

Fractured Belongings: The Sindhi Diaspora and the Quest for Identity Post-Partition

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Introduction: The Sindhi Diaspora

In 1947, the Indian subcontinent was cleaved in two by a swift and violent act of division. This Partition, like a scalpel dragged across ancient soil, left scars that bled long after the borders were drawn. Amidst this sweeping upheaval, the Sindhi community found itself displaced, cast out of Sindh—a land their ancestors had called home for millennia. Unlike Punjab or Bengal, where Partition led to a divided homeland, the Sindhi people were rendered stateless, forever exiled from their birthplace. “No flag, no country, just our language and memories,” recalls a Sindhi elder in an oral history from the Sindhi Sangat (Sangat Foundation 1997). This paper sets out to explore the legacy of that displacement, the fractured identity of the Sindhi diaspora, and their ongoing search for belonging in foreign lands.

The Sindhi experience of Partition was unique, often overlooked in mainstream narratives of Indian history. The Partition forced many Sindhi Hindus to migrate overnight to India, while Sindhi Muslims who stayed in Pakistan faced a cultural transformation that altered their sense of identity. The Sindhi diaspora is thus marked by what Salman Rushdie calls a “sense of loss and melancholia” in *Imaginary Homelands* (Rushdie 12). But unlike the visible scars of physical wounds, the trauma of exile and dispossession exists more subtly—interwoven into memory, language, and fragmented stories passed through generations.

A distinctive feature of the Sindhi diaspora is this memory—both a source of comfort and a wellspring of sorrow. For Sindhis, memory

becomes a homeland, a repository of identity that endures even as geographical ties have been severed. As Edward Said wrote, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience” (Said 173). For many Sindhis, exile became a permanent state, an unending longing for a place that exists now only in stories and rituals. The community’s tales are woven with nostalgia, echoing memories of rivers and marketplaces that are more real to them than the cities where they now live. Cultural historian Ayesha Jalal describes this as “a diaspora of feeling, a homeland of the heart” (Jalal 223), a sense of belonging that transcends maps and political boundaries.

At the same time, the Sindhi diaspora’s identity is anything but static. Living in liminal spaces, Sindhi migrants navigate a delicate balance between preserving their past and adapting to their present. The tension is palpable: they are forever Sindhi, yet unable to return to Sindh. They live in cities like Mumbai, Ulhasnagar, Jaipur, etc. and overseas in the UK; where they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Their dialect shifts, their customs blend with those of the surrounding culture, and yet, within their hearts, the memory of Sindh remains a central anchor. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls this phenomenon “cultural hybridity,” where identities are “constantly reassembled from fragments, memory, and imagination” (*Modernity at Large* 13).

For the Sindhi diaspora, this process of reassembly is a form of survival. Memory, language, and ritual keep alive a fractured sense of belonging. Yet, it is not an easy peace. Memories often bring pain; they are “haunted landscapes,” in the words of Amitav Ghosh, filled with longing and loss (*The Shadow Lines* 29). The longing for Sindh is tinged with the bittersweet knowledge that returning home is impossible; the Sindh they remember no longer exists as they knew it. Their memories of the homeland are tinged with sepia tones, coloured by the trauma of a forced departure and the ache of unfulfilled dreams.

In this paper, we will trace the journeys of these displaced Sindhis. We will examine how they reconstruct their identity, drawing strength from memory even as they inhabit new worlds. Through literary narratives

and oral histories, this study seeks to unravel the layers of cultural hybridity, resilience, and nostalgia that characterize the Sindhi diaspora. Faiz Ahmed Faiz in *Poems by Faiz* (1971) has said that they remain “parched travellers of unknown deserts, forever carrying with them the water of home” (Faiz 47). Their journey is unfinished, a perpetual quest for identity in a world that is never truly theirs.

The Long Partition

Partition did not end in 1947. It seeped, like a slow poison, through the years that followed. For the Sindhi community, who found themselves stranded in a post-colonial twilight, the trauma lingered, transforming from event to epoch. Historians like Vazira Zamindar have argued that for many, especially those from communities without a homeland, Partition was not a singular event but a “Long Partition” – a period of endless displacement and fragmented belonging (Zamindar 3). The Sindhi diaspora, living between memory and exile, became emblematic of this protracted loss.

The idea of the “Long Partition” suggests that Partition was not a clean cut. Instead, it was an unhealed wound, one that left communities, like the Sindhis, in perpetual liminality. Zamindar writes in *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia* that “boundaries did not settle, nor did they create safe havens” (4). For the Sindhi diaspora, this meant carrying the scars of a broken past into an uncertain future, a haunting continuity rather than a closed chapter.

