



Partitions

Amit Majmudar

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A stunning first novel, set during the violent 1947 partition of India, about uprooted children and their journeys to safety

As India is rent into two nations, communal violence breaks out on both sides of the new border and streaming hordes of refugees flee from blood and chaos.

At an overrun train station, Shankar and Keshav, twin Hindu boys, lose sight of their mother and join the human mass to go in search of her. A young Sikh girl, Simran Kaur, has run away from her father, who would rather poison his daughter than see her defiled. And Ibrahim Masud, an elderly Muslim doctor driven from the town of his birth, limps toward the new Muslim state of Pakistan, rediscovering on the way his role as a healer. As the displaced face a variety of horrors, this unlikely quartet comes together, defying every rule of self-preservation to forge a future of hope.

A dramatic, luminous story of families and nations broken and formed, *Partitions* introduces an extraordinary novelist who writes with the force and lyricism of poetry.

Partitions Details

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Mary Anne says

Powerful novel about people during the partitioning of India and Pakistan. This depicts what happens when people see each other, not as fellow human beings worthy of love and compassion, but as a label identifying a single characteristic, in this case religion: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh. Speaks powerfully to our world and time.

Chrissie says

“Partitions” is about the mass movements of people of different faiths that occurred when India became independent from Britain and was split into two nations, India and Pakistan. It is not about the historical events, but rather about a few individuals that lived through the mobs, killings and horrors caused by the rapid and indiscriminate drawing of borders. This book focuses on the personal events of a few individuals, not the national events. It takes place at the border between India and western Pakistan – in the region of Lahore, Amritsar and New Delhi. Four very different individuals come together; two Hindu six-year old twins of the Brahmin caste, an aged Muslim paediatrician and a young Sikh woman fleeing her father.

The narrator is what makes the book different. He is the spirit of the twins' dead father. The entire tone of the novel is changed by this "spiritual entity". Rather than being down to earth, factual the novel becomes surreal, poetic and ephemeral. This was not to my taste, and yet I believe others may appreciate such writing.

Although I do prefer writing which focuses on how individuals are battered by historical events, this book is devoid of historical events. The time period covered is just a week or two. This partially explains the lack of historical events. I learned nothing new, and that is a disappointment.

Although I can only give the book two stars, I have no difficulty understanding that others like it much more than I do.

Juliette says

How little we knew each other, though for centuries our homes had shared walls. How little we will learn, now that all we share is a border. (97)

When I recommended *Partitions* to my friend, he said, "Is it covered in blood? Murders everywhere?" If it's one thing anyone knows about Partition (the historical event) is that it is drenched in blood, mass murders, and tragedy, from all sides.

Majmudar does not deny the tragedy, and there are moments so tense that I held my hand to my throat, but he transmutes tragedy into beauty. For all that it's a short book, you care for these characters -- the Brahmin boys, the elderly Muslim doctor, the Sikh girl. You see the confusion and terror of Partition through their eyes. Like the narrator, you will want to reach into the pages and rescue these characters from the horror. But you have to watch it play out.

Much of the praise is owed to Majmudar's writing. He has a poet's mind for economy. His prose is poetic, but it does not verge on purple. Every word has importance to the story, and every detail has a purpose. He does not write to distract. He writes to enlighten.

I found myself wishing -- as I often do when I read books like this -- that we could just see how similar we are; we may pray differently or accent different syllables or have different fashions, but what we have in common is much more important.

"You are my people," she says. She waits. (197)

