



Trauma Beyond Borders: Comparative Perspectives on War, Memory, and Forced Migration in German and Hindi Literature: *A Comparative Study of W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz and Bhisham Sahni's Tamas*

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Abstract

This article reads trauma, memory, and forced migration comparatively across W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974). The two novels come out of separate twentieth-century catastrophes, the Holocaust and the Partition of India, yet they meet on a common problem: how literature represents collective violence once it has settled into individual and cultural memory. Holocaust writing and Partition writing have each produced large and largely self-contained critical traditions, but sustained cross-linguistic comparison between them is still rare, and the disciplinary reasons for that silence have themselves become a subject of debate. Taking Rothberg's (2009) account of multidirectional memory together with Craps's (2013) critique of the Eurocentric formation of trauma theory as its point of departure, this study treats the two texts as structurally analogous rather than historically linked, and asks what becomes visible when a German Holocaust novel and a Hindi Partition novel are placed within a single interpretive frame. The method is qualitative and typological, grounded in close reading and organised around seven recurring analytical dimensions. Both novels, the analysis finds, narrate trauma not as a bounded event but as a recurring structural condition, staged through disordered time, unstable or deferred testimony, and the loss of home as a category that violence dismantles before law can protect it. Sebald's photographic and architectural melancholia and Sahni's procedural social realism arrive, by very different formal routes, at the same refusal of narrative closure, and each positions literature as a supplementary archive where official history and law fall short. The article specifies a research gap in comparative, cross-linguistic trauma studies bridging European and South Asian literary responses to mass violence, and proposes this pairing as a model for future work on forced migration in world literature.

Keywords: trauma studies; memory studies; forced migration; Holocaust literature; Partition literature; comparative literature; multidirectional memory; postcolonial witnessing.

1. Introduction

The twentieth century produced two ruptures that still organise the historical imagination of Europe and South Asia: the Nazi genocide of European Jewry and the Partition of British India in 1947. Their human scale



is hard to hold in a single view. Roughly six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, while the Partition displaced something on the order of 14.5 million people within four years, with credible mortality estimates running from one to two million (Bharadwaj, Khwaja, & Mian, 2008; ICRC, 2017; USHMM, n.d.). Each event also generated a durable literature devoted to one stubborn difficulty, the representation of experience that resists representation. Both involved a sudden severing of individuals from home, community, and continuous selfhood. Both left afterlives of silence, guilt, and intergenerational transmission that outlasted the moment of violence itself. And both have increasingly drawn literary scholars, historians, and human-rights researchers to a shared conclusion: that formal historiography and law reach a limit when they are asked to describe such events.

At that limit, literature is repeatedly asked to do further work. It is expected to register what the archive omits, to give form to experience that escapes chronological narration, and to preserve testimony that might otherwise be lost to institutional forgetting (Felman & Laub, 1992). This article brings together two texts that are seldom read side by side. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) follows the fragmented recovery of a Kindertransport survivor's repressed past; the scheme that frames the novel brought roughly ten thousand mostly Jewish children to Britain between December 1938 and September 1939, and most of them never saw their parents again (USHMM, n.d.; Britannica, 2024a). Sahni's *Tamas* (1974) reconstructs the communal violence that preceded the Partition of Punjab through a mosaic of overlapping perspectives, drawing on the author's own memory of the 1947 riots in Rawalpindi.

On the surface the two texts could hardly differ more in form, language, historical referent, or voice. Sebald offers a single, melancholic, digressive first-person meditation threaded through photographs and architecture. Sahni offers a panoramic, multi-voiced social-realist narrative that moves among perpetrators, victims, and bystanders across one town over a few days. Even so, they share a cluster of concerns. Both ask how trauma disorders time and narrative. Both treat home as a category that violence destroys before the law can protect it. Both make silence carry as much weight as speech, and both show how the transmission of memory across generations or communities unsettles any tidy account of historical closure.