Unlike other Partition-affected communities, Sindhis faced a peculiar plight. The absence of a “Sindh” within the new India meant that they did not have a provincial identity to fall back on, as Punjabis or Bengalis did. This statelessness turned their search for identity into an endless journey. Urvashi Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence*, describes how “memory plays strange tricks” on the displaced, turning their yearning into an ache for what never fully was, nor could ever be again (Butalia 105). For Sindhis, this haunting manifests as a nostalgia for a homeland where they no longer belong, which exists now only in their memories and songs.

The Long Partition, for the Sindhi diaspora, became an inheritance. The post-1947 decades saw the community dispersed across India, with many moving further afield to places like Hong Kong, Dubai, and London. Yet, they carried Sindh within them, fragmentary and often idealized. This diaspora experience turned their cultural identity into something fluid, what Homi Bhabha calls “a third space” of hybridity, where they negotiated between past and present, Sindhi and non-Sindhi, Indian and global (Bhabha 55). Living in this “third space” meant that their sense of self was always in flux, pieced together from fragments of memory, culture, and adaptation.

The Long Partition was not just about geographic displacement but an ongoing loss of self and community. Sindhi families, in stories and oral histories, speak of a “ghost homeland” that lingers, “ungraspable yet undying,” as poet Agha Shahid Ali might say (Ali 89). This homeland exists in dreams, memories, and inherited narratives but resists physical form. This state of in-betweenness, both here and there, captures the essence of what the Long Partition has meant for Sindhis. It is an exile without return, a journey where home is remembered but unreachable.

The legacy of the Long Partition continues to shape Sindhi identity. Even as generations grow distant from 1947, they inherit its memory, its fractures, and its unresolved pain. Zamindar’s work highlights how the Long Partition “redefined borders not only physically, but within people’s sense of belonging and history” (Zamindar 13). For the Sindhi diaspora, then, this is a journey that does not end; it only evolves, a state of exile and adaptation across generations.

In the following sections, this paper will examine how Sindhi narratives of the Long Partition offer a rare insight into what it means to live perpetually in exile. Their stories are like unclosed doors, remnants of an incomplete departure, lingering “in the shadows of what we lost,” as Butalia eloquently observes (Butalia 110). These stories are vital testimonies, revealing how historical trauma transforms into cultural memory, how communities survive the endless act of saying goodbye to a homeland that never quite releases them.

Memories of Home: Displacement and Cultural Memory

For the Sindhi diaspora, memories of home are not just nostalgic recollections; they are lifelines, fragile yet enduring. Displacement stripped them of their homeland but left them with vivid memories of it—memories that are stitched together like a quilt from fragmented stories, rituals, and cultural practices. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs famously argued that memory is “socially framed,” meaning that our personal memories are molded by collective experiences (Halbwachs 38). In the case of Sindhis, these collective memories serve as a link to a homeland that, in reality, exists only in their minds. They are memories infused with resilience, though shaped by loss.

Displacement often turns memory into a sacred act. The writer Svetlana Boym speaks of “restorative nostalgia,” a yearning that seeks to reconstruct lost spaces through rituals and storytelling (*The Future of Nostalgia* 49). For Sindhis, home is often a ghostly presence, haunting them through smells, songs, and inherited stories. These fragments of memory become precious, a form of cultural preservation against the erosion of time and assimilation. Songs, for instance, are sung as prayers, bringing back to life the marketplaces, rivers, and temples of Sindh. Such memories are delicate, but they form an “imaginary homeland,” a term Salman Rushdie uses to describe the mental spaces diasporic communities construct to stay connected to their origins (Rushdie 10).

As Aleida Assmann explains, displaced communities often transform personal memories into shared narratives, creating a “collective framework that stands as a testament to their endurance” (*Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* 54). The Sindhi diaspora has forged a cultural memory that transcends individual experience. In this shared memory, the past is both sanctuary and burden, allowing them to hold onto their roots while navigating the complexities of exile.

Displacement heightens the need to remember, but it also alters what is remembered. Memories of home become tinted with idealism, often romanticized to offset the pain of separation. Cultural historian Marianne

Hirsch calls this “postmemory”—a phenomenon where descendants of displaced communities inherit memories so vivid they feel as though they lived them (*Family Frames* 22). Younger generations of Sindhis may never have seen Sindh, yet they carry its stories as though they are their own. Through stories, they learn to see themselves as part of a lineage marked by resilience, loss, and the longing for a homeland that is as mythical as it is real.

Displaced Sindhis gather around these stories, treating them as sacred truths. Paul Connerton writes that communities use “ritualized remembrance” to keep their cultural memory alive, embodying the past in collective rituals and traditions (*How Societies Remember* 46). These rituals are acts of survival, a way to bridge the gap between past and present. For Sindhis in India, Hong Kong, and beyond, such traditions connect them to their Sindhi heritage, forming a sense of continuity even in the face of dislocation.

