

## Loss and Latency of Migration in *Basti*

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 was a crucial rupture in which the creation of borders became the defining traumatic event of the history. This paper is invested in exploring the representation of 1947's and 1971's partition in Intizar Husain's novel *Basti* through the psychoanalytic and theoretical paradigm of trauma extracted from Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. It primarily focuses on the discursive representation of trauma as an ongoing process for the immigrants who migrated as a result of partition. In *Basti* the loss is elucidated, lightened and dignified by the return of memories and these memories become the source of creating space for that loss in the consciousness of the displaced person. Husain himself was an immigrant who first migrated from village Rupnagar to Vayaspur and then from Vayaspur to Lahore (Pakistan). Therefore, in his writing there is an amalgamation of his personal experiences with the experiences of his characters which develops a blur boundary between fiction and reality. Memory and nostalgia are two driving forces in his narrative. In this regard, he has accentuated the personal memoirs of the sufferers' vis-à-vis the perpetual nostalgia of migration. I argue that the identity of an immigrant becomes vulnerable when it is subjected to the assimilation of the foreign land and its culture. I consider trauma as a conceptual lens to examine how the geographical reconstruction of borders leads to the reconstruction of individual as well as collective identity. The paramount impression of trauma is incorporated in the memory system. This paper pursues to find through the system of memory, how the progressive impacts of the past shape the present and offers us means to rethink future.

### **Keywords:**

Intizar Hussain, Basti, Trauma, Migration, Nostalgia, Memory

Intizar Hussain was deeply affected by the turmoil of the partition of 1947. In *Basti*, he represents said event through the association of the narrative and memory. Pradip Kumar Bose asserts that “memory begins where history ends” therefore, memory becomes a “key to consciousness and represents experience in temporal order, experience as a succession”(1) . For a considerable lot of immigrants, the event of partition survived through the memory and recollection of the past more than through recorded history. Migration as an experience of exile, loss, and longing, is at the center of Hussain’s narrative. *Basti* has an unwavering focus on the pain of migration and the psychological trauma of the migrant’s post-deracination. Thus, in the present article, through a close reading of *Basti*, the researcher aims to explore Hussain’s narrative of loss vis-a-vis the traumatic experiences of migrants.

‘Loss’ a mass noun, has been defined by OED, as a “fact or process of losing something or someone”. (“Loss”) which in fact functions “as a sign designating an important absence”(2). Latency is also a mass noun that refers to the “state of existing but not yet being developed or manifest” (“Latency”). In a way, it also designates an absence of something. As the word suggests, it indicates the possibility of the return of the absent. Hence, both loss and latency are parallel entities with the same intensity of immeasurable suffering. Cathy Caruth asserts that Freud in his significant study of Jewish history, *Moses and Monotheism*, defines latency as the time that has “elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms”(3). However, she proposes that “in the term ‘latency’, the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent, Freud seems to describe the trauma as the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return”(4). Memory, reminiscence, flashbacks, and hallucinations are the sources of recourse to the repressed. The ultimate impact of trauma lies within its turn to memory. This research, therefore, argues that memory is substantial in formulating personal and collective identity.

Janet proposed the memory system “as the central organizing apparatus of the mind, which categorizes and integrates all aspects of experience and automatically integrates them into ever-enlarging and flexible meaning schemes”(5). For a migrant subject, memory creates a space which integrates the loss of dislocation into his present experience. For that matter, Richard Stamelman is of the view that the loss of the dislocated person is “clarified, illuminated and measured by the return of memories”. He defines two dimensions for the interpretation of the loss: on the one hand, the loss can indicate “the extent of the absence that has occurred”, and on the other hand, it can represent the “nature of what still

remains”(6). Partition literature of subcontinent, both in English and regional languages, co-opts these two dimensions of loss. Thereby, these narratives are the accounts of the loss of the homeland and the struggle for survival in a new land. The partition of 1947, therefore, was not only an experience of physical displacement from India to Pakistan but it also cleaved the migrant psyche into two.