The central argument is that *Austerlitz* and *Tamas*, for all their unconnected origins, are structurally comparable case studies in the literary representation of trauma and forced migration. Reading them together brings out features of each text, and of trauma narrative as a mode, that stay invisible inside either the Holocaust-literature or the Partition-literature tradition on its own. The comparison is not a claim of influence. It is a typological and thematic reading in the tradition of world-literary and cross-regional trauma studies (Rothberg, 2009; Craps, 2013). It also belongs to an interdisciplinary conversation, one of interest to law and human rights, about the evidentiary and testimonial functions of literature where legal and historical records are incomplete, suppressed, or simply unable to capture subjective experience.

The article proceeds in seven further steps. Section 2 reviews scholarship on Sebald, on Sahni, and on Holocaust and Partition writing more broadly, and then specifies the research gap. Section 3 supplies the historical and quantitative background that anchors the comparison. Section 4 sets out the theoretical framework and the comparative method. Sections 5 and 6 offer close readings of *Austerlitz* and *Tamas* in turn. Section 7 develops the comparison itself, and Section 8 closes with implications and directions for further work.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

2.1. Sebald and the Trauma of Postmemory

Criticism of Austerlitz is abundant within German studies and memory studies. Long (2007) reads the novel as an instance of Sebald's wider preoccupation with archives, and with places where the past leaves traces to be catalogued and indexed. Whitehead (2004) situates it in a broader tradition of trauma fiction organised around belatedness, the impossibility of witnessing one's own catastrophe, and the ethics of representing atrocity at one remove. Duttlinger (2004) gives the fullest account of the novel's photographs, and she cautions against a common shortcut: the frequent equation of photography with traumatic shock rests on structural or metaphorical analogy, and cannot by itself explain how the images actually work inside Sebald's prose. Taken together, this scholarship establishes Austerlitz as a paradigmatic case of postmemorial narration in Hirsch's (2012) sense, a text in which the traumatic past reaches the reader through mediation, fragmentation, and someone else's partial testimony rather than direct recollection. What this criticism rarely does is read Sebald outside a European and Holocaust-studies frame. Comparative extensions to non-Western literatures of mass violence remain scarce.

2.2. *Sahni, Partition, and the Historiographic turn*

Scholarship on Tamas has grown up within Partition studies and Hindi literary criticism. Bhalla (2006) reads the novel's documentary realism and its refusal to distribute communal blame along simple religious lines, and he stresses Sahni's attention to the mechanics by which ordinary people are drawn into, or destroyed by, communal violence. That criticism is itself part of a wider historiographic turn associated with Pandey (2001), who reconceived Partition violence not as an eruption of spontaneous hatred but as a produced event, and who set out to recover the fragmentary, embodied, and communally uncomfortable memories that nationalist historiography had pushed aside. Feminist historians carried the recovery into the gendered archive. Butalia (1998) and Menon and Bhasin (1998) documented the abduction of and sexual violence against women during Partition, figures commonly estimated in official and scholarly accounts at around 75,000 women, along with the long silences that followed. In this literature Tamas is usually compared with other Partition novels, above all Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, rather than read against European material.

2.3. *Comparative and postcolonial trauma studies*

The decisive context for this article is the recent turn of trauma and memory studies toward comparison, and two interventions matter most. Rothberg (2009) proposes multidirectional memory as an alternative to a competitive model in which remembering one atrocity is assumed to crowd out another. On his account, Holocaust memory has historically emerged in dialogue with histories of colonial and anti-colonial violence, not in isolation from them. Craps (2013) makes a complementary case. He argues that the founding texts of trauma theory, shaped by the Holocaust and by a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation, carry a Eurocentric bias that has left the suffering of non-Western populations underacknowledged, and that the field can honour its own cross-cultural ethical claims only by attending to those histories on their own terms. Alexander's (2004) theory of cultural trauma and A. Assmann's (2011) account of cultural memory as institutionally mediated push in the same direction, recasting trauma as a collective, socially constructed process rather than a purely individual pathology. Between them, these interventions license the cross-regional comparison pursued here, while insisting that any such comparison respect the specificity of each history.

