Recovery after the Rupture: Linking Colonial Histories of Displacement with Affective Objects and Memories

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.28.05
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The notion of home and belonging, specifically in the context of South Asian postcolonial diasporas, is connected to past traumas of colonization and displacement. This paper addresses how trauma, displacement, and colonialism can be understood through and with material culture, and how familial objects and items emit and/or carry within them, emotional narratives. I turn to the affective currency that emit and are transferred on and down from objects, by diasporic subjects, to access the possible reclamation of otherwise silenced narratives within colonial and postcolonial histories. By following the events of the Partition of India in 1947 as a violent historical moment that saw the displacement of millions of people, I ultimately examine how affective objects can be read as alternative epistemological sites that create potential space for recovery to postcolonial trauma and violence.

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For many postcolonial diasporic subjects, belonging and not belonging are often negotiated within conceptions of home. Home is a geography that contains memories and emotions that are, in the postcolonial context, linked to displacement, histories of conflict, and colonial exile. As a result, home, or the idea of home, can be defined as an emotional location rather than a strictly material and three-dimensional geographical location. The manifestation of these emotional locations—whether through human relationships, spaces, or the memory of metaphorical and physical heirlooms and artefacts—have affective qualities that can engender intergenerational linkages among postcolonial diasporic subjects, creating potential spaces for recovery and belonging. In other words, the idea of home, and its emotional meanings and its familial significations, can be transferred on to objects, artefacts, and heirlooms.

I suggest that the question of home and belonging, specifically in the context of South Asian postcolonial diasporas, is connected to past traumas of colonization and displacement. This article addresses, therefore, how trauma, displacement, and colonialism can be understood through and with material culture, and how familial objects and items emit and/or carry within them, emotional narratives. I expand upon existing conversations regarding objects and homes having emotional value in the context of displacement by arguing that understanding material things as affective objects allows us to rethink the ways in which colonial histories of violence are taken up within official archives; and that considering material things in this way makes room for alternative epistemological sites to exist. Put simply, my argument addresses how within the context of colonial and postcolonial violence for South Asian diasporas, there are some experiences of trauma and violence that are beyond words. The inability to articulate experiences of colonial and postcolonial violence results in a lack of space within official state narratives about personal experiences of displacement. The absence of voices of those diasporic subjects in official records then in turn allows for practices of silence to permeate intergenerational understandings of home and belonging for those communities. Thus, I turn to the affective currency that emit and transfer on and down from objects, by diasporic subjects, to access the potential recovery of otherwise silenced narratives of colonial and postcolonial trauma.

In this article, I situate affective objects within postcolonial frameworks by using diaspora, trauma, and object theories. I begin by unpacking the ways in which affect as a concept is taken up within the field of affect studies and how it extends to non-organic matter, or objects. In this way I attend to the question of “why objects?”, or what about the nature of physical things allows for a useful discussion on affect? This then leads into a discussion of how affective objects inform notions of belonging through the loss of home. Here, I look to the ways in which ideas of home and belonging are particularly contentious for diasporic subjects within postcolonial histories and discourses. I consider how home, for South Asian diasporic subjects, can thus become mobile when we consider affective objects as narrative and voice-giving entities. I use the specific example of the Partition of India in 1947 as a violent historical moment that saw the displacement of millions of people—where individuals were forced to flee and abandon their dwellings only to resettle in the abandoned homes.
of their “enemies” on the other side of the border. In this way, I examine the ways in which survival and recovery of such traumas are intergenerationally passed on and down through physical objects. Finally, these theories and discussions come together to recognize that the potential space created by affective objects can be voice-giving to otherwise silenced narratives in postcolonial archives.

Affective Objects

Affect is described by Sarah Ahmed (2010) as "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). Affects are those prediscursive forces that are outside our conscious knowing and emotions that impact our thoughts and types of relationships. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Steigworth (2010) explain that there is no pure or original state of affect. It is something that can be found in the "in-between-ness" of our ability to act and is therefore a result of a state of relation and the passage of that force (1). As well, affect is an ever-changing and ever-evolving force and its movements vary depending on the type of body or thing it encounters. Emotional geographer Steve Pile (2010) describes affect as "a transpersonal capacity which a body has to be affected (through affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)" (8). That is, affect has potential possibilities through its capacities. Affect is always expanding into areas of (and beyond) living, non-living, matter, sensation, events, atmospheres, and feeling-tones (Gregg and Steigworth 2010, 2).

