“Partition lives on in post-colonial times to such an extent that we should truly prefer the phrase ‘partitioned times’ to the more common ‘post-colonial times’” (Jassal and Ben-Ari, 19, citing Samaddar 21). With this spirited epigraph, the editors of a recent collection on the ‘partition motif’ assert the centrality of partition to any discussion of the formerly colonized world. Their claim is symptomatic of a growing insistence on the importance of the comparative study of partition in the humanities as well as the social sciences, signaled not only by books like Jassal and Ben-Ari’s (both are anthropologists), but also within the far more developed field of Indian partition studies, where humanities scholars regularly note the relationship between the partition of the subcontinent and other twentieth-century partitions (Pandey, *Remembering Partition* 1; Francisco 372; Kaul xiii). There are evidently pressing historical reasons for a turn to partition studies in the last twenty-five years: several scholars cite the reunification of Germany and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia as motivation (Cleary 1-2; Radha Kumar 3; Bose, “The Partition Evasion” n. pag.), and in Indian partition scholarship the ‘intercommunal’ violence in Indian cities in the 1980s and 1990s is often described as having triggered collective memories of Partition violence, which in turn compelled historians to break the long official and academic silence surrounding the atrocities (Didur, *Unsettling Partition* 4; Pandey, *Routine Violence* 5). At the current time, given the serious consideration of proposals to partition Iraq—including a non-binding resolution passed in the United States Senate in 2007, sponsored by then-Senator Joe Biden (see Johnson 142, n. 9; Bose, “The Partition Evasion” n. pag.)—the need for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to the comparative study of the legacies of twentieth-century partitions, one which is motivated by a commitment to social justice and not only the ‘security’ concerns that tend to dominate policy studies, seems especially urgent.

However, despite this clear political and intellectual impetus, what remains less certain is what kinds of methodologies partition studies
should entail, particularly in the humanities, and what kinds of insights might be gained from the act of comparison itself. This article will speculatively address one aspect of this problem by proposing a basic method for comparing works of ‘partition literature,’ which I define as texts that represent either the event of territorial partition or its consequences (see also Cleary 94 and 238, n. 64; Harlow). I contend that it is possible to identify distinct genres, plotlines, and aesthetic modes within the category of partition literature, with specific reference to the romance, the Bildungsroman, and the fragmented narrative. My examples come from the postcolonial partitions of India, Palestine, and Ireland only, in which conflicting claims to self-determination based on ‘ethnic’ or ‘communal’ conflict have been the primary rationale for partition in the moment of decolonization. Ethnic conflict has also been the motivation for partition in the former Yugoslavia and Cyprus, though not at the point of imperial withdrawal, while the Cold War partitions of Germany, Korea, and Vietnam were engineered as part of the US-Soviet struggle for global dominance. Nevertheless, in each case, partition was imposed or overseen by a stronger polity at the expense of a weaker one, instigating a “moment of nationalisation” (Pandey, *Remembering Partition* 17) which produced reconfigured or completely new national identities (see also Cleary 1-3 and 20; Fraser 2). Since this experience of dramatic, and often violent, territorial reorganization is common to all twentieth-century partitions, it is my hope that the narrative forms I identify will also be recognizable across a much broader range of partition contexts.

My approach builds on previous efforts to describe common characteristics among partition literatures, most notably Joe Cleary’s book *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State*, as well as the existing scholarship on comparative approaches to twentieth-century partitions and the cultural effects and legacies of partition in particular locations. However, it also departs from this scholarship by accounting not only for the functions of partition literature, but also for what I identify as the unexpected and suggestive convergence of its techniques. I first briefly discuss the main conclusions of the scholarship on partition and partition literature, which I situate in relation to my own method for reading these texts. The second part of the article examines the narrative strategies I focus on in more detail, with attention to the Bildungsroman and the fragmented narrative. I argue that both of these forms seek to critically replicate the processes through which the event of partition is memorialized. They do this not only by testifying to the physical and psychic violence inflicted by partition and in its aftermath,
as many commentators have noted, but also by creating “counterfactual” representations of pre-partition history or the post-partition present (see Gopal 82-86). Here I follow Crystal Bartolovich’s definition of “critical counterfactualism” as the “reclaiming of still incomplete revolutionary projects” (64; see also Gopal 84). While the texts I discuss are not all revolutionary in the sense she means, and they often do not actually depict alternative pasts or presents, they all contest the current order by evoking a yearning for what “might have been” (Bartolovich 66). This “critical counterfactualism” challenges the retrospective assertion of either the inevitability or the necessity of partition, and it encourages the reader to consider other forms of social and political organization that could have (or could still) come into being.

This approach requires a form of distant reading not unlike the general method proposed by Franco Moretti; thus, I pay more attention to the similarities between the texts I consider than to their many differences, and I do not attempt to account for partition narratives that cannot be classified as belonging to one of the genres I describe. My comparisons of particular texts are necessarily limited: The four main texts under consideration deal with the effects of partition within the Israeli state and the Punjab only, and their languages are Urdu (which I read in translation), Hebrew, and English, omitting Arabic and the many other languages of Indian partition literature. I also leave out major narrative forms of partition literature such as the short story (important in Urdu and Bengali in particular), memoir, and testimonial, as well as poetry and drama. A final limitation is that by emphasizing the counterfactual tendencies of the specific forms I consider, I do not fully account for partition literature that consolidates partition rather than challenges it, to use Cleary’s vocabulary (59; see also Harlow 87).