2.4. The research gap

Against this background the gap can be stated precisely. At the level of corpus, little sustained scholarship reads a German Holocaust novel and a Hindi Partition novel together within a shared theoretical frame; where the Holocaust has been set beside other catastrophes, the usual comparators are other genocides such as Rwanda, Armenia, or Bosnia, rather than the communal, non-genocidal, yet mass-scale violence of Partition. At the level of language, cross-linguistic pairings that treat a Hindi source text as a trauma text in its own right, rather than as postcolonial content to be folded into European models, are rare, which is precisely the outcome Craps's (2013) critique would predict. At the level of method, comparative trauma studies has tended to argue at the level of theory rather than to offer a transferable procedure for reading structurally analogous but historically unconnected texts. And at the level most relevant to law and the humanities, the evidentiary and testimonial functions that both traditions assign to literature have seldom been examined comparatively across the European and South Asian archives at once. This article works on all four fronts, and treats the pairing of Austerlitz and Tamas as a controlled case for doing so.

3. Historical and Contextual Background

Because the comparison advanced here is typological rather than equivalential, the very different empirical realities behind the two novels need to be stated at the outset. Table 1 sets out a comparative profile of the two catastrophes, with quantitative estimates and their sources, and Figure 2 visualises the demographic scale of Partition migration. Two cautions govern the use of these numbers. First, all such totals are contested. Partition mortality estimates in particular span a wide range, because record-keeping collapsed along with the state apparatus, so historians treat the figures as orders of magnitude rather than exact counts (Bharadwaj et al., 2008; Pandey, 2001). Second, placing a rescue operation that moved some ten thousand children beside a migration that moved fourteen million people is not a claim of moral or quantitative equivalence. Following Rothberg (2009), the juxtaposition is meant to be multidirectional rather than competitive, a way of illuminating shared narrative structures rather than ranking suffering.

Dimension	Nazi persecution & the Holocaust (context of Austerlitz)	Partition of India, 1947 (context of Tamas)
Precipitating rupture	State-sponsored genocide of European Jewry; the Kristallnacht pogrom of 9–10 Nov. 1938 marked a decisive escalation.	Division of British India along religious lines, 14–15 Aug. 1947; boundaries announced days before independence.
Principal mode of displacement	Forced emigration and deportation; the Kindertransport child-rescue scheme (Dec. 1938 to Sep. 1939).	Mass cross-border migration of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims between the new dominions.
Scale of displacement	c. 10,000 unaccompanied children brought to Britain (of c. 50,000 refugees admitted 1938–39).	c. 14.5 million migrated within four years; estimated outflows c. 17.9 million (Bharadwaj et al., 2008).
Mortality	c. 6 million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust overall (USHMM, n.d.).	c. 1 to 2 million killed; some estimates reach 3 million (ICRC, 2017; Britannica, 2024b).
Gendered violence	Family separation; most Kindertransport children were permanently orphaned by the genocide.	Abduction and sexual violence against women, commonly estimated at c. 75,000 (Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Butalia, 1998).
Documentary afterlife	USHMM and national archives; extensive survivor testimony and oral-history collections.	The 1947 Partition Archive holds 10,300+ crowdsourced survivor interviews (NEH, 2015).
Literary exemplar	Austerlitz (Sebal, 2001).	Tamas (Sahni, 1974).

Table 1. Comparative historical and quantitative profile of the two catastrophes referenced by the novels.

Source. The data in this table has been taken from Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian (2008), USHMM (n.d.), ICRC (2017), Britannica (2024b), Menon and Bhasin (1998), Butalia (1998), and NEH (2015).

