Creative Saplings, Vol. 04, No. 11, November. 2025, **ISSN-0974-536X,** https://creativesaplings.in/

Representation of Loss and Dislocated Identity in Intizar Husain's "An Unwritten Epic

[1] **Sashi Bhushan** Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Swami Shukdevanand College Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.*
Email: sashibhushan1983@gmail.com
[2] **Shaleen Kumar Singh,** Professor and Research Supervisor, Dept. of English, Swami Shukdevanand College Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.
Email: shaleen@sscollegespn.ac.in
DOI:

Abstract

Intizar Husain has gained recognized reputation as the chronicler of the after-effects of the Partition in Urdu literature in South Asia. Born in undivided India in 1925 and migrated to Pakistan in 1947, he has watched and undergone the complicated question of an unsettled homeland. Immersed in the memories of the pre-partition era, a deep sensation of loss and homesickness resonates in his fiction. His short fiction deals with the theme of Partition and its various issues directly or indirectly. One of the most hard-hitting stories, 'An Unwritten Epic, 'expresses the multiple problems of the Partition. Portraying the inter-village conflict, communal violence, and the associated euphoria for the creation of Pakistan as the story's backdrop, Intizar Husain presents the extraordinary life and the tragic fate of a village wrestler, Pichwa, in the fictional village named Qadirpur situated somewhere in a remote district of the United Province in pre-Partition India. Pichwa is a bully renowned for his fighting skills with the club (lathi). He never leaves an opportunity to show his dominating muscle power to his opponents. The story's narrator is so captivated by Pichwa's heroic charisma that he becomes obsessed with composing an epic in prose using the creation and freedom of Pakistan as its background. This obsession with Pichwa's heroism and the idea of an epic reflects the narrator's idealism and his desire to find meaning in the chaos of the Partition. 'An Unwritten Epic' captures the profound loss and identity crisis associated with dislocation. Uprooted from his stable and established surroundings, Pichwa is wholly lost once he reaches an unnamed town in Pakistan. His sense of identity and belongingness undergoes a tremendous change. Pichwa, who could become an epic hero, is rendered just as a symbol of victimhood and loss, with tragic ironies that follow. He is the powerful symbol of dislocation that embodies the loss of home, identity, and belongingness. He is destitute, where his old identity cannot fit in, and the new one remains elusive. The paper aims to analyze how 'An Unwritten Epic' explores the subjectivity of loss and dislocated identity as a profound consequence of the migration to Pakistan. It examines how the story covers the intricacies of social, cultural, and personal turmoil during the migration. It also scrutinizes how Intizar Husain highlights the political upheavals that uproot individuals from their native land and leave them adrift in a fragmented world.

Keywords: *Loss, Dislocated Identity, Migration, Uprootedness, Partition, Belongingness.*

Intizar Husain has earned distinguished stature as the chronicler of the after-effects of the Partition in Urdu literature in South Asia. Born in undivided India in 1925 and migrated to Pakistan in 1947, he has witnessed and experienced the complex question of an unsettled homeland. Soaked in the memories of the pre-partition era, a profound sense of loss and nostalgia resonates in his fiction. He received a global commendation when the English translation of his magnum opus 'Basti' was shortlisted for the much-coveted Man Booker International Prize in 2013. Basti, The Chronicle, and The Sea Lies Ahead are parts of his trilogy of novels set against the backdrop of the Partition and the various phases in the disordered history of Pakistan. He also has seven collections of short stories to his credit. Some of them are *Satvan Dar (Seventh Door), Gali Kuche, A Chronicle of the Peacocks: Stories of*

Article History : Received: 28 Sep. 2025. Accepted: 19 Oct. 2025. Available online: 25 Nov. 2025. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Conflict of Interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Partition, Exile and Lost Memories, *Akhri Admi Urdu Collection Of Stories, Qissa Kahaniyan Urdu Collection Of Stories, Numainda Kahaniyaan* and *Jataka Tales*.

