing absences and reconstructing possibilities.

So this is what I would like to leave you with as we wrap up this lecture. These discussions and these articulations are multiple ways of reconstructing possibilities if not anything. I also strongly encourage you to read through at least some of these novels which are of interest to you. And I am sure you will also get a fairly different kind of idea about how the re-narrativizing of history also leaves us with fresh possibilities to understand the nation and also for the individuals which are fraught within these many narratives of the nation.

I thank you for listening and I look forward to see you in the next session.