



Reading migration, refugees and memory of home

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Abstract: This article explores the sociological and cultural notions of the partition of India and the representations of it through literature. It analyses a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that organizes our concept of the partition and the dispersion of a huge mass of people across borders. The sentiments of the Bengali diaspora after the partition would be the crux of the study in this paper. During the partition of India, an estimate of about twelve million people in South Asia switched their homelands by starting a massive migration. The issue of trauma and triumph of the partition, search for a lost identity, the quest of re-building the new home and the nostalgic feeling will form an indispensable part of the paper.

This paper aims at analyzing the migration and other diasporic dimensions through the writings of well-known South Asian novelists with partition of India as the backdrop. It highlights the different changes that have occurred after partition and the emotional turbulences that were faced by the migrants after partition.

Index Terms: Partition, South Asian Diaspora, refugees, displacement, loss of homeland.

Introduction

Since the inception of mankind, human beings are on a continuous process of movement. Leaving homelands, searching for new lives and re-construction of identities have been widely linked up with the process of migration. Technically, this process of migration and dispersion is termed as 'Diaspora'. The term 'Diaspora' derived from a Greek word, 'scattering dispersion' means "the movement, migration or scattering of people away from an established homeland"¹, or people dispersed to more than one location. As Robin Cohen (2008,x) defines 'Diaspora' as communities living together in one country who 'acknowledge' that

"The old country'- a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions... a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background."

The objective of this study would be to focus on some of the migrants who have been forced to leave their own country on political grounds resting on religious identities. My focus of study will be on history of the mass migration that happened across the borders of the Indian subcontinent with the partition as the backdrop; and thereby on the plight of the refugees who were compelled to leave their homelands. It will trace their diasporic sensibilities through a critical appreciation of the works of fiction and films of notable writers working on the same genre.

As India was divided on religious parameters, many people had to leave their own homelands and cross the borders to secure their lives and identity. The refugees carried a sense of displacement, a sense of belonging to their own country which they had left behind. A new homeland was never easy for them to settle down; it was more of an estranged land where the imposed migrants were identified as merely 'refugees' and more overtly, a burden on the government and the already existing residents of the state. The migration across the borders was rampant; Muslims from India to Pakistan and Hindus from Pakistan to India. People were left

¹ Diaspora as defined in Merriam Webster Dictionary.

homeless, bordering on the two states and the human race was a witness to the demarcation of borders and formations of new sovereign states into eminence.

Diasporic representations have found its way through diasporic writings; and they are remarkable for the articulation of various themes of migration, displacement, memory, home and identity. Some of the most distinguished authors who have written on partition and the other related dimensions and I would like to deal with are *East West* by Sunil Gangopadhyay and *Dayamoyee's Story* by Sunanda Sikdar. Literature and fiction are supposedly the best forms of representation of a particular phenomenon, and while talking about partition; there have been innumerable reproductions of the theme through literature and cinema. Critical study on Partition and its aftermath has emerged as one of the most powerful domains of study in recent times. The partition in the east has always been a neglected domain of study and particularly its literature, although some recent works have been made quite noticeable marks in the pages of history.

Therefore, prior to delving deeper into the intricate themes of partition and the sensibilities of the Bengali diasporic mass, the novels would need a brief introduction of themselves.

1. *East West* (2000)

East- West, a Bengali novel (*Purba-Paschim*) by Sunil Gangopadhyay, and later translated by Enakshi Chatterjee, is 'set against the backdrop of the highest exodus in human history- the 1947 partition of India'. That a newly born country could exist as two geographically separated units was an unheard event. This novel is a record of those tumultuous times in East Pakistan as well as Indian Bengal extending up to the Naxal revolution in Bengal and the 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh. The setting of the novel is basically set against the backdrop of the partition of India and its aftermath. The porous borders had left millions of refugees migrating to and fro the countries of East Pakistan and India. The story revolving around two college friends, both Bengali though one Hindu, Pratap Majumdar and the other Muslim, Mamun, soon takes it into its 'expanding orbit' other characters, families and other issues. The two friends are drifted apart, separated by the political divide, and then, eventually is caught up in their own problems which centre on the political and social problems of the two countries.