Sheza 'Shez' says

Absolutely amazing...I could not put the book down! It truly reflects what a tragedy and mistake partition was and how many lives were ruined and uprooted. I really loved that it showed this from the view of actual people going through this rather than an abstract view or that of the politicians who insisted on this awful mistake. It shows the harsh realities that these people were forced to endure just because some high-up politicians decided that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, who had been living together in peace for centuries, all of a sudden couldn't because somehow they couldn't coexist in harmony because their religions were somehow too different. Utter nonsense, if you ask me. I was extremely impressed by the character Masud, who with amazing resolve and determination for a man his age did so much to help so many people. And I really liked how the author portrayed him because it showed an elderly man who saw everything he had known his whole life, along with everything he had worked for, gone and renamed, relabeled, and taken away. I was confused for the longest time about whether the narrator (their father) was dead or alive because of the way he spoke about his children and his wife, but it was still very well written. This book really stirred up a lot of emotions for me because I have grown up hearing stories about the atrocities of Partition and the effects it had on my own family (Muslim), and yet they told me so many stories of great people who helped them out of humanity, whether they were Hindu or Sikh. I truly lament at the Partition because, as the author said, "How little we knew each other, though for centuries our homes had shared walls. How little we will learn, now that all we share is a border."....it is extremely difficult for Pakistanis to obtain a visa to visit India and vice versa, so now all we have is the government and media filling our heads with lies about one another. They have a vested interest in keeping the enmity and antagonism between Pakistan and India alive. This book showed the plights of the countless women who were sold, raped, abducted, and killed in the chaos of Partition, something that left lifelong impacts on future generations. Two of my favorite quotes from the book are:

"He knows his caregiving is neither Muslim, nor Sikh, nor Hindu. Or rather, it is all three of these. The name, on the man or on the God, is something around it, not of it---thinner than the gloves on his scrubbed hands and peeled off just as easily." (page 200).

"When he finds the kafila, he wonders if he wandered in a circle and ended up joining the same one that bore him to Pakistan. The faces here resemble the faces there. The clothes are the same, the bundles and mules and families the same. Gashes often run the same angle. The relationship of attacker to victim flash before him, plain as statuary: this gash glanced across the shoulder of someone running away; this one struck the forearm of someone who saw the blade descending and tried to block it. Everything is familiar. It's only after he gets close that he can see the residual flecks of bindis on the Hindu women, or the steel kangans and hard topknots on the devout Sikhs. Externals, indistinct in the twilight, unseen by nightfall---yet precisely at nightfall, the marks by which they are targeted." (page 165).

These quotes resonate with me very much because it reinforces the fact that partition was not only unnecessary, it was a complete disaster and it had such detrimental effects not just on the millions of people who went through it, but also for future generations of Pakistanis and Indians who have enmity towards one another, and even for those who don't but yet still feel that they are different from one another. This book really moved me and stirred up a lot of emotions from my own family's migration story during Partition....I recommend this book to anyone and everyone, but I especially recommend it to those Pakistanis and Indians who feel that they are different from one another, or who feel any antagonism towards one another...I also

recommend it to any Pakistani or Indian who thought Partition was necessary, and who feel that it was successful and justified. I hope this changes their perspective. Amazing book!

Mom says

The time is 1947, and India has been split into two nations : India and Pakistan. Refugees are running, fleeing the violence and seeking safety with others of their own religion. At a crowded chaotic train station, Shankar and Keshav, twin Hindu boys, lose contact with their mother and then set off through murderous mobs in a frantic search for her . A teenaged Sikh girl, Simran Kaur, has run away from her father, who tried to poison her to prevent her capture and rape by Muslim extremists . Meanwhile, an elderly doctor, Ibrahim Masud, is driven from his home and, deeply wounded, stumbles towards possible safety in Muslim Pakistan. Somehow, these four, from different "enemy" camps, come together and form a family of sorts.

This is a truly powerful novel -- at times I disliked the book because of all the intense ugliness and violence but in the end it brought hope and light to a terrible dark time and situation. The ending is perhaps a bit too neat, but I needed that after the nightmare of brutality and inhumanity.

What most impressed me was the humanity of the main characters. They are all innocents, as are most people caught in these terrible clashes. And in spite of the horrors around them, they maintain their humanity.

Two memorable passages: A metaphor for the insidious lure of hatred: "The policewallah joins his colleague who is lazily inspecting the typewriter, pressing one letter very delicately and tentatively: first the resistance, then the give, the key sinking, the typebar rising to strike." (This gives me the chills of horror.) And another passage: "The sight of kindness reminded him of a lost, golden past, before the invention of borders, when kindness was possible."