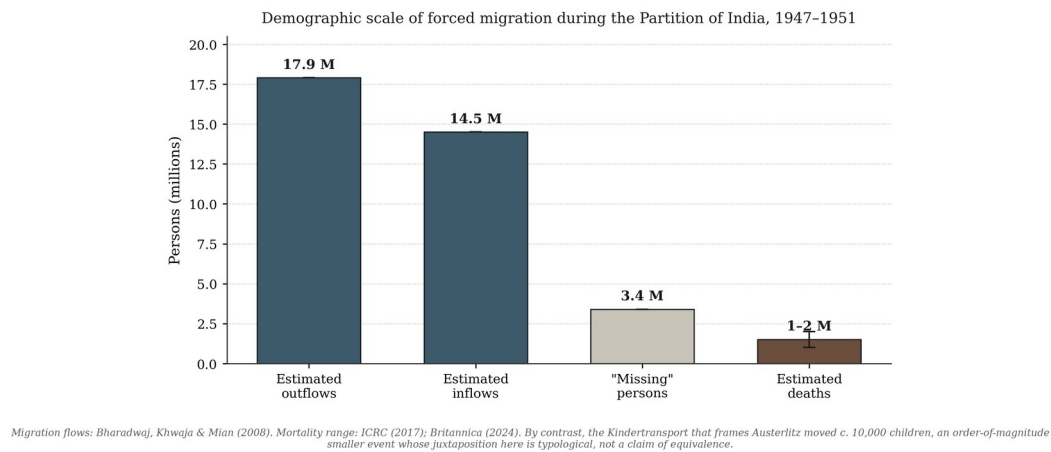


Figure 2. Demographic scale of forced migration during the Partition of India, 1947–1951. Migration flows after Bharadwaj, Khwaja and Mian (2008); mortality range after ICRC (2017) and Britannica (2024b).

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

4.1. Theoretical framework

The analysis draws on three overlapping bodies of theory, summarised in Table 2 and represented schematically in Figure 1. The first is trauma theory. Caruth (1996) describes trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment it occurs, and that therefore returns belatedly, outside ordinary chronology, while LaCapra (2001) distinguishes ‘acting out’, the repetitive and unworked-through re-enactment of trauma, from ‘working through’, a more reflective and narratively integrated relation to the past. The second body of theory is memory studies. Here the study leans on Hirsch’s (2012) concept of postmemory, the mediated relation that later generations bear to trauma they did not directly live; on A. Assmann’s (2011) account of cultural memory as institutionally and narratively sustained; and on Alexander’s (2004) theory of cultural trauma as a collective process of meaning-making. The third strand is comparative and postcolonial memory theory. Rothberg’s (2009) multidirectional memory legitimises cross-regional comparison against the charge that it flattens difference, and Craps’s (2013) call to decolonise trauma theory supplies the rationale for treating a Hindi Partition novel as a trauma text in its own right, rather than assimilating it to European templates. Pandey (2001), together with the feminist Partition historiography of Butalia (1998) and Menon and Bhasin (1998), grounds the specifically South Asian dimension of the reading.