South Asian writers have addressed in detail, the political, social and ideological conflicts, as an outcome of the 1947 partition. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice Candy Man* reflect upon the social and religious frenzy that took hold of the people of the subcontinent in 1947. However, the Urdu fiction writers particularly Sadat Hassan Manto, Quratulain Hyder, and Intizar Hussain, have assimilated the psychological residue of the 1947 division into their works. Rakshanda Jalil in her introduction to *The Sea Lies Ahead* affirms that “the Urdu Writers have been content to write of consequences rather than reasons, effects rather than causes of partition. They have even deployed myths, allegories, fables to paint on vast canvases in broad brush strokes”(7). Since literary narratives across the border endeavored to develop an objective approach towards the partition, Intizar Hussain’s *Basti* carefully contemplates the aftermath of the 1947 partition on the South Asian traumatized psyche. This chapter also explores the event of partition as a division of political and spatial boundaries, yet also as segmentation of individual existence. In *Basti*, Hussain articulates loss, reckoning the violent history of the newborn country.

Memory as an imaginative power “can potentially be used to insert personal narrative to challenge the hegemony of official history”(8). However, the memory of partition is “not a straightforward remembrance of an historical event” but a site of “inevitable aspect of independence”(9). In *Basti*, Intizar Hussain fictionalizes the diverse post-partition response associated with past communal differences. Therefore, the part of the novel set against the backdrop of the 1971 partition (the partition of Bengal and Pakistan) is a fine discourse on the cracked reality of the creation of Pakistan. It explores the formation of new country from the perspective of an ordinary Pakistani who dreams of an ideal homeland. Hussain constructs the migrants’ experience of displacement from India, re-settlement in Pakistan and their consequential lives subjected to the chaos of another war.

To begin with, Hussain migrated from Bulandshehr, district of Uttar Pradesh (India) to Lahore (Pakistan). Even though this migration laid the foundation of his creative experience, he could never reconcile the trauma of the event with the memory of his birthplace. Therefore, in *Basti*,

he intends to retrieve the past through memories of the pre-partition pluralistic culture. Muhammad Salim-ur-Rahman criticizes that Hussain “builds upwards and outwards from here, from a place of mystery and wonder, where the real world is not easily distinguishable from the one made up of fancies, where no decisions have to be taken, no traumas have to be encountered, a place guarded peremptorily by the elders, secure in their guilt-edged wisdom and elaborate superstitions”(10).

The protagonist of the story is a biographical self-insert of Hussain. Like the author himself, the narrator Zakir spent his childhood within a pluralistic culture in Rupnagar. Rupnagar is an ideal society, a place where the people had not lost their innocence yet. It is a geographical space, formed with love, sacrifice and understanding. ‘Basti’ is an Urdu language word which has a number of meanings. However, in its literal sense it refers to a small space where different groups of people live together. Accordingly, the title of the book suggests a human settlement, enriched with the feeling of ‘home’. So, Basti here refers to the village Rupnagar which is a multi-ethnic space, accommodating anyone and everyone. The recurrent images of ‘home’ in his fiction indicate nostalgia for the homeland, primarily nostalgia for his lost Basti. Zakir’s nostalgia for Rupnagar intensifies when he encounters the chaos and destruction in the wake of the partition.

Unsurprisingly, when a dislocated person writes, the canvas is not confined; they possess a variety of unique experiences to write about. Thus, the resultant text is studied within a multi-tiered matrix. Hussain’s *Basti* lacks fixity and suggests a momentous engagement with a variety of locations between the past and the present. The narrative cannot be categorized under one convenient label. Divided into eleven chapters, the novel foregrounds the coexistence of the present with the mythic past. A few of its sections reflect Hindu-Muslim unity in the pre-partition era whereas others depict the horrors of partition when the riots began. In this way the structure of the novel itself becomes a motif of loss and displacement, lacking linearity and chronological order. It draws upon the war of 1857, the war of 1965 between India and Pakistan, partition of 1947 and finally, the 1971 division of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Quite clearly, the plot of *Basti* deals with a vast range of experiences, with the trauma of dislocation as a common factor. The narrative is set in Lahore 1971, however, flashbacks reveal Zakir’s recollection of his childhood and adolescence in Rupnagar in Vayaspur respectively.