The setting of the novel is in Calcutta and the other regions of East Bengal. Though East Bengal and West Bengal had cultural and linguistic dissimilarities, both the countries had to endure their different destinies. The first part of the novel depicts the bustling life of Pratap Majumdar, who lives in Calcutta with his family comprising of his wife, daughter, two sons and a step brother. Pratap, who once belonged to the affluent family of Malkhanagar, presently situated in East Bengal, had to leave his land and travel to Calcutta to earn and survive, while Mamun stayed back.

Gangopadhyay, in this novel speaks of the 'unspoken and the inevitable bitter conclusion' - perhaps the twain can never meet'. Under the misleading simple surfaces are hidden rough terrains dealing with complex human issues and sentiments. The novel also tries to delve deeper into the East and West-'initially a political demarcation on the map but the West recedes further as we also get an insight of young people migrating to the US and UK leaving their ageing parents at home'.

Therefore, this voluminous piece of writing by Sunil Gangopadhyay, forms a well-written partition novel set at a particular place and time, gradually rising to the level of encompassing the wide extent of 'human emotions and cultural encounters'.

2. *Dayamoyee's Story* by Sunanda Sikdar

Dayamoyee's Story, a Bengali novel (*Dayamoyeer Katha*), by Sunanda Sikdar, and later translated by Anchita Ghatak; narrates the story of a girl named Dayamoyee in 1950, who lived in one of the remotest villages of East Pakistan, Dighpait, with her widowed aunt, Snehadata. It is more of an assortment of pictorial and vibrant images of a small girl's memoirs and what she encountered in her sojourn in Dighpait. The witness had long migrated from East Pakistan and have continued to live many fruitful years in one of the towns of Hindustan (India as has been generally addressed in the novel); while at the sudden death of her Dada (an old Muslim servant who used to serve her family), the 'floodgates of her memory'² had burst out; and what could be gained was a beautiful narration of the memoirs of Dayamoyee. This autobiographical encounter, narrated as a novel by Sunanda Sikdar, resides primarily on the religious conflicts, discord between Hindus and Muslims; the discrimination executed against the refugees and the small yet very crucial customs and cultural practices followed in rural Bengal. Dayamoyee's parents lived in India as they both were teachers in West Bengal and Dayamoyee was left under the patronage of her aunt; a distant cousin of Dayamoyee's father, till she was nearly twelve. During her stay at Dighpait, she observed the transformations that the village, Dighpait had encountered as many of their Hindu neighbours had started to leave East Pakistan and Muslims from India were coming in across the border.

This novel brings out the childhood of a *Kayastha*³ girl growing up secure under the protection and the comforting love of her aunt in the rural East Pakistan. It also investigates issues dealing with caste, class, religion and gender. This book was initially published in *Antahsar*, and was later awarded the Lila Puraskar by the University of Calcutta in 2008.

² References drawn from the Introduction of the novel *Dayamoyee's Story* by Sunanda Sikdar.

³ According to the caste system in Hinduism, *Kayastha*'s was an upper caste only after the Brahmins; and were treated with equal honour in rural areas.

Migration, memory and nostalgia

“Nostalgia is a hopelessly all-encompassing vice; and it is hopeless because it constructs a world that is never a ‘now’ but one that ‘was or ‘could have been’ (Hazarika 2008,9).

A migrant is always believed to be thriving at the mercy of the adopted homeland and its surroundings, while the memories of his left-out homeland survive in his heart. Nostalgic moments come up in *East West*, when Atin, Pratap Majumdar’s son had to abandon his country and migrate to the United States of America. Both the son and father had to leave their own countries under different reasons of their own, and usually turned nostalgic at rethinking about the past.