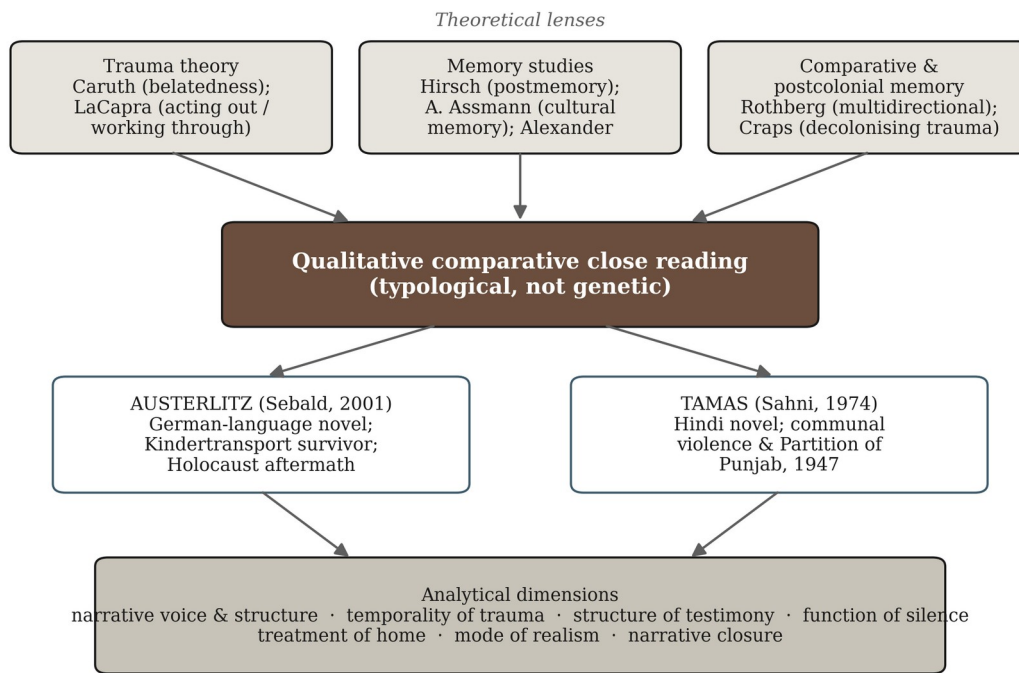


Figure 1. Analytical framework. Three theoretical lenses inform a qualitative, typological comparative close reading of the two novels, organised around seven recurring analytical dimensions.

Lens / key scholar	Core concept	Analytical function in this study
Caruth (1996)	Trauma as belated, unassimilated experience that returns intrusively.	Reads Austerlitz's delayed recall and Tamas's deferred moral reckoning as formal enactments of belatedness.
LaCapra (2001)	Acting out vs. working through.	Distinguishes compulsive repetition from narrative integration across both texts.
Hirsch (2012)	Postmemory.	Frames the narrator's mediated inheritance in Austerlitz and inter-communal transmission in Tamas.
A. Assmann (2011); Alexander (2004)	Cultural memory; cultural trauma as collective meaning-making.	Positions both novels as agents of collective-memory formation, not merely records of private pain.
Felman & Laub (1992)	Literature as witnessing; the crisis of testimony.	Grounds the reading of both novels as testimonial acts addressed to a reader-witness.
Rothberg (2009)	Multidirectional memory.	Authorises cross-regional comparison against competitive-memory objections.
Craps (2013)	Decolonising trauma theory.	Corrects the Eurocentric bias that has kept Partition outside canonical trauma studies.

Table 2. Mapping of the theoretical framework to its analytical function in the comparative reading.

Source. The data in this table has been taken from Caruth (1996), LaCapra (2001), Hirsch (2012), Assmann (2011), Alexander (2004), Felman and Laub (1992), Rothberg (2009), and Craps (2013).

4.2. Research design and methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary design grounded in close reading. The comparison is typological rather than genetic. It does not claim that Sebald and Sahni influenced one another, or that they belong to a shared tradition. Instead it treats the two novels as independently arrived-at responses to structurally similar situations, in which state or communal violence produced mass forced migration and lasting collective trauma. Following the comparative-literature practice of reading unrelated texts against a shared theoretical problem, and the multidirectional model that licenses it (Rothberg, 2009), the analysis asks how the particular forms each author develops shape what can and cannot be represented about trauma.

Corpus selection. The two texts were chosen purposively on three criteria. The first was canonical status, since each is widely regarded as the paradigmatic literary treatment of its respective event within its national tradition. The second was explicit rather than incidental engagement with forced migration, home, and traumatic memory. The third was formal dissimilarity, wide enough to test whether shared structures survive across very different narrative modes. A deliberately minimal two-text corpus, rather than a broad survey, allows the fine-grained close reading on which typological comparison depends.