The narrative opens with Zakir’s reminiscence of his childhood in Rupnagar, in pre-partition India, “when the world was still all new, when the sky was fresh and the earth not yet soiled, when trees breathed through

the centuries and ages spoke in the voices of birds”(11). These lively images of a “new world”, “fresh sky”, “unsoiled earth”, “breathing trees” and “voices of birds”, are associated with Zakir’s basti in pre-partition India. Hindus and Muslims of Rupnagar confront the plague, deaths of their loved ones and brave many storms together. Zakir grows up in a culture enriched with both Hindus’ and Muslims’ religious histories. He enjoys the interesting narrations of Bhaghatji (a Hindu shopkeeper) from Ramayan and Mahabharat, and Bi-Amma’s stories from Islamic history simultaneously. In one of his interviews Hussain states, “I used to wander through nearby woods and groves, picking mangoes, jaman, the fruit of tamarind trees and such like. All the while, the stories and legends associated with those trees, those fields and those open spaces were becoming a part of my being” (12). Similarly, the mythical tales, Jataka tales, parables, dastans and different seasons are part of Zakir’s personality. The intimacy of Bhaghatji and Zakir’s grandfather refers to the fact that the people of Rupnagar had no religious biases among themselves. The presence of his cousin and playmate Sabirah made the time even more eventful. In his childhood, Zakir learns the story of Cain and Abel along with different versions of the reality of Doomsday, a certain foreshadowing of the event that would tear the idyllic Rupnagar apart.

Zakir moves from Rupnagar to Vayaspur as a child and then from Vayaspur to Lahore as an adult. His experience of migration is steady and sequential. Although, leaving Rupnagar and his beloved Sabirah takes a toll on him, he manages to have a good time in Vayaspur, accompanied by Surrender. Later on in Pakistan, on his first night in a big, well-lit room he thinks of his old room “with discolored walls, a cot, a table full of books, and among the books a lamp that shed a dim light”. He adapts quickly however, noting the very next day that “the sky of Pakistan was fresh, like the sky of Rupnagar”(13)

As a migrant, Zakir is hopeful of a new beginning, however, further segmentation of Pakistan disillusioned him. Analogically, Intizar Hussain envisages the migration of Muslims, the hijrat of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) from Mecca to Madina. Hussain says in his essay “Hamare Ahd ka Adab” (Literature of Our Times), “In the history of the Muslim peoples, hijrat holds the position of an experience which repeats itself time and again. With its association of long-enduring pain and sorrow, both internal and external, it becomes a creative experience”(14). Moreover, he was of the view that “if one accepts such a conception of hijrat, it can be seen as not merely an external event, but as a sort of spiritual state....The meaning of Pakistan at the time was hijrat from one

age to another”(15). However, bearing in mind the post partition socio-political affairs of Pakistan, Hussain later on termed it a failed migration. In an interview in July 1974, he says about the resultant migration of the 1947's partition:

...when I was talking about the experience of migration and the articles I wrote concerning it, I was in a state of great hope and optimism. It was then my feeling that in the process of the Partition we had suddenly, almost by accident, regained a lost, great experience-namely, the experience of migration, hijrat, which has a place all its own in the history of the Muslims -and that it will give us a lot. But today, after our political ups and downs, I find myself in a different mood. Now I feel that sometimes a great experience comes to be lost to a nation; often nations forget their history. I do not mean that a nation does, or has to keep its history alive in its memory in every period. There also comes a time when a nation completely forgets its past. So, that experience, I mean the experience of migration, is unfortunately lost to us and on us. And the great expectation that we had of making something out of it at a creative level and of exploiting it in developing a new consciousness and sensibility-that bright expectation has now faded and gone.(16)

The Muslims faced this massive migration for a greater purpose. They failed to resume their old lives and were left traumatized. These dashed expectations of the immigrants gave birth to a sense of loss and rootlessness and they became nostalgic of their past. In most of the families that migrated to Pakistan, one elderly person was left behind for the sake of their ancestral lands. The elderly wished to be buried in their own land. Zakir's father, similarly concerned, had even had a shroud brought from Karbala and had had a grave reserved for himself in Rupnagar. For him the loss of his land and his home was an irretrievable one. It signifies the importance of the shroud and the grave in the life of a Muslim, as Zakir's Ammijan was more worried about her death than the problems of life. Despite the fact that migrants could claim more land in Pakistan than what they possessed in India, people like Hakim ji preferred to stay back to be buried in his native land. He states his reason this way:

...Hakim-ji, you didn't go to Pakistan?”