However, by suggesting a provisional template for reading partition fiction that can be used in reference to different geopolitical contexts, I aim to contribute to the development of a methodology that can avoid some of the pitfalls of the “case-by-case approach” to partition studies (Radha Kumar 4), which in the realm of policy can lead to a failure to learn lessons from other partitions, and in literary criticism, to tautology (i.e. the claim that ‘these narratives of partition are all about partition’). If we are to make meaningful comparisons between partition texts, it is necessary to refine our mode of enquiry, which I think is best done through a focus on shared narrative techniques. More polemically, though I agree with Cleary that partition literature is not necessarily contestatory, I would like to suggest that the propensity
towards counterfactualism can be seen as inherent in the particular genre I identify. This is a different claim from the commonplace assertion that fictional accounts of partition “interrupt” (Pandey, Routine Violence 15), “destabilize” (Didur. Unsettling Partition 11-13), or “expose” (Hasan 39) the new national narratives formed in the aftermath of partition. On the contrary, I argue that literature can do more than counter official narratives, and that it is not necessarily or even typically anti-nationalist. Instead, partition fiction has a special capacity to gesture towards and, in some cases, formally construct, visions of collectivity and nationhood based on solidarity, not separation.

Comparing Partitions

The existing approaches to the comparative study of partition can be broadly characterized by discipline, by their attitude to partition, and by what it is that they seek to compare. In policy-oriented fields like political science, international relations, or peace and conflict studies, it is often taken for granted that a comparative approach to partition studies can determine the utility of partition—or lack thereof—as a means of resolving ‘ethnic conflict’ (a term which assumes that such conflicts are fuelled by atavistic, ‘tribal’ allegiances rather than, for example, the divide-and-rule policies practiced under colonial governance). Although some contemporary political theorists hold that partition is a viable option “when all else fails” (Kaufmann; Johnson; Waterman), many others contend that twentieth-century partitions have consistently produced more problems than they have solved. As one vehement rebuttal to the pro-partitionists puts it, partition is “an effectively useless policy tool” since “effective partition is unlikely to occur except through ethnic cleansing during war” (Horowitz and Weisiger 203). It follows that the study of the failures of past partitions can potentially reveal “broad, comparative lessons for making peace” (Bose, Contested Lands 5) in regions that are still suffering partition’s after-effects, or where partition is still considered to be a possible solution (e.g. Iraq or Israel/Palestine). The basis for comparative study then is not only the common structural features that twentieth-century partitions have shared—such as the use of partition as an imperial exit strategy—but also, and more importantly, the desire to construct a prescriptive framework for resolving ethnic conflict (or otherwise set the terms of national independence, as in the Cold War partitions) that can be adapted to different contexts, whether or not partition is seen as an acceptable means of resolution.
Partition scholarship in the humanities tends to take a less overtly instrumentalist—or interventionist—approach. Rather than viewing partition through the lens of conflict resolution theory, humanities scholars have typically been more skeptical of claims for the obduracy of ethnic divisions, and have identified partition itself as a form of social violence. Recent scholarship in history, literature, and cultural studies has focused on the artistic and testimonial evidence of the lasting suffering partition has engendered, in both material terms (murder, rape, dispossession, and displacement) and psychic terms (trauma, nostalgia, and the formation or suppression of collective memory). This approach might seem to enable comparison between different partition contexts on the basis of a shared experience of partition-induced trauma, an approach already suggested by the number of studies of the Indian partition of 1947 that draw on Holocaust and trauma studies (e.g. Didur, *Unsettling Partition*; Kabir; Priya Kumar; Jassal and Ben-Ari 48; 46). Yet very little comparative study of partition has so far taken place in the humanities, whether from a trauma studies perspective or otherwise. Instead, the vast majority of work on the cultural effects of partition has addressed the Indian partition, where, as Ritu Menon has argued, there is little comparison of the experience of Partition “from a cross-border, three country perspective” (159), let alone between the Indian partition and other partitions.

The focus on India helps to explain the pronounced emphasis on human suffering in existing scholarship. Not only were the immediate effects of Partition particularly catastrophic, especially in the Punjab, but they were also suppressed from most histories of the period in favor of celebratory nationalist accounts of the birth of the two new nations of India and Pakistan (Hasan 12-18; Pandey, *Remembering Partition* 1-20). Fictional accounts of the Indian partition have been a key part of the effort to counter the “collective amnesia” (Pandey, *Routine Violence* 23) enabled by such triumphalism, since fiction, in both literature and film, was the arena in which the most sustained engagement with the human cost of the partition took place. However, the idea that Partition literature is best read as a counter-nationalist document of suffering now threatens to achieve hegemonic status. Partition fiction is regularly described, often with reference to the work of Gyanendra Pandey and Menon and Bhasin, as a means of filling in the gaps in the official historical record (e.g. Rastegar 26); like subaltern testimony, it is seen to serve as one of the “small voices” of history (Pandey, *Remembering Partition* 203). Literature, in other words, is understood
as an “eloquent witness, and perhaps the only witness, to an unspeakable and inarticulable history” (Kumar 202; Hasan 17). Deepika Bahri goes so far as to suggest that Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* (first published as *Ice Candy Man*), which I discuss in more detail below, positions the reader as a “belated witness who must now share the pain, the blame, the guilt” (228) with those who lived through Partition.

The problem with this approach is not that it sees all literary accounts of the Indian partition as necessarily oppositional; Pandey, for one, explicitly distinguishes between critical and consolidatory texts when he suggests that the northern Indian partition literature published in the 1950s and 1960s “conforms pretty much to the secular nationalist problematic” that mourns partition violence but sees it as an inexplicable aberration (*Routine Violence* 23). Instead, the trouble is that when the value of literature is located in its capacity to bear witness to personal trauma (or indeed, to position the reader as a proxy witness to such trauma), the line between literature and survivors’ testimony is blurred, and the specific work that literature is able to perform in partition contexts—as opposed to other contexts of mass dispossession, violence, or war—becomes much harder to describe. Jill Didur makes a similar point when she warns against reading Partition narratives as either “record” or “gossip”: If we are to be able to attend to the “literariness of [partition] literature,” we have to approach literary texts as discursive *interventions* into existing representations of the history of partition (“Lifting the Veil?” 10ff; Didur, *Unsettling Partition*; Marx 599). This is not to suggest that the affective or traumatic dimension of the experience of partition is unimportant, but rather that it is inseparable from the particular kinds of reconceptualizations of social and political space that twentieth-century partitions have entailed. While fiction and testimony are both able to represent individual suffering, fiction is better placed to contextualize it, and to reexamine the political certainties that have produced it.