One of the most charismatic storytellers, Intizar Husain "is a man very difficult to pin down. A realist, symbolist, writer of abstract stories, romantic, escapist, memorialist, mythographer—he is something of each and yet contained by none of these categories (Asaduddin). His distinguished style, tone, themes, craft, complexity, and narrative technique set an example for his leading contemporaries. "His narrative had timelessness to it. It was free; unshackled from ideological weight"(Farooqi). He skillfully assimilated the rich elements of Persian Dastan and Qissa in his fiction. His writings are marked with ancient patterns and themes because the Indian traditions of Katha, fables, folk stories and Pali Jataka Tales influenced him.

Intizar Husain draws freely and imaginatively upon the rich and fascinating narrative traditions found in such diverse sources as the Katha Sarit Sagar, Puranic lore, Sufi legends, religious epics, Jataka tales, popular lore about talking animals and birds, Hatim Tai, and anecdotes about rishis who have enough learning to challenge the gods but are ye fallible. A thoroughly modern writer, Intizar Husain uses the sources to reflect upon religious faith and identity; historical truth and moral delusions; and power and the endless failure of reason.(Bhalla xvi)

So, he blended the old art of characterization and storytelling style with modern themes and settings. His fiction carries a sense of nostalgia because he frequently borrows from the cultural history and mythology of the Indian subcontinent. Thus, his writings are deeply immersed in traditionalism and classicism. By employing cultural symbols and innovative metaphors, he often contrasts superficial modern values with the decaying traditional ones. That delivers a sense of melancholy and loss to his stories. His works reflect his nostalgia and emotional connection with the beautiful past that is lost forever. It echoes the pain of witnessing humankind's contemporary reality and bleak future.

Intizar Husain's short fiction deals with the theme of Partition and its various facets directly or indirectly. Written in 1952, "An Unwritten Epic" ("Ek Bin-likhi Razmiya") is one of the most hard-hitting stories. It expresses the multiple problems borne out of the Partition. Portraying the inter-village conflict, communal violence, and the associated euphoria for the creation of Pakistan as the story's backdrop, Intizar Husain presents the extraordinary life and the tragic fate of a village wrestler, Pichwa, in the fictional village named Qadirpur situated somewhere in a remote district of the United Province in pre-Partition India. Pichwa is a bully, renowned for his fighting skills with club (lathi). He never leaves an opportunity to show his dominating muscle power to his opponents. The story's narrator is so obsessed with his heroic charisma that he plans to compose an epic in prose using the creation and freedom of Pakistan in its background.

The story "presents the climate of hope and unbounded optimism prevailing among the Muslims in the days just prior to the Partition, and their deep emotional attachment to the idea of Pakistan"(Memon 91). When Jat attackers from the neighboring locality approach to conquer Qadirpur during the communal riots, Pichwa sees it as a golden chance to display his elegant fighting skill with the club publicly while defending his village. His homeland, Qadirpur, and club are inseparable parts of his identity. His club is often compared with

Moses's staff. For Jats, conquering Qadirpur meant overpowering Pakistan by crushing the identity of Pichwa.

> The Jats were just as valiant. They had heard of Qadirpur only because of Pichwa: His skills were renowned. That was why the Jats had gathered from all over; mounted on richly adorned elephants, they had set out at night in a torch-lit procession to conquer Qadirpur. Their army was well-equipped and disciplined. Their elephants were loaded with guns and ammunition, swords and spears, and they marched in military formation. (Husain 1)