Yet memory is not always gentle. For many, recalling home stirs a painful awareness of what was lost. Sociologist Avery Gordon describes this as a “haunting,” an enduring sense that the past shadows the present, never fully gone but never fully accessible (*Ghostly Matters* 63). The Sindhi diaspora is haunted by the memory of a place that is simultaneously near and distant, tangible in their hearts yet unreachable in the real world. Through this haunting, they keep alive a connection to their origins, a testament to their refusal to let go.

Ultimately, memory serves as both anchor and drift. It roots the Sindhi diaspora to a homeland that exists now only in stories, yet it allows them to create new meanings in the present. Through memory, they cultivate an “internal homeland,” a place woven from shared stories and nostalgia. As Toni Morrison so aptly wrote, “Memory is a monster; you forget—it doesn’t. It simply waits. It watches” (*Beloved* 73). For Sindhis, memory watches over them, guiding them back to Sindh, a land they can visit only in the sanctuary of their hearts.

Cultural Hybridity and the Sense of Belonging (or lack thereof)

For those who live between worlds, cultural hybridity is both a blessing and a burden. The Sindhi diaspora, scattered across foreign lands, inhabits a realm of mixed identities, adapting to new cultures while clinging to remnants of the old. But this fusion of identities brings with it an enduring tension. W.E.B. Du Bois famously called it “double consciousness”—a sense of “two-ness,” being “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 3). For the Sindhi diaspora, it is a similar struggle, a constant negotiation between old loyalties and new demands.

Cultural hybridity can create a fluid sense of belonging. It allows diasporic individuals to draw from multiple cultural wells, blending traditions and languages to form something uniquely their own. This fusion brings a creative richness, allowing the Sindhi diaspora to reimagine what it means to be Sindhi in Mumbai, Hong Kong, or Dubai. As Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs... yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture” (102). Like Anzaldúa, the Sindhi diaspora creates new identities from the fragments of their heritage and their host societies.

Yet, hybridity does not always result in belonging. The patchwork of identities that hybridity creates can also feel like a fracture, a feeling of being suspended between worlds but fully at home in neither. Frantz Fanon describes this experience as one of profound alienation, writing that “the feeling of inferiority...arises when the native comes into contact with the culture of the mother country” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 11). For the Sindhi diaspora, a similar disorientation occurs. Their sense of self is shaped by Sindh, yet they must adapt to societies that view them as outsiders. This duality creates a complex sense of identity—part nostalgia, part alienation, always unfinished.

The younger generations of Sindhis inherit this sense of hybridity and its conflicts. They may never have set foot in Sindh, yet they are taught its customs, its language, its spirit. They wear the culture like a coat that doesn't quite fit—familiar, yet foreign. As Salman Akhtar writes in *Immigration and Identity*, “Cultural hybridity...entails both a sense of loss and a sense of discovery” (89). For young Sindhis, this hybridity can feel like a space of both possibility and exclusion, a way to belong and yet remain on the margins.

In the end, cultural hybridity is neither home nor exile. It is a state of becoming, a journey with no final destination. For the Sindhi diaspora, belonging is elusive, a place they construct but can never fully inhabit. As Edward Said once observed, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (*After the Last Sky* 16). Cultural hybridity offers glimpses of belonging, but it is an uneasy home, marked by both connection and distance, an identity that is constantly remade, and never complete.

Liminal Spaces and the ‘In-Between’ Identity

The concept of liminal spaces finds its essence in the Sindhi diaspora's experience post-Partition. Liminality, as conceived by anthropologist Victor Turner, represents an ambiguous space “betwixt and between” (Turner 93). For the Sindhi community, this state is not just metaphorical but a lived reality. They inhabit an existence that oscillates between the homeland they lost and the host nations they struggle to embrace. This space, which Homi Bhabha describes as “the in-between,” becomes a site of both possibility and disquiet (Bhabha 2).

After the Partition of 1947, the Sindhi people found themselves in a constant state of flux. Unlike other communities granted defined territories, the Sindhis were left rootless, devoid of a homeland. Theirs was an identity shaped by unmoored dislocation. Ashis Nandy highlights this feeling of suspension: “For the refugee, the past is a lost country, the present an uncertain battlefield, and the future a distant mirage” (Nandy 5). This sense of living “in-between” places has etched itself onto the collective consciousness of Sindhis, fostering a duality marked by nostalgia and adaptation.

The ‘in-between’ identity emerges from these fragmented narratives. Edward Said’s reflections on exile come to mind: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (Said 181). For Sindhi migrants, the trauma of being uprooted created new cultural expressions that blended elements of their past with those of their present. This hybridity, however, did not come without struggle. The desire to maintain a distinct Sindhi identity often conflicted with the pressures to conform and belong in new sociopolitical landscapes. As Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, “Identity is a process, never a fixed product” (Minh-ha 142). Sindhis embody this ongoing negotiation, where identity remains a site of contention and resilience.