One of the reasons that the comparative study of partition literatures is useful is that it can help shift the focus from reading this literature as testimony to reading it as an imaginative response to the common guiding logic of partition, which has held that political space must be reorganized in order to “accommodate” (Cleary 29) ethnic or other forms of political conflict. If the rationale for comparing (for instance) Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* with Mukul Kesavan’s *Looking Through Glass*—two texts which were written forty years apart, and which make use of documentary realism and magical real-
ism respectively—is that both of them represent the partition of India, it is very tempting to conclude that the reason to read these two texts together is to glean different kinds of information about the event of Partition itself: one more immediate, and the other as evidence of the continued “haunt[ing] of the collective memory of the subcontinent” (Priya Kumar 215). But if one compares Train to Pakistan with the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani’s Men in the Sun (Rijal fi al-shams), with the rationale that each of them represents a response to partition, it is clearly impossible to rely on coincident or divergent representations of the same events as a basis for comparison. If we are to understand the relationship between these texts as sharing something more than the recourse to a universalized notion of trauma—which would not solve the problem of what distinguishes partition literature from other kinds of conflict literature—it is necessary to find links between their respective political imaginaries.

Cleary has come closest to proposing a methodology for this kind of comparison by suggesting that partition narratives can be compared in terms of their effort to either advance the goal of complete separation or promote convergence and reintegration (59). However, he does not suggest particular literary strategies which might be adopted across different contexts, focusing instead on the local and text-specific articulations of the functions he identifies. Thus, though he does note at one point that dreams of reconciliation are registered at the level of form, he limits this insight to Irish partition literature only (110). My aim is to demonstrate what Cleary leaves implicit by accounting for some of the formal and generic similarities that I have found to be common among literary narratives of partition. If, as Jason Francisco puts it, the literature of partition “rightly forces us to reckon sides and to choose” between partition and coexistence (373), it does so by formally re-enacting the conditions of that choice, and by refusing to concede—sometimes in spite of itself—that partition could ever have produced a just or equitable outcome.

Genres of Partition

1. Romance

One of the major forms common to partition narratives from India/Pakistan/Bangladesh, Israel/Palestine, and Ireland/Northern Ireland is the “romance-across-the-divide” (Gopal 72-73; Cleary 110 and 112-14). The basic model for this plot is a heterosexual romance
between lovers on opposite sides of the partition, which typically is either tragically thwarted or can only be realized in exile. In Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, for example, the romance between a Sikh man and a Muslim woman (admittedly a rather violent and misogynistic affair; see Kaul 16) ends in disaster: Juggat Singh manages to stop the train carrying Nooran to Pakistan from being blown up, but he is killed in the process. In *Arabesques*, a novel written in Hebrew by the Palestinian Israeli writer Anton Shammas, the romance is similarly, though less violently, truncated. The novel initially takes the form of letters from the Palestinian Israeli protagonist to his Jewish Israeli lover, but in a self-consciously allegorical reversal, the woman’s husband, an officer in the Israeli army, finds the letters and cuts off their correspondence. Conversely, in Joan Lingard’s *Kevin and Sadie* series (1970-1976), Catholic Kevin and Protestant Sadie are able to stay together, but only by leaving Belfast for England. Over the course of the remaining books, they get married, have a child, and finally settle in Wales, but they never return permanently to Northern Ireland. Another variation appears in Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*. In the early part of the novel, the Hindu Ayah’s multi-confessional group of lovers represents a pre-partition pluralist idyll which is already retrospectively tinged with nostalgia; when this circle of lovers is forcibly narrowed to her Muslim abductor Ice-candy-man, Ayah’s abduction is made even more horrific by the loss of the pre-partition innocence of the possibility of the cross-communal romance, which, after partition, can only be falsely staged through violence and coercion.4

Clearly, the “romance-across-the-divide” is not a genre that is limited to partition contexts; as Doris Sommer has famously shown, the genre was commonly used in nineteenth-century Latin America as a means of imaginatively unifying newly independent states made up of economically and ethnically diverse populations. Yet while Sommer’s national reconciliations tend to be figured by happy-ever-after narrative resolutions, the tragic endings common to partition romances tend to represent unification as unrealizable in the present. Whether because of the seeming irreversibility of the loss of pre-partition innocence, or the inability to imagine a state structure in which the lovers’ romance would not be taboo (Cleary 115), narrative resolution is typically only achieved in these novels through the confirmation, not the refutation, of the divide between the ‘national’ groups. Indeed, the desired union of the two lovers often has the effect of intensifying the divide rather than undermining it (Gopal 73). Thus,
though A. B. Yehoshua’s *The Lover* is a ‘successful’ partition romance, insofar as it ends with Dafi and Na’im’s physical consummation of their mutual attraction, this union is made possible by Na’im’s increasing desire to identify as a Jew rather than an Arab (242; Ramras-Rauch 143). Reconciliation can only be achieved through Na’im’s willing capitulation to Jewish Israeli hegemony, which makes the lives of what the novel designates as ‘real’ Palestinian Arabs (represented by Na’im’s brother, a militant killed in action) seem even more remote from Jewish Israeli experience.