This emotionally moving book covers only about 48 hours and focuses on only 4 main characters but tells the larger truth of the millions of people affected by senseless war. It seems bizarre to say that Partitions is a lovely poetic book, uplifting and hopeful, but that is the case.

edj says

I'm sitting at a barbecue with a group of people, and I discover that one grew up in Pakistan. "I'm reading a book right now about the partition of India and Pakistan, and the violence of that time," I mention.

"Whose side is it written from?" he asks me.

"The author is really presenting both sides, but the narrator is a dead Brahmin Hindu," I say, and get no further. The entire table wants to talk about the dead narrator.

So I will begin by telling you that the narrator is dead. However, this works out fine in the book. It really doesn't read much differently than the normal all-seeing 3rd person narrator, except the parts where he wants desperately to get involved and can't, as pure ephemeral spirit, move anything physical.

It's 1947. India and Pakistan are being divided and apparently everyone is furious about it. This is what I do

not understand. I understand it historically, and I understand the rationale behind it a bit. But I do not understand the violence, from all sides against all sides. Why on earth would people hunt down others who are trying to leave and brutalize them? I do not understand this world.

Partitions follows 4 characters in detail. First of all are Hindu twins Shankar and Keshav, the 6 year old sons of the (dead) narrator. We watch as they are separated from their mother at the train station, and follow them in their wanderings through the city, in search of their mother and someone to watch over them. We also follow Simran Kaur, a Sikh girl who escapes out the window from her father, who is planning to dull her with morphine and then shoot her. He does this to protect her, knowing the mobs of Muslim men outside their house will soon arrive to first rape and then either brutally murder or enslave her, her sisters and her mother. Simran is the only one to escape, and we follow her journey with bated breath, as she must battle overwhelming odds to survive. Last of all is Ibrahim Masud, a Muslim doctor in Punjab. Angry Hindu mobs destroy his clinic and he limps towards Pakistan, himself at risk, stopping to care for every wounded person he meets. When he does at last reach the refugee camp on the Pakistan side of the border, he doesn't stay to join the British doctors and nurses who are caring for a never-ending stream of arrivals. These are the ones who have survived, he realizes, and goes back out to the dangerous fields to care for those who won't otherwise make it. In a beautiful and satisfying stream of events, he meets and cares for both the twins and Simran.

In spite of the violence, I really enjoyed this book, which surprised me. I usually hate books where men with swords wait on train platforms for trains to stop, then wade in and kill everyone on board. Perhaps it is because the book did not go into excessively gory detail, so it did not feel gratuitous. Perhaps it is because the book somehow presents hope, that all people are not relentlessly evil, that some resist and see humanity in all regardless of the way one's turban is tied or whether or not one eats meat. Certainly, it is because Partitions is very well written, with characters that manage to be nuanced even in the middle of extreme circumstances. If you are someone who enjoys novels that relate historic times and events, or if you are interested in India or Pakistan, I highly recommend this book. It's poetic sweep shows us good and evil alike, like the world that exists around us, a mix of both extremes that still manages to contain beauty.

Beverly says

- I really enjoyed this book. I have been having good luck with books about 200 pages long – We the Animals and The Buddha in the Attic were books with the same page length that told powerful stories.
- While I have read several books about the “partition” between Pakistan and India – they are usually written from the pov of one of the sides – Partitions is not written to favor a side and that is what made the storyline unique
- The author's skill as a poet shows as the writing is beautiful and flows well. Once you start reading will not want to put the book down.
- This book actually takes places during about a 48 hr time period and while there are several story threads all are fully flushed out. This was a violent time for this area and horrors/violence happen in the story, but is told with compassion and elegance.
- Really a story about humanity and people who had to live through this time period once the “politics” are been settled and often had very little time to decide what this border meant to them.
- The story has an unique narrator – it is the father of the twin boys – who is watching over his sons and wife – he has foresight about events before it happens but does not have the power/strength to save/warn them – can often just be a breeze that distracts/cool/alert to danger. At first I was not sure how this would work but it ended up working well.
- The ending was surprising – I did not see that coming
- Shows people have the capacity to do exceptional good and exceptional evil – showed the lure of mob rule.