In the earlier part of the novel, Pratap’s sister, Supriti faced a widowhood at the untimely death of her husband and was almost driven out of her in-laws’ house, and she took refuge at Pratap’s residence. The duo reminisced their past, their home in Malkhanagar, “where they used to spend all their Puja holidays together. It was a distinctly different feeling with white puffs of cloud, the dropping of the seuli flowers in the morning, the fresh feel of the breeze and the aroma of the rice paddies. It was just an occasion to be together”. (*East West*, 144)

Pratap’s mother, Suhasini, was bearing the same bereavement that existed in Supriti. Suhasini, a widow had to leave Malkhanagar and settle down for the rest of her life in Deoghar, but had the intense desire to return back to her homeland and displayed inability to accept the new country as her homeland, their very own ‘*desh*’.

“Why can’t we go back to our own place? We have paddy from our own fields, our own fruits, and fish from our tanks. We could see the date palm juice and live well”. (*East West*, 146)

Similar to Suhasini, Supriti, at her death bed also wanted to return back to her home, her desired and long-lost homeland. Sikhdar’s novel, ‘a quasi-autobiographical’ one, carries a highly melodramatic undertone replete with vivid and vibrant images of rural East Bengal with partition as the backdrop. Sikhdar’s novel ‘*Dayamoyee’s story*’ comes up with a highly melodramatic undertone with various other issues to be dealt with. Contrary to the other two novels, Sikhdar has tried to bring in the metaphorical images while migration. Mythological connotations have been brought in repeatedly, with references of Lord Krishna leaving Brindavan and travelling to Mathura with Akrur. In fact the last chapter of the novel is named as ‘Krishna left with Akrur.... Forever’, when Daya leaves her home heading towards the unknown and the untrodden.

The memory of the lost and abandoned homeland seems to be occupying the minds of the migrants and the writers in their novels have well depicted it. Gangopadhyay brings out the nostalgia throbbing in Pratap’s heart. Dayamoyee, after migrating from East Pakistan to India still thought about her own country, in Dighpait but she never uttered the name of her country as it was lost to her memories. Pratap’s father never felt the urge to leave his own country and considered the idea of partition as rather vague and obsolete, yet after his death, his family had to travel to the other side of the border. East Pakistan, the homeland to millions always reminded them of vibrant countryside, freshness, abundance and exuberance in the families.

Quest for a new identity

For a migrant, the time and space are lost in time and, what remained were the remnants of the memory. Everything seems to be lost with time. Sunanda Sikhdar tried to bring out the similar agony and grief of the Muslims migrating from India to East Pakistan. Many such Muslim families also had to succumb to the same fate of imagining a new homeland in a new country. They were also compelled to leave their homeland in India and move to East Pakistan on religious motifs. Daya’s ‘maa’, though unwilling to frame any kind of alliance with the Muslims of the country, tried to comfort them with her own words of solace. She used to say, “Don’t cry, Achhar. Try to love our Dighpait. After all this too is on God’s earth. Yes, the king of Coochbehar is a big man but God is the king of all kings. You are in his kingdom. He listens to you whether you call him Allah or Ishwar. You have little brothers and sisters. Think of them and get a hold of yourself”. (*Dayamoyee’s Story*, 60). Though Sikhdar’s novel bears a melodramatic undertone in every single episode, it beautifully brings out the vivid and lively images of all the characters. Daya’s ‘maa’ a devout Hindu widow, felt disgusted at Muslims pouring in from India and occupying the abandoned Hindu homes. She usually addressed them as ‘ripuchi’ (a refugee), oblivious of the fact of becoming a refugee herself once she migrates to India.