What distinguishes the failed partition romance from other kinds of failed cross-border romances—including Romeo and Juliet’s—is its particular form of counterfactualism, in which the social order where the lovers might be united is *not* unimaginable (*pace* Cleary), because historical alternatives can be found in the pre-partition period, when other forms of political organization—including federation, regional autonomies, and economic unions (see Fraser)—were not only imagined but seriously considered. In each of the examples I’ve mentioned, the yearning of the lovers enables us to envision the possibility of an undivided India, Ireland, or Palestine: Their romance challenges the collective naturalization of partition by attempting to defamiliarize the communal boundaries used to rationalize it. The eventual frustration of that yearning—or the colossal compromises that one or both lovers must make to satisfy it—does not negate its affective power or its imaginative affiliation with past alternatives to partition. Even Yehoshua’s novel, which is hardly anti-partitionist in content, has to work very hard to combat the logic of its genre; it does so in part by turning the adolescent romance into a rather comic, lighthearted affair that signifies the Jewish state’s capacity to accommodate its Palestinian Israeli minority, rather than presenting a tragic passion doomed by the history of Palestinian expulsion and dispossession. By equating romantic love with a desired social harmony as a genre, the partition romance directly challenges the political logic of partition, even if individual texts attempt to mitigate or neutralize that challenge.

Partition romance is a form in which the relationship between narrative structure and the critique of partition is readily apparent. The next two genres I consider are less easily identifiable, either as discrete narrative forms or as forms that are intrinsically linked to, let alone critical of, partition. These caveats notwithstanding, I want to argue that both the *Bildungsroman* and the fragmented narrative offer provocative ways of thinking about how the naturalization of partition might be confronted,
since, as I suggested above, both forms seek to undermine the seeming fixity of social and territorial boundaries in the post-partition period by critically reproducing the history of the creation of those boundaries, and by trying to make alternatives to partition thinkable once again.

2. Bildungsroman

In the case of the Bildungsroman, this project is sometimes attempted by aligning the narrator’s coming of age with the event of partition itself, as in Cracking India and in the non-fictional childhood memoirs by Amos Oz and Ghada Karmi; or, alternatively, by figuring coming of age as an awareness of the legacy of partition, as is the case in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark, Edward Said’s memoir Out of Place, and Shammas’s Arabesques. In each of these texts, young adulthood is metonymically associated with the traumas (or for Oz, the temporary triumph) of partition: The pre-partition period, or the period before the awareness of partition, is identified with childish innocence, while the post-partition or post-awareness period equals adult disillusionment. Like the partition romance then the partition Bildungsroman is a pessimistic genre, in which the pre-lapsarian age before partition is—like childhood—irrevocably lost, and the dystopia of the present seems extremely difficult to overcome. At the same time, however, the nostalgia for that time of innocence is constitutively anti-partitionist, and so it holds onto the possibility of a different kind of future. Even in Oz’s memoir, as one reviewer notes, the young Oz’s entry into adulthood is marked not just by his mother’s death, but also by “the death of the socialist-Zionist dream of a just society” (Leonard n. pag.); the event of partition simultaneously signifies the realization and the negation of the fantasy of total separation, as it becomes almost immediately clear that partition has not ended Palestinian and Arab resistance to Zionism.

Cracking India and Arabesques share more than a dual reliance on the genres of the partition romance and Bildungsroman, since both have had the dubious honor of having received a great deal of critical attention in English. A more compelling link, however, can be seen in the novels’ common use of the Bildungsroman form, both featuring a semi-autobiographical protagonist (who in Arabesques is also named Shammas), as a means of simultaneously rehearsing and challenging the seeming inevitability of partition. The specific political projects of the two novels are by no means equally radical: Cracking India restages partition from the vantage point of an upper-class family in
Lahore whose Parsee origins place them ‘outside’ of the conflict and in a position to offer charity to its victims (see Hai), while *Arabesques* takes the riskier route of “deterritorializing Hebrew” (Hever; Hochberg) by using it to tell a story of Palestinian dispossession. Yet both demonstrate the *Bildungsroman*’s particular capacity to highlight the contingency of partition, in part by drawing attention to the responsibility, and not just the victimization, of those who were present and those who live with its consequences.

*Cracking India* is in many ways a fairly conventional example of the *Bildungsroman*, following its protagonist-narrator’s journey from an almost total innocence of all forms of injustice, including discrimination on the basis of gender and disability, to a level of familiarity with social, sexual, and physical violence that leaves her, if not traumatized, certainly far less capable of wonder or trust. While critics have normally located the novel’s effort to defamiliarize the event of partition in its use of Lenny’s naïve narrative perspective, signified most obviously through her “collapse of the figurative and literal uses of language” (Didur, *Unsettling Partition* 72; Bhatia 203-04; Hai 388-89), this progression from innocence to experience is in fact a more important intervention. Partition is made uncanny (Gopal 81) not just because the reader is meant to imagine what it might be like to share Lenny’s innocence, but because, like her, we are encouraged to contrast the time of pre-partition innocence with that of post-partition disillusionment.