This "insignificant village" epitomizes the very idea of Pakistan for Pichwa that was personal and he is ready to go to any extent to protect it. "His friends picked up their mothers' blessings, committed their wives and children to the mercy of God, and marched into battle with such dignity and courage as to evoke the heroes of ancient wars"(1). His excitement, zest, and confidence are unbounded as he addresses his gang members to fight valiantly against the approaching attackers, "Tighten your belts, you bastards. Maula Ali has at last heard our prayers. By His grace, we are about to reap a rich harvest"(8). The idea of Pakistan does not mean to him the way it meant to the makers of Pakistan, historians, intellectuals, religious leaders, etc. during the Partitions. He wages the battle against Hindus not because he sees or hates them as Kafirs out of religious differences but because he wants to demonstrate to them his superior fighting skills with the club. "He fought without reason or purpose; he fought for the sake of fighting. That is why when the storm of communal violence swept across the country, he didn't stop to ask uncomfortable questions. The riots gave him the chance to display his expertise with the lathi unrestrained"(8). Wrestling for him has nothing to do with religious pride or Islamic selfhood. It was simply a matter of physical superiority and manly skills. "Although it is likely that the Muslim League's idea of Pakistan may have lurked in Pichwa's consciousness, it was essentially a totally personal Pakistan he fought for in his native Qadirpur. For him as well as for most of the denizens of this tiny Indian locality, Pakistan meant Qadirpur" (Memon 92).

The big jolt to Pichwa's sense of identity occurs when he learns that Qadirpur will not be part of Pakistan. "Pichwa was out of his depths. He couldn't understand how Qadirpur, where he lived, could have been left out of Pakistan"(Husain 9). He and his gang members try to lighten this frustration and loss by hoisting the religious flag instead of a Pakistani flag on the Pipal tree outside Eidgah on the outskirts of the village. "Mammad and Kalwa, however, convinced him that since Pakistan didn't care about its religious brothers, they shouldn't give a damn about Pakistan. They should form their own Pakistan"(9). Pichwa's experiences of loss and frustration were not individual; instead, they were collective. It represents the betrayal and loss of the masses who were left behind, although they fostered and cherished the very idea of Pakistan nationalism in their heart. Pichwa instantly realizes that the nature of the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims has changed. His zest, vigor, and hopes for Pakistan are decimated, and pessimism takes over.

To some writers, the Partition marked the emergence of a new country (the land of pure) and the beginning of freedom. It meant a crisis of overwhelming proportions involving horror, bloodbath, disaster, and human debasement to Progressive writers across the border. Some portrayed it as a loss of pluralism and syncretism, and some lamented the forced migration, trauma, displacement, loss of homeland, and subsequent alienation. Some viewed and

interpreted the migration in the context of violence, pain, and loss as they spoke of the unspeakable horrors experienced by the millions of refugees while crossing the border in search of safe shelter. "Others depict it as hijrat, an experience akin to the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina and therefore an experience that transcended human sufferings" (Jalil, "Batwara vs Azaadi: How Indian and Pakistani Writers Viewed the Partition"). Intizar Husain was one of those writers who saw a sea of possibilities in migration, marked with experiences of suffering and pain. He was hopeful that hijrat would be a catalyst for the emergence of "new consciousness and sensibility" in Pakistan. "He, in fact, celebrated the exilic moment as hijrat and saw in it a tremendous opportunity for Muslims to reinvent themselves"(Asaduddin). His vision of partition was in sheer contrast with that of progressives like Manto who preferred to expose the wounds and unspeakable horrors while depicting the sickness of a depraved society. On the contrary, Intizar Husain was hopeful of new opportunities for Muslim folks in a new country after the Partition.

If Manto probed the horrors of Partition with all the delicacy of a camp surgeon, laying bare a sick, ailing society like "a patient etherised upon a table", Intizar sahib has chosen to view Partition as hijrat or migration; the greatest cross-border migration in recent history, which he repeatedly likens to a recurrent historical partition, is for him brimful with the possibility of exploring the past while unravelling the present. (Jalil, "Intizar Husain (1923-2016): The Pakistani Writer Who Mourned What the Partition Did Not Bring")

Intizar Husain in his fiction rues the fact that such a unique opportunity presented by the partition was squandered and lost. He observes the shattering of that dream, ideal, and hope in an unfortunate way. He laments that Pakistan failed to deliver what was hoped for because it forgot to learn from its history. The creative force became directionless and purposeless because a sense of loss, betrayal, gloom, failure, and, disbelief dominated. Pakistan was no longer a land of new possibilities, purity, incorruptibility, sincerity, and large-heartedness. His short stories and novels reflect the weariness, hopelessness, and disillusionment of post-partition generations that witnessed how everything was overshadowed by greed, corruption, intolerance, disintegration, and ethnic violence.