“No, young man.”

And the reason?”

Young man! You ask for the reason? Have you seen our graveyard?"

"No."

"Just go sometime and take a look. Each tree is leafier than the next. How could my grave have such shade in Pakistan?" (17)

Hussain also records the memories of Hindu and Sikh immigrants from Shamnagar. There too a number of big houses were left empty, while a few also stayed locked. People locked their houses carefully in hopes of returning someday. Edward Said, in his introduction to *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, states: "Exiles, émigrés, refugees and expatriates are uprooted from their lands" and even after they adjust themselves to "new surroundings, sadness still remains in their 'chronicles'". He argues that exile can produce "rancor and regret, as well as a sharpened vision". What has been left behind can either be "mourned" or can be used "to provide different set of lenses". Said asserts that "exile and memory go together"; it depends on how a person remembers his past and how he uses it to see the future(18). Certainly, the event of partition had created an insurmountable vacuum in the social and religious lives of the immigrants. Zakir, as a migrant in a new country, becomes an epithet of trauma. He and his friends do not find any sense of affiliation with the new people and the country due to the underlying socio-political divides. This maladjustment forces Zakir to take refuge in his memories.

Zakir recollects the scattered events of the wars, partition and the time of curfews via a journal and letters. His journal captures the days of tumult, disillusionment and fear preceding the war of '71. Moreover, it also depicts his emotional journey, composed of memories of folktales, alleys, places and platforms. According to Zeleza, writing is "an act of healing, of remembering, of recreating and returning to the elusive home", to give meaning to the loss and "fragmented life" that is "out of place"(19). The memories of bygone times plague Zakir's mind as collages of scattered thoughts. His constantly finds himself asking the same questions throughout the novel: where does he begin? Where does the forest of his memories begin? The image of the forest is of great significance in Hussain's writing. On the one hand, it symbolizes the emotional state of his characters as dense, thick, and mysterious, like a forest with no boundaries. On the other hand, the forest stands as a sign of desolation of an ideal "Basti" that has turned into a forest, augmented with a traumatic history.

Along with a source of remembering and healing, writing for a migrant is also a political act of resistance. Language gains efficacy through the domain in which it is used. A conscious use of a foreign

language is a means to engage the colonizer, both linguistically and psychologically. But Hussain shows a political resistance by writing in Urdu. Due to its “inherited colonial legacy of repression and censorship” Pakistan has not treated well those who wrote in Urdu. Another possible reason for it can be Pakistan’s own “ideological confusions and political troubles”(20). But Hussain emerged as an Urdu fiction writer without paying heed to these problems. The study of mythology and folklore are sources of inspiration for him. He eluded the lure of modernity, preferring primitive civilizations to define his work.

Hussain highlights the passage and subsequent loss of time, by creating timelessness in the sequence of events which according to him was not a conscious effort. His characters simultaneously live in the present time as well as in the time suspended inside old, locked houses. Zakir says to himself: “But time doesn’t pass! It keeps passing... It keeps hovering around. And houses never stay empty. When those who lived in them go away, the time lives on in the houses.”(21) These lines explain the importance of keys, which are not merely the keys to a house but “a trust” that Zakir has been given by his father to guard. These are keys to the earth which has protected them and shown them kindness. According to Maulana, the earth follows a person even when a person leaves it. “Even when cities are left behind,” he says, “they don’t stay behind. They seize on you even more. When the earth slips out from under your feet, that’s when it really surrounds you. The grasp of the earth is no doubt strong”(22).