The novel is almost comically packed with moments of confusion and epiphany that make up what might be understood as Lenny’s sentimental—or perhaps political—education. In one of the novel’s most frequently cited passages, Lenny takes the news that India is to be “broken” literally: “Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother’s then?” (101). This retrospective staging of childish credulity is not always believable or consistent—as Hai points out (394), few five-year-olds would casually refer to pubic hair or white slave trafficking (Sidhwa 68-69)—but it is nevertheless used to establish Lenny’s innocence, which is allegorically paralleled, like Ayah’s meetings in the park with her admirers, with the pre-partition innocence of the population. However, Lenny’s climactic loss of innocence comes not from her position as a witness to violence, as some critics have claimed, but from her own actions: When she betrays Ayah’s hiding place to Ice-candy-man (Sidhwa 194), she becomes implicated (again, like the population as a whole)
in the violence against Ayah that follows (Kabir 184). At this point, her role as naïve informant, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak (6), is dramatically decreased: She plays no role in narrating the novel’s most harrowing episode, the massacre in Ranna’s village (207-20), and she is unable to offer much information about Ayah’s abduction, rape, or recovery, despite the centrality of this event to the narrative (Hai 402). According to the logic of the Bildungsroman form then Lenny is socially incorporated by becoming complicit with partition violence: She comes of age by passing from the role of witness to the role not of victim (that is taken by Ayah) but of participant.

The critical emphasis on the novel’s preoccupation with witnessing (Bahri) seems to overlook this essential structural element of the text, which is foreshadowed earlier in the novel by the delight Lenny takes in the bullying of the family’s Hindu servant, Hari (126). Lenny’s culpability works on an allegorical level—she is a representative of her class (the Parsees benefited from colonial rule as a group, as the novel itself makes clear) as well as the general population—but it also signals Lenny’s sense of her own individual agency as a perpetrator of division and violence. Aijaz Ahmad has written that “what we witnessed [after Partition] was not just the British policy of divide and rule, which surely was there, but our own willingness to break up our civilizational unity, to kill our neighbours, to forgo that civic ethos, that moral bond with each other, without which human community is impossible” (119; see also Gopal 82). This is a damning but also, from a counterfactual perspective, a productive insight, for if the Indian partition and the violence that followed it were not only the result of colonial policy and the competing self-interests of Congress and the Muslim League, but also a product of the agency of non-elites, then Partition violence can be less easily conceived of as an agentless disaster. In this light, Lenny’s incorporation into post-partition society is also an assumption of political responsibility.

While Arabesques draws on the Bildungsroman form much more subtly and selectively than Cracking India, and is far more difficult to summarize as a result, the novel’s use of the genre also stages the progression from innocence to knowledge as a process of coming to understand one’s own complicity with partition. The novel’s most distinctive feature is its structural opposition between two alternating narratives. “The Tale” (“Ha-sipur,” also “the narrative”) is a folkloric account of the fictional Shammas’s natal village of Fassuta, a Christian village in the Galilee, set mainly before 1948 but also during Shammas’s childhood in the 1950s; “The Teller” (“Ha-mesaper,” also
“the narrator”) is a linear, realist narrative set in the protagonist’s adult life as an author and journalist writing in Hebrew in the 1980s. It is easy to map this formal division onto the national division set up by partition, and one of the ways in which this novel works to defamiliarize partition is by gradually destabilizing the split between “oral Arabic” and “scribal Hebrew” (Brenner 440), for instance by allowing characters from one part of the narrative to migrate to the other.

What is less immediately apparent, however, is that the complex process of Bildung that is staged in “The Tale” is also part of this effort. The magical realism of the early part of the narrative— signaled most obviously by the mythical rooster Ar-Rasad, who guards the village’s gold-filled cave (Ginsburg 190)— aligns Shammas’s childhood innocence with the image of pre-partition Palestine as a bucolic, pre-modern idyll, in contrast with the Israeli dystopia of the present. As the novel progresses, however, “The Tale” begins to lose its fantastic quality and coalesce into “hard political history” (Feldman 382), as the adult narrator moves back in time and recounts events that took place before he was born: before and during partition. Some of this account details Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, including the expulsion of the residents of the nearby Muslim village of Deir el-Kasi in 1948. Yet the narrative is more centrally concerned with the role that “corruption and weakness,” infighting, greed, and revenge killings played in the “drown[ing of] the rebellion” of 1936 (Shammas 190) and the Palestinian defeat in 1948, as represented by the enmity between the two villages. Thus, we are told at the beginning of the novel, from the point of view of the young Shammas, that the Fassutans “were subject to persecutions and torture” at the hands of the Deir el-Kasi villagers in the early part of the century (11), and later during the 1936 uprising. It does not follow, however, that the novel is a document of “Arab Christian nationalism,” as Feldman has argued (382), for, in the second half of the novel, it transpires that the Fassutans were not simply victims: They refused to participate in the uprising, and they subsequently escaped expulsion in 1948 because they were able to bribe the Jewish commander. The eviction order for Fassuta was duly rescinded, while the residents of Deir El-Kasi were dispersed and their village renamed Moshav Elkosh (11 and 126). Even the story of Ar-Rasad becomes part of this history: The Fassutans, already suspicious of the uprising, decide that Palestinian resistance forces are “the enemy of Ar-Rasad, who was wary of them and did not show the tip of his tail in fear they would attempt to take control of his treasures by force” (193), a reference to the Palestinian militias’ commandeering of civilian food stores.
The adult Shammas is in one sense even more innocent than the child Lenny, since none of this history is the result of his own actions. Nevertheless, the implication of this narrative trajectory from innocence to awareness is that coming of age means being able to critically evaluate received history. Palestinian resistance to partition fails, this narrative suggests, not only because Palestinians are the weaker party, but also because their internal communal divisions reflect the logic of partition itself, in which group identity provides a pretext for the assertion of power. Unlike *Cracking India* where nostalgia for the pre-partition past enables a critique of the post-partition present, in *Arabesques* nostalgia takes on the more conventional cast of a dangerously dehistoricizing emotion which prevents Palestinians from taking responsibility for their own political failings, past or present.

