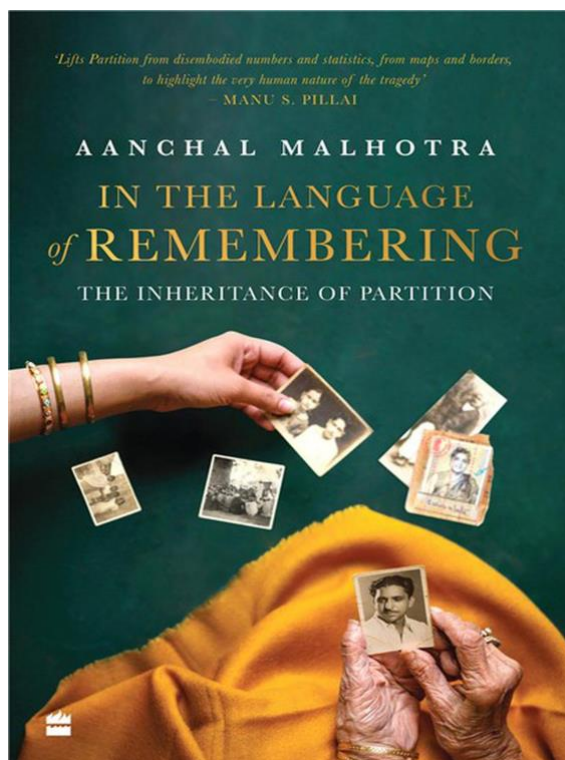


Aanchal Malhotra, *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition*. Gurugram: Harper Collins, 2022. i-xlii+713 pp. P-ISBN: 978-93-5489-891-4 and E-ISBN: 978-93-5489-914-0.



Aanchal Malhotra's *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* ventures into a relatively new area of Partition studies. Built up on an impressive corpus of interviews of Partition survivors and their descendants scattered in the Indian subcontinent and beyond, it probes into the dynamics of transference of memories to succeeding generations who try to reconfigure the emotions of the displaced subjects and, in the process, get themselves involved. The book is thus about “the passage of memory” which involves “a relationship between a generation that has lived through a historical trauma and a generation that has inherited the memory of that trauma” (*In the Language* xxx). This marks a critical shift in the focus of research which conventionally dwells on the pangs of the Partition victims.

Not that commentators have not talked about this transference. Urvashi Butalia, for instance, in the Introduction to her edited volume *Partition: The Long*

Shadow (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2015), argues that “as the numbers of those who retain direct, experiential memories diminish, as their stories recede, ways of remembering also change,” affecting the ways such memories are passed on (viii). She observes that with the passage of time “the power and poignancy of the direct story are often muted, and what tends to acquire more importance is the *business of living* with the consequences of that history” (viii-ix; emphasis added). The “business of living” may be noticed more emphatically in those who have not gone through the experience of displacement and violence and hence may not be emotionally latched on to the stories of turmoil. Malhotra’s thesis is different as she proceeds to demonstrate how even the members of the younger generations are swayed by strong emotions – their remembrance of the inherited stories, she observes, “seemed as visceral as the way these would have been described to them” (*In the Language* xxvii).

The visceral nature of the narratives is evident in the distinctive ‘language’ of the narration – the title of the book demonstrates Malhotra’s interest in the ‘linguistic’ aspect. In the Introduction she traces the meaning of the “language” not just to the verbal components or styles but also to the inflections of the voices as well as the words left unsaid. She discovers emotions deeply “embedded in bodies” – in their movements, gestures or “looks in the eyes” (xxx). There is a history of deep emotion associated with the Partition that is communicated through this wider spectrum of language. Emotion also plays an important role in the structuring of the interviews in the book. The chapters are named after “certain emotion or actions that appeared emblematic of the conversations” (*In the Language* xxxiii) such as fear, grief, hope, friendship or migration. This neutralises the discriminatory biases inherent in identity-based classification. She suggests the commonness of feelings and emotions in all human beings affected by a cataclysmic event like Partition. Naming the chapters after nations, nationalities or religions would not have done justice to the emotional turmoil people of the subcontinent went through – irrespective of their ethnic, religious or national identity.

