

The Affective Afterlife of Family Belongings: Object-Stories of India's Partition

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This essay is a meditation on the affective afterlife of family objects in the oral histories of refugees from India's Partition. The British partitioning of India led to the creation of India and Pakistan in 1947 displacing about 20 million people on both sides of the border. Drawing on three years of fieldwork with ten displaced families, I explore how stories of family objects—in their presence, absence, replacement, erasure, and reproduction—accomplish the affective task of homing for refugees. Objects, notes Jane Bennet, have “thing-power,” which “gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary man-made items to exceed their status as objects and manifest traces of independence and aliveness . . .”¹ Like stories, objects have the capacity to travel, materially and affectively as well as literally and figuratively, with/in bodies, between worlds. In telling object-stories, I propose that family objects accrue affect and perform belonging in *belongings* by becoming affective membranes, conduits to home. Affect, according to Sarah Ahmed, is something that “sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.”² Objects, Ahmed continues, are “sticky because they are already attributed as being good or bad, as being the cause of happiness and unhappiness.”³ These object-stories embody “stickiness” by showing how an artist's pen, donated books, a dresser, a chair, a money box, a cheap reprint, a birth certificate, an invitation from the Queen of England, and memories of lost objects—become affective anchors that re/assemble an old world. Ultimately the stories illustrate how *objects* take on affective properties by beginning to *feel* and *sense* and *be* like something else—a semblance of home.

¹ Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvi.

² Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.