"An Unwritten Epic" captures the profound loss and identity crisis associated with dislocation. The narration extends beyond the Hindu takeover of the locality of Qadirpur. In a kind of metafiction, it follows the journey of Pichwa, the narrator, and other inhabitants of Qadirpur in the aftermath of displacement in Pakistan. Uprooted from his stable and established surroundings Pichwa is completely lost once he reaches an unnamed town in Pakistan. His sense of identity and belongingness undergoes a tremendous change. Pichwa's sense of identity keeps deteriorating since this moment and the man who had the potential of becoming an epic hero is just rendered as a symbol of victimhood and loss with the tragic ironies that follow. He "suffers a most unheroic fate in the ignoble business of Partition, and an even more demeaning turn of events and state of affairs greets him in his beloved utopia of Pakistan in its concrete historical realisation, the double disgrace draining him of all epic-heroic elan vital"(Naqvi).

Told in two parts, "An Unwritten Epic" presents a complex narrative exposing the devastating ironies of the Partition. The second part of the story is not linear and stable, as it is reported through some irregular entries in the narrator's diary. As the calamity of migration from Qadirpur to Pakistan follows, Pichwa is left bewildered and without moorings. He considered Pakistan a place where his uniqueness and wrestling talents would be appreciated and

nurtured. But, he desperately searches for identity in Pakistan as everything around him seems overwhelmingly strange and deteriorated. The man who made Jats bite the dust in Qadirpur was diminishing daily. "All his arrogance and pride have crumbled to dust" (Husain 14). Once hailed as the Tipu Sultan of the 20th century, Pichwa's heroic stature as a wrestler vanishes in Pakistan, and he is just left struggling to get food and shelter in the new land with no identity and belongingness. "But here, he is merely a dispirited man looking for a job. This morning, he said, 'Mian, find me a job. In this damned city, I can't find a place to rest my feet. Babu, if you can't find me a job, at least get a house allotted in my name" (13). According to the narrator, Pichwa is no longer a figure worthy of an epic. "After all, the Arjuna of the Mahabharata of Pakistan is a dejected hero. He wanders through its streets and alleys looking for a house and a job. The harder he tries, the less status he has as a hero"(Husain 16). Losing his old magic, he becomes a pawn on the chessboard; a mere plaything being pushed from one square to another.

Pichwa tries to conquer this sense of melancholy by resorting to some strange coping mechanisms. He tries to manage the chaos of his life through his own kind of survival tactics. He romantically dreams of owning a bigha of land to grow a mango orchard and establish a wrestling pit. But the narrator reveals to him that the land in Pakistan belongs to the zamindars.

> I replied, Hey, Sheikh Chilli, who'll give you a bigha of land? This land is not for the likes of you and me. It belongs to the zamindars.'…He retorted, 'Aren't zamindars our Muslim brothers? If I appeal to them in the name of Rasoolallah, they'll surely give me a morsel of land.' That's an example of Pichwa's strange logic — talking as if zamindars were Hindus or Muslims! (15)

Muhajir Pichwa tries hard to assimilate in Pakistan but to no avail. This land does not welcome him and millions of his kind with open arms. The rehabilitation of migrants and the allotment of abandoned properties and land were manipulated in favor of the powerful and opportunists. Landless peasants were not given any rights to these assets. The dark reality of the migration crisis descends upon him when even his influential compatriot Naim Mian scolds him when Pichwa asks for help getting a job in Pakistan. "Damn it, everyone gets up and heads straight for Pakistan as if his father's treasure were buried here. Can't you see there is no more room" (14).