Analytical procedure. Each novel was read against seven recurring dimensions, derived from the theoretical framework and refined as the reading progressed: narrative voice and structure, the temporality of trauma, the structure of testimony, the function of silence, the treatment of home, the mode of realism, and narrative closure. These categories served as a shared coding grid, applied symmetrically to both texts, so that convergences and divergences could be identified systematically rather than impressionistically. The resulting matrix appears as Table 3 in Section 7, alongside two descriptive framing rows (historical referent and evidentiary function).

Limitations. The analysis works from standard published translations, Anthea Bell's English Austerlitz and the Penguin English Tamas, and it therefore treats translation as a methodological constraint, since features of the German and Hindi originals, particularly at the level of syntax and idiom, are not fully recoverable in translation. This is exactly the kind of linguistic loss that Craps's (2013) critique warns against, and closer work with the source languages is identified below as a priority for future research. As a two-text qualitative study, the design prioritises interpretive depth over generalisability, and its conclusions are offered as an analytically transferable model rather than a statistically representative claim.

5. Trauma, Fragmentation, and Silence in Sebald's Austerlitz

Austerlitz unfolds as a series of intermittent encounters, spread over several decades, between an unnamed narrator and Jacques Austerlitz, an architectural historian who slowly recovers the memory of his own displacement. As a child he had been sent to Britain on a Kindertransport from Prague on the eve of the Second World War, raised by a Welsh foster family under a different name, and left for most of his adult life without conscious knowledge of his Jewish origins or the fate of his parents. Delay is the novel's central device. Austerlitz's traumatic history is withheld from the reader for much of the text, in a way that mirrors how it is withheld from Austerlitz himself, who suffers a breakdown at the very point where suppressed memory begins to surface. At the level of form, this enacts Caruth's (1996) account of trauma as belated: an event not experienced fully when it happens, which returns only later, and only in part, through involuntary rather than conscious channels.

Sebald's prose is saturated with architecture. Railway stations, fortresses, archives, and institutional buildings recur as external, monumental analogues for the psychic structures in which trauma is stored and hidden (Long, 2007). Austerlitz's professional obsession with nineteenth-century railway architecture gradually becomes legible as a displaced fascination with the very stations through which he himself passed as a displaced child, so that the built environment turns into a repository of memory the conscious mind cannot yet reach. The photographs that run through the text do related work, though nothing about it is simple. Duttlinger (2004) warns against reading them merely as emblems of traumatic shock. In practice they point toward a documentary reality that the surrounding prose can never quite narrate, opening a persistent gap between visual evidence and verbal testimony that itself performs trauma's resistance to full articulation.

Austerlitz is not only a survivor's narrative but a postmemorial one. The story reaches us through the unnamed narrator, who receives it secondhand, in fragments, across occasional meetings. That doubling

places the reader in the position Hirsch (2012) associates with postmemory, a relation to the traumatic past that is mediated, partial, and dependent on someone else's testimony. What the novel stages, then, is not only the trauma of forced migration and family loss but the difficulty, and the ethical necessity, of passing that trauma on to those who did not live it, the reader included (Felman & Laub, 1992). Home is never restored. Austerlitz's search for his parents ends not in reunion but in the confirmation of loss, and the spaces he moves through, hotel rooms, waiting rooms, archives, stay permanently provisional, enacting the condition of the displaced person for whom no legal or national category of return is finally available. In LaCapra's (2001) terms, the novel dramatises a protagonist caught between acting out and a working-through that its own withheld ending declines to complete.