In this paper, I look at affect specifically as it extends onto objects and things. An object's affective quality can be determined based on its location and time – when and where the object is situated is when and where one would experience its affect. This is to say that to experience an object as affective is to consider not only the object, but also what is around the object (Ahmed 2010, 33). As Ahmed explains, to be affected by something is to assess that thing, to understand it (31). In pairing affect with objects in order to reassess certain postcolonial histories of violence, what is thus created is a space to get to the truth (Morrison 1998) of lived experience, which are often left out of official state-sanctioned histories. I am referring here to Toni Morrison’s discussion on truth vs. facts as she states, “[...] facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot” (93). I particularly push against investigations of "official" histories of the South Asian diaspora – those narratives that are deemed “legitimate” or “acceptable” (whether it be memorials, official documents, history books, etc.). These “acceptable” narratives were, mostly, written by those who had not experienced the trauma of displacement or indeed were the very colonial bodies that incited the violence. In this way I attend to the voices of displaced postcolonial Indians that were otherwise silenced. The importance of this idea lies in its exploration of those silences and the ways in which we can access them without disrupting the well-being of the victims of displacement.

In understanding objects as affective sites, we can find that materiality is not only the value of an object. The value, for the most part, exists in the tangible processes of humans’ interactions with things (Hockey 2007). Humans are as material as the objects they make and are also moulded by the supposedly “dead matter” that they are surrounded by (138). As Hockey et al. state in reference to Peter Pels, "things also tell us who we are, not in words, but by embodying our intentions. In our everyday traffic of existence, we can also learn about ourselves from objects, almost as much as from people" (138). Objects and material agency foster powers that raise hope, induce loss and sadness, and create fear and happiness – along with other human-based senses and emotions. They can also engender a space for memories and memory-sharing, particularly when we begin to consider objects as “inalienable possessions” – things that cannot be replaced by any other object (Myers 2001, 9). It is to this approach that I consider a very particular human-object relationship in cherished items.

“Inalienable possessions” are types of objects that are categorized as artefacts, heirlooms, and familial belongings. Heirlooms are symbolically heavy with cultural meaning and are
collected as prized ancestral relics (Myers 2001, 9). Annette Weiner (1992) describes how the heaviness or “denseness” of such objects is created through ancestral histories, the object's association with its “owner,” secrecy, sadness, and sacredness. Heirlooms and objects are also exchanged, passed around, passed on, and if they are tied to familial histories, can be read as replacements to memories. As identity-bearing objects that hold memories, heirlooms become what Weiner describes as “keeping-while-giving” (13). The residual effects of the individual’s experience are intermingled with the heirloom’s affects as it is passed along. Therefore, the materiality of everyday objects and their survival across time and location illuminates a particular relationship between human lives, memories, experiences, and culture.

The memories of such objects, I argue, are accessed through genealogical connections and intergenerational stories. This is to say that these culturally specific objects, which have transmittable memories, do not do this same kind of emotional work if separated from their ethnographic ties when, for example, they are reclassified as “art” and placed in museums in a Western context (Myers 2001, 10). Within postcolonial frameworks, the relocation of materials and material culture insists on an understanding that value cannot be simply defined but that is engrossed in various routes of exchange, display, and storage (12). The appropriation of culturally significant items into colonial routes of exchange are historically loaded, thus the ways in which affective objects can be read as sites of recovery can only be done so within the setting of familial narratives of victims of colonial and postcolonial violence. In the context of familial heirlooms, a genealogical link is used as a space to communicate, but while keeping in mind the complexity of such relationships. Thus, the spaces in which these affective objects are held become important vessels in which belonging and not belonging is negotiated. This space is traditionally considered to be the home or familial dwelling. However, for South Asian postcolonial diasporic subjects, the loss of such a space opens the possibility of notions of home becoming mobile, as home attaches itself to its affective objects.