I kept thinking what I would do in the situations

- I would read another book by the author
-

Marcy says

The history of the Indian Partition comes to live through the events that occur at the same time to Amit's compelling Muslim, Sikh and Hindu characters. Each character's minute-by-minute, day-by-day existences are revealed by an "all-knowing" Hindu father who died in a pact with one of his gods to leave one of his ill twins on earth to heal and survive and take him instead. Although the narrator is all-knowing, he is powerless to change the painful events he narrates. This novel depicts the desperation and terror that all ordinary inhabitants of both India and Pakistan faced when the Partition of India and Pakistan were announced.

Kudos to Amit Majmudar's first novel for telling the stories of the Partition from multiple perspectives. There is no single story when it comes to history. In the case of the Partition, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus lost their homes, traveled to a new land without any belongings, only for many to be fatally murdered on the way, left behind to barely survive in the crowd's impatience to get on a train to safety. Children of all beliefs are witness to these atrocities. This novel portrays the goodness of some and the the abysmal and appalling behavior of others, trafficking lost children, trying to survive.

The language of Amit Majmudar is exquisite. She shows, and does not tell, of the horrors of the Partition.

"The one image that lodges in Keshav's mind is the image of a young woman, four buildings away, stepping off a roof. She doesn't throw herself down, and she isn't pushed. She doesn't throw herself down, and she isn't pushed. It's deliberate, onto the ledge as onto the first step of a staircase, the next step the step off. As if she were a tightrope walker with the tightrope missing. Her falling is finished before he can point to it. The crowd of men beneath surges away from her landing, then closes back in on it. They remind me of still water reacting to a single raindrop."

I would recommend this global read for high school readers.

Nancy Oakes says

Partitions is the Amit Majmudar's first novel, although he is also an award-winning author of poetry. According to the acknowledgments, his family was not caught up in the 1947 partition of India which created the new nation of Pakistan, his relatives have no stories about that time, and everything he knows about this tumultuous period of history he learned through reading. In this book, "partition" refers more to what happens after the politics are settled and Pakistan has become a reality; it also finds meaning in the dislocation of people as they are separated from their homelands and families as well as their ordinary day-to-day existences. In such a dark and violent time, the author also reveals little pockets of human kindness here and there that offer some hope for a future in which people can set aside what keeps them apart and work together. It is a novel of historical fiction combined with magical realism, and that fact alone means that the reader must prepare to suspend his or her disbelief.

In both India and Pakistan, the newly-created border led to a massive exodus as people sought safety from revenge killings occurring on both sides. Millions of people found themselves uprooted due to a tide of violence and the new political and sectarian realities brought about by this partition. Majmudar's core group

of four characters become representatives of the human river of refugees that followed in its wake: Shankar and Keshav Jaitly, a young set of Hindu twins separated from their mother waiting for the train to India; Ibrahim Masud, a Muslim doctor who sees people as people not as their religions; and Simran Kaur, a young Sikh girl who finds herself dangerously alone after running away from her father, who takes extreme measures to protect the females (and one little boy) in his family.

The story is told via the ghost of the twins' dead father Roshan, who moves in and out of the lives of the four main characters. While he moves the narrative along, the reader is also introduced to his own story. Roshan was the son of a Brahmin doctor and became a well-respected physician himself. He had it all until he married the twins' mother Sonia, who was of much lower caste than his own family and much younger than he. His marriage separated him from his family; even when his sister comes surreptitiously to perform the naming ceremony for the boys, she doesn't forgive: she will not even accept water given to her by Sonia. Now as he hovers on the edge of the living in spirit form, he is able to see evil in people's hearts as he steadfastly keeps his attention on this children. Roshan's ghost is the reader's guide through the burnt-out buildings, the piles of dead bodies and the vultures (literally and figuratively) waiting to get at them. At the same time, it is also the illuminator of random acts of human kindness throughout the characters' respective ordeals and after they eventually come together.