In the beginning, creating a new nation for Muslims had something miraculous about it. So, the inevitable dislocation and relocation demanded a fresh start, a new identity, and forgetting what was left behind in Qadirpur. But, Pichwa no longer identifies with Pakistan's meta-narrative as the land of promises. His dislocation and deprivation rob him of his self, purpose, and heroic status. Pichwa "had an attitude, he commanded respect, he was feared. But his qualities could only thrive in their local habitat. With his migration he loses his habitat and with that his swagger"(Farooqui 107). His vigorous life and sense of identity suffer progressive deterioration. Being humiliated, alienated, and disillusioned, he realizes Pakistan is incapable of giving him a secure selfhood. His identity is fragmented and decentered as an upshot of the experiences of this uprootedness. He is caught between two worlds — one dead and the other powerless to sustain him— that leave him fluttering his wings in the void. Left with no dignity and a place of his own, a deep sense of loss and absurdity fills his soul.

The narrator contrasts Pakistan's real world with the fantasy world of Qadirpur. For Pichwa, Qadirpur appears as a symbol of valiant prospects. At the same time, Pakistan's promised land,

on the other hand, became a land of loss and ruined dreams where his prospects of assimilation and possibilities of thriving are dashed to the ground. With the dreams that have gone awry, Pichwa keeps searching for the idealized world of Quadirpur in Pakistan. Still, Qadirpur cannot be found in the land where the political and civil space is corrupted with greed, opportunism, declination, callousness, and exploitation.

When we think of "Qadirpur", we picture a world all symbol and meaning, crammed with heroic opportunities. "Pakistan" on the other hand appears in the latter part of the story as a world in which all grand opportunities are pre-empted, human qualities are petty and mean, events take place in a dimension stripped of symbol and meaning, and cast no shadows. It is true that this "Pakistan" resembles a world we know, where the rich exploit the poor and the first-comer triumphs over the late-comer. But this world of "ours" does not appear in the story. Its elements are polarized by the invention of two rival worlds: the first immeasurably larger than life, the second depleted and impoverished by any standard. (Bedford Ian 26)

Qadirpur symbolizes a shared space marked by social consensus and cultural purpose. At the same time, Pakistan represents a lack of humanness, morality, rootedness, and a sense of an abiding community. It appears to have materialistic social conditions that don't believe in coexistence, assimilation, and organic relationships with fellow beings.

> The new heroes of Pakistan are the cynical manipulators of law and economics, not the common men who had hoped for so much. Pichwa becomes an emblem of lost memories and abandoned hopes, and the narrator acknowledges, in the secrecy of his diary notations, the impossibility of imagination in a society that has been ruptured from its older forms of life. (Bhalla xvi)

So, "frustrated and nostalgic," Pichwa leaves Pakistan and returns to his native place, Qadirpur to redeem himself. But the identity of Qadirpur is erased from the new map of India. Its language and culture have evaporated with migration. Religious fanatics have changed its name to the land of Jats "…Qadirpur, which no longer exists. The new inhabitants of this basti now call it Jatunagar"(Husain 21). The narrator paints a horrible picture of Qadirpur's post-communal riots and subsequent migration of its inhabitants to Pakistan. "I can describe Qadirpur because it is already a story. Its soil is red with the blood of its sons, its air filled with screams, its homes charred, its mosque in ruins, its wrestling pit desolate"(16). The cycle of loss and degradation is completed when Pichwa is brutally killed in Jatunagar. People of the basti "saw his head hanging from the same branch of the peepal tree near the idgah on which Kalwa and Mammad had flown their party's flag"(22). Pakistan had no place for him. He finally "found a few square yards of land in his old country"(22).