Home and Belonging

Anat Hecht (2001) powerfully states, "to lose a home is to lose a private museum of memory, identity and creative appropriation" (123). To be separated from one’s home and belongings is often equated to being separated from all that is familiar and steady. When discussing the South Asian diaspora, this separation is particularly important to note because diaspora cannot exist without the loss of home or the displacement from homelands. This unfolds vis-à-vis identity formation (the loss of home is a kind of identity loss, too). Moreover, homes are not just sites of conditioning, social relations, and economic management; they also represent a position that is in relation to the nation as a whole. The house is not only integral to the individual identity, but that of the community and nation in its entirety. This is to say that place and home represent belonging in terms of individual identity as well as citizenship and national identity (Hua 2011, 52).

In understanding the home as a pivotal component in both the construction of individual
and national identity, we can then look towards the physical things that make up the home. A house holds an array of different materials and therefore collectively creates a living experience that is more important than the total of its parts (Hecht 2001, 123). All of these materials are supplied with meaning, memory, and emotion, which are what turn a house – infrastructure, property – into a home. However, in the context of postcolonial diasporic experiences, homes and all their various held objects become lost or displaced. This concept exposes the tangled tensions that exist between humans and objects, drawing specific attention to objects that are removed or demolished and thus do not "out-live" their owners. With this I ask: if objects are supposed to be cherished sites of memory, what happens when these sites are destroyed or ruined? What is at stake if an identity-forming environment, like a home, disappears? And, finally, how does the idea of home, and displacement, play out across generations?

One of the ways to begin thinking about the connections between objects, memory, emotion, diaspora, and location, is to notice how, during war and conflict, objects are both removed and cherished. The emotive energies emitted by artefacts and objects appropriated during war by members of the “enemy” community demonstrate the non-human agency and consequential affective ties that material goods have. Yael Navaro-Yashin, in her work Affective Spaces, Melancholic, Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge (2009), for example, considers people who are displaced from their homes and are forced to flee and take shelter in other abandoned houses, producing the odd result of a diaspora living in homes of another diaspora; and in doing so, she explores how it feels to live with objects and within ruins left behind by the earlier, displaced, community. Navaro-Yashin describes the things within houses as being charged with the traces of other people's lives. She demonstrates how homes are charged with "cultural agency" and as objects of political and legal substance (179). Her specific study examines Turkish-Cypriots' relations to houses, land, and objects that they appropriated from Greek-Cypriots during the war of 1974 and the subsequent Partition of Cyprus.

Through this work, the notion that those who have been uprooted from their homes because of the threat of war, conflict, or violence is investigated by the ways in which they become surrounded by objects of ruin. For Navaro-Yashin “ruined matter” refers to things that are a result of an act of violation (5). She explains that these object objects and environments have acquired their status because they could not be carried or taken with their owners due to the displacement incited by conflict or war, rather than because these things were not needed or wanted. This rejected material is then reused, recycled, and appropriated by those who are left behind.

The emotive energy of focus in Navaro-Yashin’s work is melancholia, or what she calls “maraz” (4). According to Navaro-Yashin, maraz is a way the displaced Turkish-Cypriots described their condition of depression in their inner state of being. It is a state of deep and unrecoverable sadness that is located by the lack of calmness and happiness within their internal selves (4). It is a concept that represents a feeling that is beyond words; an affective state that permeates experiences of survival for victims of displacement. These spatial and experiential tensions highlight the dualism between the material and the ideational, between tangibility and social imaginaries (1), which becomes key in analysing the colonial discourses that encapsulate the portable affective objects. That is, what becomes apparent are the limitations of language when it comes to experiences of trauma.