By alternating this narrative with the story of the adult Shammas’s life in “The Teller,” however, and by writing the novel in Hebrew, Shammas insists that the real history of the pre-partition period—both the Shammas family history, and the history of Palestinian dispossession—is also part of Israeli history. The novel’s Palestinian and Israeli narratives appear to be separate only so long as the history of Israel/Palestine is understood in terms of the “dual society thesis” which holds that Palestinian and Israeli societies developed in total isolation from one another (Piterberg 69), and only so long as Israel is defined as a Jewish state. This presentation is inherently counterfactual, since it makes it possible to envision its opposite: an Israeli state that, as Shammas argued in his famous debate with Yehoshua, “exists in a certain territory, [and] then everyone who is in that territory is an equal part of it, and then an Arab in Jaljulia is Israeli just like A. B. Yehoshua” (Grossman 257, original emphasis).

As a genre then the partition Bildungsroman might be classed as a version of what Joseph Slaughter has called the “dissensual Bildungsroman,” which he defines as a form that protests the protagonist’s exclusion from the “public realm of rights” while drawing on the norms of this realm to articulate his or her claim (181-82). In the case of the partition Bildungsroman, the constitutive paradox is that the form both relies on and resists partition’s historical trajectory: It depends on its seeming inevitability for the momentum of its plot, and yet it challenges the ahistorical belief that Muslims and Hindus, or Arabs and Jews, are doomed to permanent conflict. To assert the existence of a different past, as in *Cracking India*, or the possibility of a different future, as in *Arabesques*, is to refuse this passive form of social incorporation, and to insist on the agency of individuals to promote more inclusive forms of nationality.
3. Fragmented Narrative

My final example, the fragmented narrative, is a stylistic rather than a plot category, defined by the use of any kind of episodic or disjunctive narration: spatial, temporal, generic, or perspectival. Narrative fragmentation is, of course, often associated with Euro/US modernism and postmodernism, and many twentieth-century partition narratives are evidently influenced by this mode. However, the use of the fragment in partition fiction can also be read as a kind of situationally specific appropriation of its Jamesonian sense, in which narrative fragmentation represents the protagonist’s inability to apprehend the totality of the post-partition multi-state order. The counterfactual potential of the genre comes from the narrative impetus to reconnect the fragments; this can be read as a formal expression of the desire for reunification, or, in its more radical manifestations, as an illustration of the kind of imaginative deconstruction and reassembly that needs to be undertaken if the exclusionary forms of national identity created by partition are to be confronted and undone.

The genre can be broadly divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are the narratives that try to combat the experiential sense of fragmentation that partition has instigated by performing and then resolving it within the narrative itself. For instance, Edna O’Brien’s *House of Splendid Isolation* uses non-linear chronology and postmodern changes in genre and voice to narrate an allegory of national reunification between an elderly woman from the Republic of Ireland and the IRA gunman she is compelled to shelter in her home (Harris 111-12). Deane’s memoir *Reading in the Dark* offers another variation, gradually incorporating stand-alone episodes from the narrator’s childhood into a coherent narrative of republican resistance and failure. In both novels, the reader’s experience of piecing together the story mirrors the protagonists’ experience of reconstructing the pre-partition past that governs their experiences, while the limits of the protagonists’ knowledge stand in for the ‘collective amnesia’ of the population as a whole. The narrative’s energy then derives not only from the desire for reconciliation, but also from the need to construct a more accurate and complete historical memory that will counter this mass forgetting.

By contrast, the two texts I consider below, Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Mottled Dawn* and Oz Shelach’s *Picnic Grounds: A Novel in Fragments*, are distinguished by their refusal to connect their fragments. The two texts were published more than fifty years apart, in Urdu and English respectively, and yet their construction is remark-
ably similar: Each presents a series of very short narratives, often only a few sentences and rarely more than a page in length, and usually consisting of just one scene. Both texts are characterized by the extreme brevity and discreteness of these segments, which are joined not by characters, chronology, or setting, but only by their subject matter—in each case a devastating critique of the destructive consequences of partition. This thematic emphasis, underpinned by the repetition of a selection of images and tropes, counters what initially seems to be a form of anti-narrativism. Instead, the reader is encouraged to make his or her own connections between the fragments, and to seek his or her referents in the contemporary conditions they represent.

This genre, particularly in the extreme form represented by Manto and Shelach, is worthy of note in part because the ‘fragment’ is already a common category of analysis in Indian partition studies. This trend originates with Pandey, whose essays “The Prose of Otherness” and “In Defense of the Fragment” have become “ubiquitous citations” in studies which emphasize partition literature’s disruption of dominant national narratives (Didur, Unsettling Partition 169, n. 6). Pandey draws on Manto, among other less well-known figures and texts, to illustrate his contention that the “fragment”—meaning literature, diaries, testimony, or other material not included in official archives, as well as the perspectives of marginalized groups more generally—“is a disturbing element, a rupture . . . in the self-representation of particular totalities and those who uncritically uphold them” (Routine Violence 66). Despite his reliance on literature as evidence, it must be emphasized that Pandey’s definition of the fragment is not a literary one: It is directed against “totalizing” historiographical practices ranging from colonial to Marxist—he pointedly distances his definition from Gramsci’s notion of the fragment (199, n. 49)—rather than describing any specific property of narrative.

However, literary critics have subsequently reversed Pandey’s direction of analysis and adopted the term to read Manto’s own work, particularly his iconic short stories of Partition (“Toba Tek Singh,” “Cold Meat,” and “Open It”), as “fragments” in both the historiographical and the narrative senses of the word. For instance, Alex Padamsee argues, following Pandey, that the short story is a popular form in narratives of the Indian partition because “it is necessarily a fragment” which “favours the narration of uncertainty” (also a term from Pandey). In his reading, Manto’s stories exemplify this use of the structure in the “undecidability” of their endings, which refuses the ethical closure of the horrors of Partition offered by celebratory narratives of national independence and
questions “the very possibility of narrative” after Partition (2-3). Aamir Mufti’s reading is unusual in that it draws on Lukács rather than Pandey, and yet he comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that the “fragments” collected in the Urdu short story “do not merely point toward a totality [as in Lukács] . . . [but] pu[t] the terms of this totality in question” (184). Though Mufti allows that Manto’s is an immanent critique of nationalism, he nevertheless concludes that in his work the fragment “disturbs the serenity in which that totality [of the modern life of the nation] is produced, pointing always to the possibility of collective ways of life that are less singular and more hospitable to individual and collective freedom” (209).