6. Communal Violence, Displacement, and Memory in Sahni's Tamas

Tamas is set in an unnamed town in undivided Punjab during the days just before Partition. Working through a large ensemble of characters, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, rioters, victims, local officials, and political organisers, it traces the mechanics by which a deliberately engineered provocation escalates into full-scale rioting, mass displacement, and the collapse of a previously mixed community. The opening act is one of manufactured desecration, a slaughtered pig planted on the steps of a mosque, and the novel follows the rumour and reprisal it sets loose. Where Austerlitz withholds and delays, Tamas proceeds by accumulation and simultaneity. Sahni cuts between locations and perspectives within a tight timeframe, producing a documentary, almost procedural effect that Bhalla (2006) characterises as social-realist testimony rather than conventional drama organised around one protagonist's development.

This formal choice carries its own theory of trauma and complicity. By moving among the perpetrators of violence, the organisers who manufacture it for strategic ends, and the ordinary residents swept into displacement almost without warning, Tamas refuses the consolation of locating blame in a single community or a single villain. It presents communal violence instead as a systemic and orchestrated process, in which ordinary social relations are unmade with startling speed. The novel's structure, which tracks the manufactured rumour, the calculated provocation, and the bureaucratic and political failures that let violence proceed, closely follows Pandey's (2001) argument that Partition violence should be understood not as spontaneous hatred but as a produced event, and it dramatises that claim at the level of literary form.

The novel pays close attention to the loss of home as both a physical and an existential rupture. Families flee at short notice, carrying what they can, unsure whether displacement will prove temporary or permanent. In restrained rather than melodramatic prose, the text records the specific and gendered dangers of flight, including the abduction of and violence against women, a theme that resonates directly with the feminist recovery of women's Partition testimony as a suppressed strand of the record (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Unlike Austerlitz, where trauma is repressed and returns belatedly to a single survivor, Tamas presents trauma largely in its immediate, unfolding present. Silence works differently here. It is not the delayed return of a repressed personal history but the silence of official and neighbourly complicity, the things seen and left unnamed, the violence enabled by administrative inaction and calculated political ambiguity. Memory in Tamas is therefore less a matter of postmemorial transmission across generations than of testimony contemporaneous with the event, offered as a documentary counter-history to a nationalist narrative that, at the time of the novel's publication, had largely kept the scale and mechanics of communal violence out of public memory (Alexander, 2004; A. Assmann, 2011).

7. Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Read together, the two novels reveal both striking convergences and instructive divergences in how literature narrates trauma and forced migration across very different contexts. Table 3 summarises the comparison across the seven analytical dimensions, together with two descriptive framing rows, and the discussion that follows draws out its most significant findings.

Analytical dimension	Austerlitz (Sebald, 2001)	Tamas (Sahni, 1974)
Historical referent	Holocaust; Kindertransport displacement from Prague.	Partition-era communal violence, Punjab, 1947.
Narrative voice & structure	Single, digressive first-person; embedded narration; interpolated photographs.	Panoramic, multi-perspectival social realism; ensemble cast.
Temporality of trauma	Belated; repressed; surfacing decades later.	Immediate; unfolding; contemporaneous with the event.
Structure of testimony	Second-hand, postmemorial; the narrator receives fragments.	Distributed, choral, eyewitness-contemporary.
Function of silence	Silence of repression (intra-psychic).	Silence of complicity (social and political).
Treatment of home	Irrecoverable; provisional spaces (waiting rooms, archives).	Abandoned overnight; loss staged as sudden rupture.
Mode of realism	Documentary-photographic melancholia.	Procedural social realism; manufactured-riot mechanics.
Narrative closure	Withheld; ends in confirmed loss.	Withheld; violence unresolved and unpunished.
Archival / evidentiary function	Supplements the record of Kindertransport aftermath.	Counter-history to nationalist minimisation of Partition violence.

Table 3. Comparative analytical matrix across the seven core reading dimensions, with two descriptive framing rows (historical referent and evidentiary function).

Source. The data in this table has been taken from Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) and Sahni's *Tamas* (1974).