The limitations of language when expressing experiences of colonial and postcolonial trauma results in some members of postcolonial diasporic communities becoming emotionally attached to, and therefore internally (psychically) responsive to, family mementos, objects, and artefacts; it is this process that helps underscore the connections between the material and the ideational. As a result, emotion can be understood alongside memory and affect in order to draw attention to how the human "senses" are inseparable from the ways people act and live. This coupling allows us to think about the
relationship between human and object and encourages new understandings of how colonial histories are inseparable from material objects that existed in and through conflicts, displacements, and migrations (Edwards 2006, 4).

**Remembering Difficult Histories**

In the context of the South Asian diasporic subjects, histories of colonialization and displacement are most notably centered around the catastrophic event of the Partition of India in 1947. The end of the British Raj resulted in the birth of two nations: India and Pakistan—an event that led to murderous riots, unspeakable violence, and mass loss of lives and homes. Partition saw the division and separation of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh populations into newly assigned countries, creating interethnic conflicts and fissures that continue to have rippling effects to date. This event, in many ways, parallels but does not twin with the Partition of Cyprus that Navaro-Yashin focuses on in her study. The Partition of India and Pakistan also resulted in a mass displacement of between eight to ten million people who were forced to flee across the border into their newly created country of either India or Pakistan (Didur 2006, 4). The violence of this rupture saw the death of half a million people, and whole communities abandoned their homes and belongings on one side of the border to resettle on the other side in the deserted homes and spaces of their “enemies” who were doing the same thing in their homes (Das 2007, 20).

The suddenness of this loss and relocation manifested a lasting trauma on victims of this violence that have been passed on intergenerationally. Dhooleka Raj (2000) notes that amongst the three different generations that experienced different stages and moments of Partition and post-Partition, there are various understandings of what Partition is and was. These generations grew up in different periods and their family narratives are disjointed. At the same time, those who directly experienced Partition often obscured their stories when passing them on to other generations by often sharing “new” or “different” memories of the events. As Gyanendra Pandey (2001) explains, these new memories did not often include Partition when they were retold; what emerged was the mentality that stated, "what is the point telling today’s children about these things? [...] All that has nothing to do with their lives and their problems" (16). From this, the story of Partition as told to the children and grandchildren of victims, becomes faded from shared stories. In this way, the voices of the victims are strikingly silent and many do not recount their experiences unless asked (Das 2007, 80). As well, the knowledge of Partition’s trauma is not explicitly shared between parents and children—therefore the sharing of stories between family members becomes understood as silent practices (Raj 2000, 31). Raj explains that individuals do not want to remember, that families do not want to “recall the bad times” (36), and that many would rather avoid the stigma of being known as a refugee. This becomes particularly potent for Sikh diasporas in post-Partition India, as the newly formed India became a Hindu state and Pakistan a Muslim state, and the Sikh community suddenly found themselves belonging to nowhere.

The absorption of Partition narratives into silent practices has meant that many descendants of the refugees do not realize that when their refugee family members left the Pakistan side to come to India, and vice versa, they assumed the move was temporary (39). There is a lack of understanding, by the later generations, of how the migration was perceived as impermanent and what difficulties were faced when the refugees realized they were, indeed, not going back home. What resulted for the displaced was a deep feeling of nostalgia and a desire to see their homes one last time, which they could not do, leaving many not wanting to speak about Partition at all (39).

On the side of official state narratives, Partition, as a subject, has been generally neglected in Indian public culture—there have been no attempts to "memorialize Partition" through monuments, museums, or even public hearings and trials (Das 2007, 19). This approach has had an impact on how refugees feel stigmatized and uneasy about sharing their experiences with family members. Veena Das
describes the lack of response to Partition as a reoccurring trope in Indian historiography that views trauma as "witness to some forgotten wound" (102). What results, then, is an "official history" that is largely accepted and structured based on statistical figures and timelines, leaving out the lived experiences of those victims of violence.

In the general silence that surrounds narratives of Partition as an event, something else emerges. In many cases, a different kind of remembering happens where familial stories that are intergenerationally passed down from refugees of Partition to their next of kin often takes on a quality of a "frozen slide." In other words, the storytelling that does transpire tends to focus more on life pre-Partition – what life was like "on the other side." Stories would therefore include the details of everyday life: stories of neighbourly gossip, how fresh the fruit used to be in their old homeland, or how they missed the shopping at their neighbourhood bazaar (80). Through this, there is an attempt to recover aspects of the past that re-enters life experienced prior to displacement.