Hussain, in many of his interviews, talks about the aforementioned magical force in the earth. In addition to this bunch of keys to the sacred piece of earth, Abba Jan’s other lost assets include a few pages from Imam Sajjad’s prayer book (the son of Hazrat Hussain R.A.), a piece of clay from Najaf and a rosary made from the clay of Karbala. Though all these things are memories that belong to his past life in Rupnagar, they are also references to the unfaithfulness of Umayyads to the grandson of Holy Prophet (PBUH). Abba Jan articulates:

“Zakir’s mother! What is there left now that’s good to talk about? Don’t you see what’s happening in Pakistan?” As he spoke, he picked up a book stained with mold. He opened it and looked inside, then handed it to him and said, “It’s a collection of Hazrat Sajjad’s prayers. Keep it carefully.” He stopped and thought for a moment, then said, “A questioner asked, ‘Oh best of those who offer prayer! In what state did the morning find you?’ He replied, ‘I swear by the Provider, the morning found me tormented by the Umayyads.’” As he spoke, Abba Jan grew sad, and said, “Son, from



then to now, that morning has continued.” He fell silent, then said, “And it will continue until the Appearance.” (23)

Aba jan is referring to the fact that man is fated to be betrayed by life. The father of Zakir (Maulana Sahib) was a whole culture in himself, opposed to the “innovations” of the modern era. He even had stopped offering prayers in the local mosque after the electricity been installed there. Throughout his life, he followed the culture of his time, its fixed values and traditions. On the contrary, Zakir becomes a symbol of loss. He, along with his physical balance, loses the balance of his mind. Where he once walked confidently upon the new land of Pakistan, he later stumbles upon the same earth. He states, “It’s a strange thing. I’m walking along here, and the sound of my footsteps is coming from over there—from where—? Or perhaps I’m here, and I’m walking somewhere else—? Where—? Where am I walking? On what earth are my footsteps falling”(24). The prevailing sense of disillusionment makes him doubtful of his own existence. He fails to comprehend his present identity and feels like an impostor inside his own body. For him, there is turmoil inside of him, while the outer world goes about its normal business. He broods, “Other people’s history can be read comfortably, the way a novel can be read comfortably. But my own history? I’m on the run from my own history, and catching my breath in the present. Escapist. But the merciless present pushes us back again toward our history”(25).

The trauma of dislocation turns out to be an undying reality for the immigrants. For them, everything including the earth, the sky, days, nights, places, and people, has been replaced, “the goodness and sincerity gradually died out from the days, how the days came to be filled with misfortune and the nights with ill omen”(26). Therefore, in *Basti*, transition is not an immediate shift, rather it is a gradual process. A surface analysis of the circumstances of Zakir and his family’s circumstances offers the idea that they have not faced any physical violence and bloodshed during migration from India to Pakistan. However, Hussain’s characters, especially Zakir, explicitly represent the scars of trauma. They are physically and psychologically dislocated migrants who, after surviving traumatic events of partition, emerge, unrecognizable to themselves. For this very reason, Zakir turns to history to erase the foreignness that has become a part of him.

Jennifer Yusin labels the aforementioned conflict as the “geography of trauma” of the mind, in which “the borders that separate and constitute nations in the subcontinent are also the indelible scars of trauma inscribed into the landscape of South Asian identity, both collective and individual”(27). Similarly, Zakir’s consciousness has

moved away from the world outside towards this internal 'geography of trauma'. Memories come to his mind in the form of places and geographical signs to erase the loss of dislocation and lack of familiarity. He remains unable to reconcile his past with his present. Trauma leaves its overriding impact upon the psyche of Zakir and other immigrants.

The loss is elucidated, lightened, and dignified by the return of memories. These memories become the source of adjustment to that loss in the consciousness of the displaced subjects. However, in case of Zakir, the trauma turns out to be a reflective psychological state. It numbs his senses and renders him unable to think cohesively. Contrarily, Afzal, Salamat and Zawar are emotionally aggressive youngsters who remain unable to control their sentiments. In this regard, Nishat Zaidi in his review of *Basti* writes, "In the characters of Afzal, Irfan, Zawar and Salamat, we see the disillusionment of the young Pakistanis with the unwinding process of history. Zakir's reaction, however, is different. Being a teacher of history, he has a more contemplative attitude, surrounded by the sounds of sloganeering, shouting and bullets, Zakir withdraws into himself"(28).

The migrants of 1947's partition had hardly got themselves settled when the dreamland shattered and there opened up a new storm of bloodshed, war, violence, homelessness, and rootlessness. Hussain, in his conversation with Asif Farukhi reveals that the past sprang to life within him again when the dream shattered, the dream that the Muslims of the subcontinent brought with them to the new homeland. Afzal, who in the beginning of the novel is overly energetic to change the world, loses his initial spark toward the end of the text. He, after his forceful speeches, suddenly realizes that ugly people have let the beauty of Pakistan rot. He, therefore, proposes that everyone must work together to make it beautiful again. Salamat shows his mistrust for the new homeland by migrating to a foreign country instead of staying in Pakistan.