7.1. Convergences

Both novels treat home not simply as a dwelling but as a juridical and existential category whose loss precedes and exceeds any formal legal remedy. Austerlitz's search for his parents' Prague apartment and the families in *Tamas* who abandon their homes overnight both stage displacement as a condition for which no contemporaneous legal or administrative framework proves adequate, anticipating the continuing struggle of refugee and human-rights law to redress displacement and the loss of home. The two texts are united, too, in a formal refusal of closure. Austerlitz ends without reunion or resolution, and *Tamas* ends with violence still largely unresolved and unpunished, so that each denies the reader the consolations of restored order that conventional historical narratives of the Holocaust's aftermath or of Indian independence tend to supply. In both, finally, literature performs an evidentiary function that formal history and law at first failed to perform, a convergence of direct relevance to law-and-humanities scholarship interested in literature's capacity to preserve testimony that official archives omit, distort, or reach too late (Felman & Laub, 1992; Rothberg, 2009).

7.2. Divergences

The sharpest divergence lies in narrative temporality and the structure of testimony. Sebald's novel is organised around belatedness and postmemorial transmission: trauma is repressed, returns decades later, and is narrated at two removes. Sahni's is organised around simultaneity and immediate documentary witness: trauma is narrated in its unfolding present, spread across many characters rather than concentrated in a single belated recollection. This maps onto a broader distinction between the individual, psychoanalytically inflected trauma narrative associated with much European Holocaust literature and the

collective, sociologically inflected narrative associated with much Partition writing. Neither tradition reduces to that generalisation, and both novels exceed it, since Sahni individualises the interior life of certain characters just as Sebald gestures toward collective and institutional history through archive and architecture.

A second divergence concerns silence. In Austerlitz silence is chiefly the silence of repression, the protagonist's inability to reach or speak his history until memory returns of its own accord. In Tamas it is chiefly social and political, the willed silence of officials, neighbours, and institutions who watch the preconditions of violence gather without intervening. The contrast suggests that the use of silence in trauma narrative is not a single transferable device but one whose meaning depends on the kind of violence in question: whether it is state-perpetrated and open to later disclosure, as with the Holocaust, or communally enacted and subject to contemporaneous, politically motivated concealment, as with Partition. Read through Craps (2013), this is precisely the sort of context-specific difference that a decolonised trauma theory has to register rather than dissolve into a universal European model, and it becomes visible only when the two texts are read side by side.

8. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This article has argued that Sebald's Austerlitz and Sahni's Tamas, though separated by language, national tradition, and historical referent, are structurally comparable literary responses to twentieth-century mass violence and forced migration, and that reading them together illuminates features of trauma narrative that stay underexamined when either tradition is studied alone: the disordering of time, the instability of testimony, the loss of home as an unremediable category, and the divergent functions of silence. The comparison has been developed as typological rather than genetic, set within a shared framework of trauma theory, memory studies, and comparative-postcolonial memory theory rather than any claim of direct connection, and disciplined throughout by the multidirectional principle that comparison should illuminate without flattening (Rothberg, 2009; Craps, 2013).

The gap this article addresses, namely the scarcity of sustained comparative scholarship bridging European Holocaust literature and South Asian Partition literature across corpus, language, method, and the law-and-humanities frame, points toward several lines of further work. The pairing might be extended beyond these two texts to a larger comparative corpus of Holocaust and Partition narratives, including intermediary cases such as Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay, a novel about a Holocaust refugee in India that Craps (2013) reads as a site of entangled memory. Closer analysis of the German and Hindi originals, rather than their English translations, would enable the finer-grained linguistic reading that a decolonised trauma theory calls for. And in the register most relevant to law and human rights, there is room to investigate how literary testimony of this kind has been, or might be, drawn on within transitional-justice, reparations, and refugee-law contexts where official archives remain incomplete. In bringing Austerlitz and Tamas into dialogue, the article proposes comparative, cross-linguistic trauma studies as a productive model for understanding forced migration as a recurring, structurally analogous feature of modern history across otherwise disconnected national and literary worlds.

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