Daya faced lots of dissimilarities after she travelled to India. She, herself could not adjust to the new country and its linguistic standards. She often got involved in petty fights with her own brothers and sisters. The new land became the foster land for her, whereas the land of her birth inevitably was her own homeland and country for her. Similar to all the migrants across the borders and the survivors of partition, Sunanda Sikhdar, the author also experienced the same pangs of trauma at departing from her homeland. Sunil Gangopadhyay has also tried to depict the same in his novel.

These issues have created havoc in the past and have loosened and fragmented India. In this discussion where I have analyzed the three novels on the basis of certain diasporic issues that erupted after Partition in India, with its own local customs, habit and culture within its own historical processes. ‘Diaries, reminiscences, as well as fiction’ are some of the remarkable sources to look at partition through the perspective of the survivors of the tragedy. The narratives from East and West Pakistan has somewhat overshadowed the

gust of Partition at the north-east frontier of India, where people have felt the similar thrust of violence and discrimination at being ousted from their homelands.

Literary representations from Bengal and the North-eastern zone of India has remained quite an unexplored genre, with respect to the popularity that the narratives of West Pakistan had gained⁴. Recent studies in literature of Bengal and North-east have taken into representing the era more seriously, 'contextualized in its time' represents the time. A current study is also being conducted on the memory and traumatic events, while the post-partition years of Bengal is limited to the domain of complex questions arising out of livelihood, identity and place of sojourn.

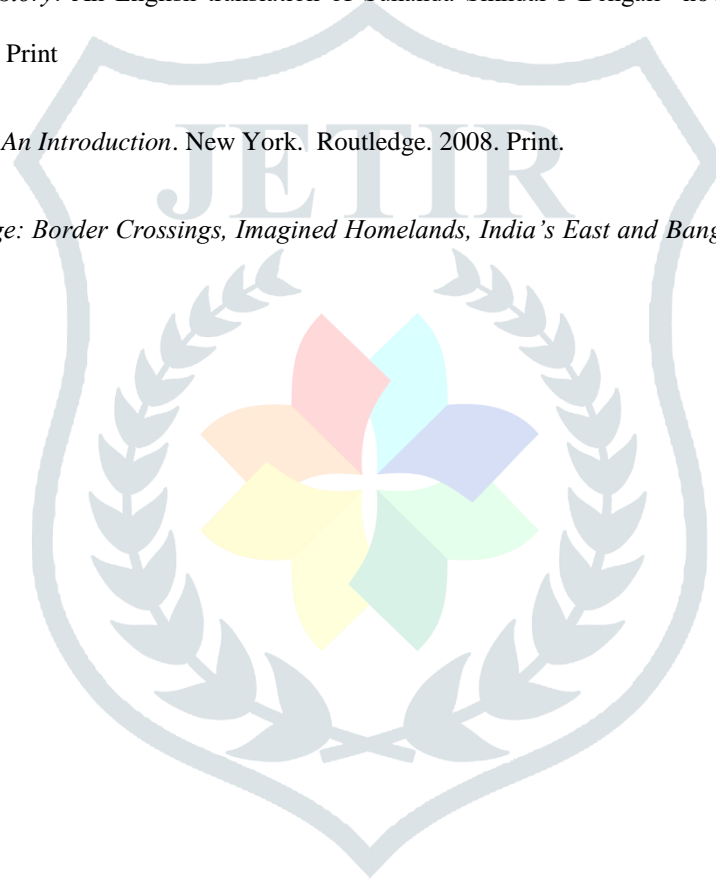
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⁴ The works of Bengali authors written in bangla have gained momentum with depictions of experiences of those who had survived the partition and migration and also those who have stayed back. remarkable among those would be *Dayamoyeer Kotha*, Sunanda Sikhdar, 2000, Adhir Biswas, *Deshbhager Smriti*, 4 vols., Calcutta, 2005; Shanta Sen, *Pitamohi* Calcutta,2009, Prafulla Ray, *Keya Patar Nouko* , Calcutta 1970. Other pieces of non-fiction has also found its place in locating the trauma in Bengal.