Pichwa's tragic fall also symbolizes the loss of the narrator's creative self. Pichwa could redeem his grace as a genuinely tragic figure by meeting his end heroically. But, the narrator, who once cherished the idea of writing an epic in prose on the theme of creating a new nation by having Pichwa as its protagonist, finds his vigor and creativity smothered. He also compromises his ideals with Naim Mian to get allotted a flour mill to his name. His creativity kept on withering since the moment he entered Pakistan. The partition and the subsequent migration to Pakistan smother the possibilities of the natural development of the narrator's and Pichwa's identity. The narrator's admission in the end invites introspection –

> Poor, romantic Pichwa! What a way to meet his end! His death was as dramatic as his life. The only unromantic event of his life was his hijrat to Pakistan. If only he hadn't come to Pakistan. By coming here, he humiliated himself and ruined my novel. (22)

In portraying the existential struggle and dilemma in the wake of the Partition, "An Unwritten Epic" comes close to Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" The question of complicated, fractured, and dislocated identity is at the center of these two stories. Both Bishan Singh and Pichwa are existential seekers whose basic identities are destroyed by political activities. Their existence is divided between two national identities imposed upon them and their strong affiliations to their homelands. Their lives are marked with the question of roots and identification after the upheaval and dislocation. In "An Unwritten Epic", the narrator imagines Pichwa leaving Pakistan and reaching a utopia where migrants like Pichwa can get shelter instantly and not be treated as outsiders –

> Well, that fellow Pichwa did finally leave Pakistan. In fact, travelled miles and miles away from Pakistan — far beyond the borders of India and Pakistan — and reached a country without borders, where countless migrants who found themselves stranded were instantly 'settled'. (21)

"Toba Tek Singh" also dreams of a country without borders, conflict, and imposed identities — an alternate space where the spirit of humanity, fellowship, tolerance, and forgiveness reigns supreme.

Pichwa, the tragic character and the powerful symbol of dislocation embodies the loss of home, identity, and belongingness. He is destitute, where his old identity cannot fit in, and the new one remains elusive. He is alienated, confused, and purposeless as he yearns for a sense of self in Pakistan. After migration to Pakistan, his life is tinged with absurdity and senselessness. He seeks to find meaning and connection in the face of dislocation, but the enduring sense of loss refuses to die. Thus, "An Unwritten Epic" explores the subjectivity of loss and dislocated identity as a profound consequence of the migration to Pakistan. Portraying the intricacies of social, cultural, and personal turmoil, Intizar Husain highlights how the political upheavals uproot individuals from their native land and leave them adrift in a fragmented world.

Works Cited:

Asaduddin, M. "Intizar Husain and His World." *Caravanmagazine.In*, 1 June 2013, https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-essays/intizar-husain-and-his-world.

Bedford Ian. "Intizar Husain's 'An Unwritten Epic' and the 'Matter of Pakistan.'" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 28, no. 1, Mar. 1993, pp. 16–32.

Bhalla, Alok. "Introduction." *Story Is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays, and Drama*, edited by Frank Stewart et al., 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. vii–xviii.

Farooqi, Mehr Afshan. "The Timeless Story of Intizar Husain." *Dawn.Com*, 3 Feb. 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1237179.

Farooqui, Mahmood. *A Requiem for Pakistan: The World of Intizar Husain*. Yoda Press, 2016.

Husain, Intizar. "An Unwritten Epic." Is a Vagabond: Fiction, Essays, and Drama by Intizar Husain, edited by Frank Stewart et al., 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1–24.

Jalil, Rakhshanda. "Batwara vs Azaadi: How Indian and Pakistani Writers Viewed the Partition." Scroll.In, https://scroll.in/article/813959/batwara-vs-azaadi-how-indian-and-pakistani-writers-viewed-the-partition. Accessed 5 Oct. 2024.

---. "Intizar Husain (1923-2016): The Pakistani Writer Who Mourned What the Partition Did Not Bring." Scroll.In, https://scroll.in/article/802919/intizar-husain-1923-2016-the-pakistani-writer-who-mourned-what-the-partition-did-not-bring. Accessed 1 Oct. 2024.

Memon, Uhammad Umar. "Partition Literature: A Study of Intizar Husain ." Partition Literature: An Anthology, edited by Debjani Sengupta, Worldview Publications, 2018, pp. 67–107.

Naqvi, Nauman. "A Secret South Asian Meta-Utopia." Seminar, vol. 632, Apr. 2012, https://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html.