The privileged value in these readings is ambiguity, which is favorably opposed to the allegedly hegemonic forces of narrative on the one hand and nationalism on the other. Yet the fragments in Manto do not challenge the idea of totality; on the contrary, they seek to represent a new social totality in which atrocity has become the norm (Marx 623-24). For instance, in “The Benefits of Ignorance,” when a sniper aims his gun at a child, he and a companion have the following exchange: “‘What are you doing?’ his companion asked. ‘Why?’ ‘You are out of bullets’” (187). Here, as in many of the fragments, the impact of the episode hinges on a reversal of expectations: Under normal (pre-partition) circumstances, the murder of a child would be unthinkable, but under the new normal order this imperative no longer applies. A number of the fragments draw attention to the material economy of partition violence, which again emphasizes the ordinariness and the seeming inescapability of the new order. Violent acts are perceived in transactional terms by the perpetrators, as in “Double Cross,” where the speaker complains of having been sold faulty petrol that won’t burn any shops (211), and “Losing Proposition,” where the protagonist is furious to discover that the girl for whom he has paid forty-two rupees is not from “the other religion,” and demands a refund (198). Even the child in “Jelly” who sees congealed blood on the ground assimilates it into his own experience, saying, “Look, mummy, jelly” (192). The accumulation of such fragments points less to a skepticism or disillusionment with narrative than to a heightened narrativity, in which the reiterated banality of these acts of violence outlines the total social transformation that has taken place. For Manto the fragment is not opposed to total representation, but potentially (though never actually) productive of it.

The aggregation of analogous fragments has the further effect of constructing a public terrain whose contours are not those of either of the
new nations. Manto offers few contextual details which could identify his protagonists as Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim—most characters go unnamed, for instance—and one of the recurring themes, as in “Losing Proposition,” “Mistake Removed,” and several other fragments, is the impossibility of identifying the group identity of any individual on the basis of his or her appearance. As Mufti points out, by refusing to label his protagonists, Manto rejects the “balance” between Hindu and Muslim acts of violence that is common to many works of Indian partition literature (206), including Train to Pakistan, a practice which “reduces the violence to the language of the feud” (Das and Nandy 189; Harlow 88). However, this strategy also counterfactually posits the existence of a pre-partition polity that might have become an independent nation, and which, even after partition, is still tied by a shared culture and history, which now includes the history of the partition violence. Rather than ‘the nation’ then Manto’s critique is directed at the state order that legitimates the violence he depicts by normalizing the idea of ethnic and communal difference (Marx 624), an order that is haunted by the nation that might have been.

In marked contrast to the previous text (or indeed Arabesques), Shelach’s Picnic Grounds refrains from direct representation of the violence of the Palestinian partition and its aftermath. Historical and contemporary atrocities—Deir Yassin, the torture of Palestinian prisoners, the massacre at Hebron—are alluded to in passing, but the emphasis is on the everyday acts of forgetting and willful ignorance that enable most Israelis to overlook this history of violence. While the effect of the repetition of this theme is cumulative, as in Manto, Shelach makes more deliberate use of the fragment’s aporetic quality as a means of evoking the silences within hegemonic Zionist discourse. Shelach introduces this method in the first fragment of the book, “One Afternoon.” The fragment opens with the line: “A professor of history from Bayit Va-Gan took his family for a picnic in a quiet pine wood near Giv’at Shaul, formerly known as Deir Yassin” (1). Though the fragment offers no comment on the massacre beyond its name, its presence at the end of the sentence reconfigures the meaning of the sentence as a whole. Both the professor’s academic specialization and the stillness of the forest are given a significance which is not immediately apparent from the words “history” and “quiet” themselves, but only from the delayed revelation of the setting’s relationship to this event. The reference to the Hebrew renaming of formerly Arab towns and villages repeats this act of layering, the Hebrew name obscuring the Arabic and yet continuing to gesture towards its past existence.
The professor, we are told, is careful to preserve the tranquility of the scene by refraining from dwelling on its history: “[He] did not talk of the village, origin of the stones [which they use to build a fire]. He did not talk of the village school, now a psychiatric hospital, on the other side of the hill. He imagined that he and his family were having a picnic, unrelated to the village, enjoying its grounds outside history” (1). The fragment ends on this word. By its conclusion then the “quiet” of the scene has been revealed to have a double significance: It marks both the absence of Palestinians and the Israeli protagonist’s reluctance to substantiate that history by speaking it aloud. The repetition of the word “history” foregrounds the professor’s putative societal role, while his desire to be “outside history” alludes to the peculiar position of historians who may be well informed about the past atrocities committed by the state, but still choose or are encouraged to narrate an ethnonationalist version of events. This presentation aligns Shelach with some of the more radical work put forward by the Israeli New Historians (Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, Avi Shlaim), since these historians have framed their work as a revision or refutation of Zionist historiography, but Shelach’s text emphasizes the act of suppression itself, not the historical record being suppressed.