While the story is compelling, the author's poetry background enlivens even the smallest moments in the novel. The clinic where Dr. Masud works becomes "the only place he feels safe...protected from further suffering because of the suffering already there." A man playing a drum "inhabits his music." The crowds in exodus are "Great human rivers, the vanished Sarasvati reborn with all her tributaries," where "Migrant field hands who walked one way to eat now walk the other way to starve." A particularly nasty man has "seen delicate things up close only after they have been broken." And at one point, Dr. Masud is just two hours away from reaching Pakistan when Roshan notes "He never knows when he crosses the border. It is too early in the border's life cycle; it hasn't budded checkpoints and manned booths yet, hasn't sprouted its barbed wire thorns." It's a striking and even chilling moment in this novel -- a point at which the novel's contemporary future meets up with the reader's present; that particular story still has yet to be written in 1947.

What I'm not so sure about is the ghost of Roshan Jaitly. When I first picked up this book and realized what was going on with the narration, I did the mental equivalent of an eye roll, trying to decide whether or not I would even read it. And having finished it, I thought this tack sort of cheapened this story. Aside from the fact that it's a ghost, there's just too much of Jaitly's own self interjections throughout, especially at the end of the story where Roshan's ghost intervenes to stop a terrible act. I get where the author was going with this approach, but still, if there had been some omniscient narrator rather than a ghost, that would not have changed the core story except at the last. Although that would have meant a rather terrible ending, when writing about human tragedy, sometimes the heartbreaking consequences produce much more impact. I thought this bit was annoying and unnecessary. The other thing I think that would have helped would have been a map of the area both before and after the Partition. I was a little confused at times and had to often refer to the internet for help.

If it's possible to get past the ghostly narrator, Partitions is a fine opening effort from this author, and brings to light a chapter in history that is especially relevant to events today. Even if you don't know anything about the partitioning of India, Majmudar's story will carry you through part of its aftermath. Readers who can't deal with often-brutal scenes of violence or suffering should probably pass, but if you like historical fiction on the literary side, this one will probably appeal.

Ming says

A moving book, beautifully written by a poet. I finished it last night and its mood and beauty continue to resonate. Partitions tells of the horrors of 1947 but its three stories or perspectives of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh characters are well-balanced and deeply moving. Majumdar's writing is lyrical, conveys a tender and wrenching tone, and maintaining a profound sense of humanity. He showcases his characters' vulnerability, strength, and beauty as they struggle to survive the confusion, violence and worst motives of others.

I cannot adequately describe how I did not want the reading pleasure to end, despite the profoundly difficult setting (time and place) of this book.

I'm now on a mission to get ahold of his newly-released Abundance
<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15...>

Julie says

Devastating. This book leaves me speechless. The story takes place around a terrible time for India & Pakistan - the Partition. There are 5 main characters of the book all of whom go through their own versions of hell. I won't say any more on the plot outside of it was hard at times to read due to what is happening to our heroes and heroine. BUT - that doesn't mean you shouldn't read it as the writing is so wonderful, very lyrical. At the end, you may cry out of sadness for human kind, out of joy for hope, and out of anger at humanity's stupidity. But it is a wonderful - albeit - devastating read. (I also have to call out that there is a special contribution that dogs make in the story that makes this dog person very happy.) After reading The Abundance and now this book from Mr. Majmudar - I'm now a huge fan of his writing style. He reminds me of Khaled Hosseini in that you learn something of another culture at a terrible time in that culture's history. Make sure to read the author's afterward at the end.

Parita says

Loved it...every bit of it!

One of the most humane stories I have read in a while. Separated from loved ones in a time of great conflict and mistrust, this is a story of how 4 strangers make a family. Using the central characters of the story, the author talks about the birth of 2 mighty nations, the bloodshed and grief that came in its wake, uprooted people turning savage from loss and suffering and of those brave survivors who made it home. Even while avoiding the usual gory bits involved with the indo-pak partition, the story manages to talk of the horror of that time. Narrated by a dead man lingering between worlds, it has a strange but pleasant touch of Indian traditions and emotions. I loved the attention to detail given to expression of emotions, even animal emotions. I wasn't surprised when by the end of it, it felt a lump in my throat and moist eyes.