Items that were somehow carried across the border in the chaos of Partition become now cherished possessions as they represent survival – a nod to the fact that if the item survived, so did its owner. As a descendant of refugees of Partition myself, I have experienced this very moment with my own family members. Stories of "what happened" always centered around an object or physical thing that stands as proof that there was indeed a time before this rupture happened. For example, my Sikh grandmother – who died when I was much too young to remember her – left with her son, my father, a wedding necklace known as a Rani Harr. This heirloom was one that was beloved and charged with familial history but was also one that was almost lost during the upheaval of Partition. Yet, now it sits in my possession as a physical link to a past that I would have never otherwise known or understood. There are no words that come with the Rani Harr, only an affectual residue that this item once sat in the hands of my grandmother and acted as a witness to a moment of horrific trauma and violence as it was tucked away against my great-grandmother’s body to be carried across the border into a place that promised safety.

Recovery in the Loss

The difficulties that resulted from the intergenerational traumas of Partition have led to a reliance on official state records and archives for general knowledge and understandings of its history. As Gayatri Spivak (2008) explains in her discussion of the gendered subaltern, communication between daughters and mothers, and between grand-daughters and grandmothers, is difficult. Language, location, and time create barriers that are difficult to penetrate (7). This is where the affective object becomes useful when thinking about the ways in which post-partition subjects may be able to recover an intergenerational connection to their familial past. To put it simply: there are some traumas that are beyond words.

Dina Georgis, in her work in The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East (2013), elucidates, "indeed, when it comes to trauma, the only thing we can be sure of is that our experience resists thought and language" (169). With this explanation, the question of survival is not only understood through what is said; it can also be understood through experiential knowledge and silences. Here I argue that affective objects not only complicate language, but do not always have to depend on language. I contend that survival is articulated through the object's tangibility and materiality as well as oral narrative or storytelling. The affective feelings surrounding objects, and the desire to keep, discard, and share objects, aids in the production of diasporic recovery to colonial trauma in the postcolonial present while offering a new or different set of thematics linked to, but outside of, embodied personhood.

The affective quality of the objects can create or destroy "the better life" depending on whether the object projects a melancholic history or what Georgis calls "the better story" (1). Georgis argues that narrative is an emotional resource for learning and for generating better futures. She suggests that narrative gives us
By accepting the suggestions that the question of survival can be understood through what is unsaid, affect as it attaches itself to objects and artefacts – material things – creates points of inquiry into, and potential understandings of, experiences that are beyond words. In linking these concepts to trauma and displacement, the emotions surrounding the affective object – the subjective meanings attached to things – uncovers some of the unspoken and unsaid complexities of displacement. The very characteristic of portability of objects creates an ability to carry a history, narrative, and even home. What is lost in upheaval and violence can, once again, be found in the memories the objects hold.

Conclusion

Belonging, for many in the South Asian diaspora, is a contentious issue that is connected to feelings of colonial exile. Their narratives and histories of home are often rooted in displacement and violent ruptures. Through traumatic events that occurred to the Indian nation during the twentieth century, including the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, voices of survivors and victims have oftentimes been undermined by the “official” histories of the South Asian diaspora (as seen in memorials, official documents, and history books) or through the wilful erasures that seek recuperation in silence.

In order to uncover these otherwise silenced stories, I have turned to objects and theorized how they provide us with alternative sites of remembering. By attending to emotion, memory, and affect through the medium of material culture, I have drawn connections between objects and the human experience. In order to access the narratives that come from affective objects, in the context of post-Partition India, I have argued that a genealogical link is produced through affective objects and their attendant narrated memories, which are often found in material things passed down through generations. I emphasized the importance of familial and intergenerational ties within this discussion as it is key in accessing the objects’ affective currency. Ultimately what the study of
affect affords, when thinking about the ways it can attach itself to physical things, are alternative epistemological sites that can provide potential spaces for recovery to postcolonial trauma and violence.