Although this fragment is narrated in the third person, many others are narrated in the first person plural. This unidentified “we” acts as a witness or a party to particular acts of historical censorship, as in “Tu B’Shvat,” set on the day of the tree-planting festival. In this fragment, the “we” is a group of children that shun another boy for calling the ceremonies “murderous and fascist” because, the child says, the tree-planting hides the remaining evidence of Palestinian villages (29). Like Manto’s unidentified protagonists, Shelach’s indistinguishable narrators function as Israeli Everymen, forming a culpable collective who are connected not because they have actually committed acts of violence—none of the fragments address this question—but because they are rational and complicit participants in the silencing of the history of Palestinian dispossession. The desire for a different social order that this representation implies is movingly voiced in the only first-person fragment in the book, “Nostalgic.” It begins self-deprecatingly: “I was a nostalgic from childhood. In kindergarten I longed for my nanny. In first grade I longed for kindergarten. In high school I longed for primary school (which was a horrible experience)” (95). At the end of the fragment, however, this subjective experience is expanded to include the rest of the nation: “Having since boarded an
airplane and left Israel full of bitter disillusionment and hope for the future, I now long for a time not very long ago, but which I have never known, before ever I existed, or, preferably, before we did” (95). The explicit counterfactualism of this sentiment, in which the narrator born long after partition yearns for a pre-partition past that he (or conceivably, she) has “never known,” is in some respects deeply pessimistic, not least because it comes after the narrator has left the country. At the same time, however, by desiring the negation of the complicit Israeli “we,” the fragment holds out a form of “nostalgia” for the future, in which the exclusionary form of that “we” will have ceased to exist, and a more egalitarian “we” might be realized.

Conclusion

Whether or not one wants to follow Ranabir Samaddar in substituting “partitioned times” for “post-colonial times”—and I, for one, would not want the necessary connection between the two terms to be obscured—it is at least the case that the generic affinities between these otherwise disparate fictional texts are more convincingly explained as a common form of reference to partition than to the more general and variegated history of imperial rule. Taken as a group, these narratives sketch out a convergent mode of literary and political imagination, one which challenges the logic of partition by lamenting its forgotten alternatives. It is tempting, perhaps, to dismiss the kinds of counterfactuals that fiction can provide: These texts are not policy documents, and they typically only express a desire for alternative social structures rather than actually representing them. Yet the critique of partition that they offer has its own kind of power. In the closing paragraph of an essay on women’s novels about the Indian partition, Ananya Jahanara Kabir tentatively suggests that if more narratives of “fratricide” (see also Francisco 372) had been produced immediately after partition, they might have enabled a cross-regional mourning within the new nations that could also have been the basis of cross-border reconciliation. This insight perhaps seems too utopian, however, and she amends it with the disclaimer: “But these are counterfactual arguments” (190). Yet the defense of partition is based on its own kind of counterfactual: The idea that partition is the ‘least worst option’ assumes that the violence would have been far worse if it had not been implemented, even if historical evidence suggests, particularly in the cases of India, Palestine, and Ireland, that partition has almost always produced armed conflict and not prevented it. As Bartolovich points out, if the “ubiquitous conservative counterfactualism of the right that naturalises [the] status quo” is to be countered effectively, it
is imperative to develop a critical counterfactualism that makes alternatives to the present imaginable (74). The need for such a practice is particularly acute in the case of partition, since the idea that heterogeneity breeds conflict is still very much with us. Moreover, it is precisely because alternatives to partition have become so difficult to envision—especially in Palestine—that counterfactual questions need to be asked, and counterfactual scenarios need to be constructed. It may be that literature is the only arena in which this effort can be carried out in relative freedom, even if those alternatives that can be imaginatively figured are, under the current global order, always finally deferred.

Notes

1 In what follows, references to “the Indian partition” or “Indian partition studies” are not intended to privilege the study of post-partition India over the study of Pakistan and Bangladesh; rather, I use such phrases to describe the partition of historical India, in parallel with the partitions of Palestine and Ireland. I sometimes also use the capitalized form “Partition” to refer to the Indian partition, in keeping with common practice in Indian partition scholarship.

2 Strictly speaking, of course, Palestine was not actually partitioned, since the UN partition plan of 1947 was never put into practice; the ‘two-state’ solution seeks to officially implement partition for the first time. Yet as Salah D. Hassan points out, the idea of partition is central both to the Palestinian “partition-to-occupation narrative,” in which the partition of historic Palestine into the Jewish state and the non-sovereign Palestinian territories is synonymous with the nakba, and to the “narrative of a doomed peace that merely legitimates partition” (41). The idea of partition is therefore arguably even more central to Palestinian and Israeli writing than it is in writing from partition contexts such as India and Ireland, where (despite the ongoing conflict over Kashmir and the steadfastness of the Irish republican parties) partition is more commonly thought to be ‘finished.’

3 I give the date to distinguish the “Great Partition” (Khan) from the partition of West and East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971.

4 Ayah is named once in the novel as Shanta, and some commentators refer to her by name in order to avoid objectifying her further by calling her “Ayah” as Lenny does, but I think this exaggerates her subjectivity to a degree that the novel—for different possible reasons, as contrastingly argued by Didur in Unsettling Partition (87-93) and Hai (398-407)—does not permit.

5 In both cases, this has much to do with the backgrounds of their authors and their language of composition. Cracking India was one of the earliest
and most successful Pakistani novels in English, and is arguably still the
best-known, thanks in part to Deepa Mehta's film adaptation, Earth.
Arabesques, meanwhile, is far and away the most acclaimed Hebrew-lan-
guage novel by a Palestinian Israeli writer; Ammiel Alcalay attributes its
success to its seeming confirmation ("through no fault of its own") of
Israeli pluralism and multiculturalism (9-10 and 286, n. 21).

Sidhwa also makes this argument in an interview with Alok Bhalla (232).

A more recent English translation by M. Asaddudin is also available, under
the title Black Margins.

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*Alif* 30 (2010) 31