In *Basti*, the immigrants wish to recollect their broken dreams in a dimension of displacement because their migration to a new land has become a perpetual pain. It is because "trauma is "always about something prior... the nature of trauma is such that it happens too soon and is accompanied by a belated and fragmented understanding" thus it is "forever trapped in the gap between knowing and unknowing"(29). The experiences of Hussain's characters lack uniformity and exist in fragments. Salman Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands*, talks about exiles recollecting their homeland like a 'broken mirror', every fragment of which offers a different reflection. Therefore, when a migrant subject looks at his past through the new position of an exile, he regards his

homeland with a different perspective. In this 'broken mirror' one can only see fragments of one's identity and homeland. These broken images then create deracination for émigrés.

Immigrants are always trying to grasp their roots and the beginning of their histories. This search for roots generates new meanings and spaces, in which float the fluid identities of the exiled. Zakir observes people's gait and surmises that the old identities of people around him are lost. He also evaluates his own walk and wonders if he too should be walking like the others. It suggests Zakir's psychosomatic state in post-partition Pakistan. For him, the ashes of the 1947 partition are rekindled by the events of 1971. Zakir feels his past catching up to him and he oscillates between pre- and post-partition days. The text delineates individual trauma, linked to the collective historical trauma of dislocation. This link becomes a condition of 'eternal recurrence': the idea that the universe and all existence has been recurring and will continue to recur in the same pattern, an infinite number of times across infinite time or space. Zakir observes history repeating itself and realizes that "what has already happened will happen again... That is already occurring." (30) Nostalgia, therefore, is an inescapable repercussion of migration, a literary device critical for Hussain.

*Basti*, after giving voice to war and violence, ends with a sustained silence prevailing over Zakir and the others he knows, sitting "like statues... in the deepening dusk of the evening, three motionless shadows" (31). Everything around them sinks into stillness. Speech sometimes even fails the narrative itself, the stories it tells proving too overpowering for words, but this continued silence sometimes morphs into something valuable as it does in *Basti*. Silence has an intense impact upon the surroundings, producing new signs, quite literally in the text. Afzal directs everyone to be silent so that they might see a sign. However, it is not described what sort of sign it could be. This sign seems to be a torchbearer of hope among those of hopelessness, and this is how Hussain chooses to end his narrative. Afzal addresses his friends, in the graveyard, as: "Fellows, signs always come at just these times... this is the time for a sign" (32). Hence, the ending of *Basti* becomes a possibility of a revelation that may split the hovering clouds of darkness and silence. Although, the ending is opposed to the reader's expectations, it stands as hopeful, albeit unresolved.

*Basti*, therefore, is an account of a broken reality, a testimony to the suffering underlining the creation of Pakistan. In a conversation with Rakshanda Jalil, Hussain recounts the experience of displacement in the contemporary context, by stating the heart-wrenching hollowness created

by the fall of ideals. He appears to be of the view that people should learn from their mistakes in the past. We, however, did not. Perhaps this is why history too, recurs in futile cycles. Hence, to recall is to recollect and assemble different components of one's identity to give them legitimacy and a "sense of cultural identity" (33). It is a continuous cycle of departures, arrivals, and eternal returns.

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1. Bose 12; Ray Chaudhury 5653
2. Stamelman, 422
3. Caruth "Unclaimed Experience" 16-17
4. Caruth "Trauma" 7
5. Kolk and Hart 159
6. 422-26
7. Jalil, TSLA x
8. Raj 31
9. Raj 30
10. 207
11. *Basti* 3
12. Asaduddin 2
13. *Basti* 70- 71
14. Asaddudin 3
15. Hussain qtd. in Memon 133-34
16. Hussain qtd. in Memon 377
17. *Basti* 109
18. 15-30
19. 3
20. Aslam 2
21. *Basti* 188
22. 102
23. 178
24. 106
25. 68
26. 73
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