In the Language of Remembering is a sequel to the author’s earlier work *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition Through Material Memory* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2017). Both the books are based on interviews but while the latter is exclusively on material memory, the former is focused, as pointed out earlier, on the transference of Partition memory to the members of the later generations and how they respond to the memories. *In the Language of Remembering* also contains a chapter on material memory which Malhotra defines as the “ability of an object or a possession to retain memory, and act as stimulus for recollection” (*Remnants* 4). This memory “considers the object a primary character around which the past is arranged” (*In the Language* 373). Mundane objects, because of their quotidian nature, are not usually “valued for their age, rarity, technical virtuosity, beauty, or

even their serendipitous survival” (*In the Language* 373) but they can really act as “vessel[s] for memory.”

In the chapter entitled “Material Memory” Malhotra exhumes old stories while discussing material objects such as a “curfew pass” issued on 30th of August, 1947 to Delhi-based Anis Khan’s grandfather Mohammad Umar, or a faded cheque book issued to the Pakistani girl Saba’s grandfather Wajid Ali Khan by “Imperial Bank of India, Srinagar, Kashmir” which contained the last set of cheques dated October to November, 1947, or an exquisite piece of jewellery (a gold bracelet) originally belonging to Tanjima Kar Sekh’s grandfather’s mother Snehalata, or even the scrapbook of the Scottish-origin historian William Dalrymple’s father (and Sam Dalrymple’s grandfather) Hew Fleetwood Hamilton-Dalrymple who was in the subcontinent during the Partition and was close to the political protagonists of the time. *In the Language of Remembering* is thus intimately connected to, and developed on, the theme of *Remnants of a Separation*. Besides the Introduction, *In the Language of Remembering* comprises twenty-four chapters organised around twenty-four topics of emotional significance such as material memory, borderlands, family, fear, friendship, grief, loss, and returning. Anam Zakaria, a historian and the author of the much-acclaimed book *The Footprints of Partition: Narratives of Four Generations of Pakistanis and Indians* (2015), has written the Foreword of the book. She rightly observes that it emerges out of “an urgency, a quest and a desire to document, to preserve, to archive the memory of Partition” (xvi). This is testified by the establishment of increasing number of projects and archives as well as literary and research works which try to preserve the memories of a generation fast disappearing.

As one goes through *In the Language of Remembering*, one comes across unusual, deeply affective episodes of remembrance in which not only the members of two or three generations of a single family are involved but so are those of other families across borders and religions who are bound together in an amazing web of friendship. In the chapter “Belonging,” for instance, Malhotra records the role of a *haveli* (mansion) called “Shams Manzil” built by a Muslim family in Jullundur in 1909 which acts as a catalyst to bring people of diverse backgrounds together. Mian Faiz Rabbani, born in the *haveli* in 1931, migrated to Lyallpur in Pakistan in 1947. Seized by an uncontrollable desire to see his “homeland,” Rabbani visited Jullundur twenty-five years after Partition and was pleasantly surprised to see the house and the stone plaque at the entrance bearing the old name. He was welcomed in the house as ‘*ghar de maalik*’ (owner of the home) by Upkar Anand, the present owner. In 2008 Rabbani’s niece, Samar visited the house and with Anand’s consent carried the still-intact name plaque to Lahore. Rabbani showed it to Malhotra when the latter visited Lahore in 2014. In late 2020, Anand’s New Jersey-based granddaughters (Amneet and Puneet) contacted Malhotra to inform her that their grandfather Upkar Singh Anand had identified the stone plaque of “Shams Manzil” in her book *Remnants of a Separation*

(2017). In a video interview conducted later, Anand described how during the Partition he was taken for dead, and his funeral was performed. With such knowledge of Partition, Puneet could feel sensations running through her body while reading Saadat Hasan Manto's short narratives "Khol Do," "Toba Tek Singh" or "Thanda Ghosht." The entire book pulsates with such stories vibrating with feelings and sensations. The readers will be deeply touched by the narratives that create ripples, even waves, of emotion across generations.

This book, as a whole, unearths people's history – their stories of love and enmity, displacement and settlement, of wealth and poverty, of their loss of home and homeliness, and nostalgia. It is overwhelmingly about memory and forgetfulness. It tells us about how hidden stories are exhumed by chance comments, references to old places and people, providential meetings and coincidences, and carefully preserved material objects. They connect generations, families, and people living in distant places. By foregrounding the role of emotion as having overriding significance in understanding Partition, the book counteracts statist history and unfolds the other side of the event. Aanchal Malhotra's *In the Language of Remembering: The Inheritance of Partition* will be admired by sundry readers and repeatedly referred to by perceptive critics in the future.

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