A must read for those who want to see both sides of a great agony tale

Lisa Hura says

Sometimes, a book makes lovely reading, even when the subject matter is very sad. Partitions by Amit Majmudar is one of those books. I was not at all surprised to read that the author is an award-winning poet; there is a certain poetry to the language in this story that gives it away. (He is also a diagnostic nuclear

radiologist, but I haven't quite worked that into the mental picture I get when I'm reading.)

In 1947, the border between Pakistan and India was closed. It was not a peaceful closing. Muslims and Hindus caught on the wrong side of the border found themselves in great danger; by some estimates, up to a million people died. Partitions deals with the stories of several people trying to get to the right side of the new border.

Our narrator, Roshan, is dead. He has been dead for five years now, but he is keeping watch over his wife, Sonia, and his twin boys, Shankar and Keshav. In the train station, trying to get on the last train headed to Delhi, the boys become separated from their mother — an absolutely terrifying event for all of them. Roshan will follow the boys on their journey. He will leave the story of Sonia's fate to the very end.

We also follow Ibrahim Masud, an elderly Muslim doctor. The doctor frightened me — he seemed somehow simple, stunted either by age or defect, with tremendous difficulty speaking to adults around him. His tremendous tenderness dealing with children leads him to try and help those he meets on the road to Pakistan. There is also Simran, a young Sikh girl who found that at the last minute, she could allow her father to "save" her, and fled her home and family. Both will encounter kindness and cruelty as they search for safe passage on what Majmudar describes as a river of humanity.

The stories are heartbreaking. In the face of so much hostility, it is hard to imagine any sort of happy ending. The narrator is particularly interesting — he is not quite omniscient, but he sees these events, travels back and forth in time and place, to bring us their stories. He wants desperately to protect his sons, but in the end, all he can do is watch.

Still, I did not find this a sad book to read. The writing is beautiful, although I had some trouble with vocabulary. I gave up trying to look up all the Indian words that were unfamiliar to me; most are clear enough in context, but I feel like I'm missing something, translating them on my own. I loved the narrator's voice, his fierceness in defense of his sons and as well as his hesitance. He makes you want to invest in these characters, even if you can't see a way for there to be any good ending.

Alyssa says

What a heartbreaking story. This novel tracks twin Hindu boys, an elderly Muslim doctor, and a Sikh young woman all trying to make their way to their new homes during the 1947 partition of India. During a journey that's often terrifying, all four of these travelers learn about the bad and good in people as they travel. Told from the viewpoint of the boys' dead father, the story keeps you on the edge of your seat. Stories like this are often hard to read, because they show how awful human beings can be. At the same time, it is necessary that we read them, to learn, to grow, and to become better. From the little that I know about the partition, this novel seems to portray a very realistic view of those events.

Regina Lindsey says

The partition of British India in 1947, created two independent nations – India and Pakistan – and resulted in one of the largest forced migrations in history. Approximately 12.5 M people fled across the newly delineated borders dependent on one's faith. Hindus and Sikhs headed towards India while Muslims focused on entry into Pakistan. Partitions follow four people – a set of young Hindu twins, a teenage Sikh girl, and an elderly Muslim doctor – caught up in the migration chaos and the violation surrounding them.

Told from the perspective of the twin's dead father, this work is a "sit on the edge of your seat" tale. Majmudar is a poet and a doctor. His experience in both realms serves him well for his debut novel and his choice in narrator's creates a great deal of suspense, as the narrator seems to have the ability to know what the future holds while, at the same time, able to visit scenes from the past. But, Majmudar goes deeper than just the events surrounding partition. He shows how traumatic events can bring out the best and the worst in human and how it is the heart of the individual defines character rather than a label we tend to ascribe to each other. "He knows his caregiving is neither Muslim, nor Sikh, nor Hindu. Or rather it is all three of these." (pg. 199)

This is a short, quick read. However, it can be difficult to read at times. I certainly appreciated the work and look forward to more works by Majmudar.