Scholarly works like Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar’s *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia* illuminate the enduring effects of this in-betweenness. She argues that the experience of prolonged displacement blurred the boundaries of home and diaspora, creating a sense of “perpetual exile” (Zamindar 14). Oral histories gathered from the Sindhi community reveal how individuals managed to preserve cultural memory despite fragmented realities. Songs, stories, and rituals served as vessels to transmit identity across generations, even as they adapted to new surroundings.

Thus, the liminal space occupied by the Sindhi diaspora is more than a backdrop; it is the narrative itself. It is a testament to survival, “a place where the old is not entirely lost, and the new is not fully won” (Bhabha 2). In navigating this space, the Sindhis demonstrate how communities can forge a complex identity that is neither wholly integrated nor completely estranged. Their existence in this ‘in-between’ world captures the essence of post-Partition trauma while illustrating the strength to craft spaces of belonging amid displacement.

In the words of poet Agha Shahid Ali, “...to be exiled / is to love from distance” (Ali 35). For the Sindhi diaspora, the liminal is not just transitional; it is enduring, shaping an identity that is both fractured and resilient.

Narrative as a Tool for Healing and Preservation

Narratives hold immense power for communities grappling with loss and dislocation. For the Sindhi diaspora post-Partition, storytelling became both a balm and a bulwark. Through narrative, pain could be voiced, shared, and softened. Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, asserts that narratives are “a way of shaping experience” (Rushdie 12). For displaced Sindhis, recounting stories was not just an act of remembering but of reclaiming identity. Oral traditions passed from elders to younger generations preserved more than memories—they preserved belonging.

Narratives serve as tools for healing. They offer a structure to chaotic experiences, turning fragmented recollections into coherent stories. This helps individuals and communities find meaning in trauma. As Toni Morrison wrote, “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (Morrison 37). For Sindhis, stories woven with memories of home and tales of resilience became collective lifelines. These stories acted as both testament and therapy, a communal practice that allowed for grief and continuity.

Storytelling is also a vessel for cultural preservation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, highlights how subjugated voices must reclaim their narratives to preserve identity (Spivak 84). For Sindhis, oral histories filled gaps left by official records. Songs, folk tales, and personal accounts kept the past alive in the present. This fusion of memory and narrative fortified a shared sense of identity, even when physical roots were severed.

To listen to these stories is to witness the resilience of displaced people. It is to understand that narrative, as Chinua Achebe believed, is “a way to keep the past alive for the future” (Achebe 45). For the Sindhi diaspora, storytelling is not only a means of survival but of reclaiming agency, stitching fragmented selves back into wholeness.

Implications for Diasporic Studies and Memory Work

The Sindhi diaspora’s narratives post-Partition offer rich insights for

diasporic studies and memory work. As Svetlana Boym notes, “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be a rebellion against the modern idea of time” (Boym 49). For the Sindhis, memories intertwined with oral histories resist erasure. They challenge linear notions of history and place, instead revealing identities as fluid and multi-dimensional.

Diasporic studies must consider the emotional terrain of such memories. Paul Gilroy’s concept of “routes” rather than “roots” (*The Black Atlantic*) underscores that diaspora is a space of movement and hybridity (Gilroy 19).

For the Sindhis, narratives stitched from past and present experiences highlight that diasporic identity is always in negotiation. Memory work also faces implications for how stories are archived and valued. Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory”—how later generations inherit trauma and memories not lived but deeply felt—applies here (Hirsch 22). For the Sindhi diaspora, descendants continue to bear the weight of loss, using storytelling to keep collective memory alive and evolving.

Thus, studies of diaspora must embrace the complex interplay of memory, loss, and resilience. These are essential for understanding how communities reconstruct identity in the shadow of historical trauma.

Conclusion: The Ongoing Search for Belonging

The Sindhi diaspora’s post-Partition journey embodies resilience, loss, and the ongoing search for identity. Forced into exile without a homeland, the Sindhis preserved their heritage through memory and narrative, crafting an “imaginary homeland” from the fragments of their past. The concept of the Long Partition reveals that this displacement was not a single event but an enduring legacy that continues to shape identity. Living in liminal spaces, the Sindhi community balances nostalgia with adaptation, forming hybrid identities that are complex and ever-evolving. Oral histories, stories, and rituals serve as tools for healing and cultural preservation, sustaining a sense of belonging even in exile. The interplay between memory and narrative becomes essential in reconstructing a fractured sense of self. For scholars of diasporic studies, the Sindhi

experience underscores the need to view displacement as both historical trauma and a site of cultural endurance. Their story, marked by perpetual in-betweenness, speaks to the strength required to keep one's identity alive in the face of loss.

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