



DIVIDED MEMORIES, SHARED HISTORIES: HINDU-MUSLIM EXPERIENCES IN THE PARTITION LITERATURE OF TWO BENGALS (1947-1971)

Faruk Sk 

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Author Details:

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Dept. of History,
Vidyasagar University,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Faruk Sk

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Abstract

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 not only divided a geographical territory but also fractured centuries of shared cultural and religious coexistence between Hindus and Muslims. This study explored how Partition literature from both East and West Bengal represents the intertwined yet divergent memories of those two communities. Drawing on novels, short stories, memoirs, and oral testimonies, the research investigates how writers reconstruct trauma, displacement and belonging through the lens of religious identity and collective memory. The analysis highlights how Hindu and Muslim narrative of migration, violence, and loss are shaped by differing national and historical contexts- India and East Pakistan yet are connected through shared emotional landscapes of home and nostalgia. By comparing literary representations across the two Bengals, the study aims to uncover how memory functions as both a site of division and reconciliation. Ultimately, the research argues that Partition literature serves not merely as a record of communal rupture but as a medium through which the enduring bonds of shared history and humanity between Hindus and Muslims continued to be remembered, reimagined, and reinterpreted.

Keywords: *Partition of Bengal, Hindu-Muslim relations, Memory and Identity, Migration and displacement, Two Bengal literature, Collective trauma*

Introduction

Partition as an event of dreadful consequences deeply affected the lives and minds of hundred and thousands of people who came directly and indirectly under its shadow. Millions were rendered homeless. Its pain was inflicted through the trope of literature maybe because the reality was so harsh. We have to vast literature cannon of Partition Literature about the division of Panjab, but we can hardly count the article written on the Partition of Bengal. With the time of Bengal Partition discourse has evolved through various stages, each having a different area of focus. History told us that when the British left undivided Bengal they separated it into two new countries India and Pakistan on the basis of the two- nation theory. This division caused massive religious identity- based mass exodus in different parts of the subcontinent. This decision gripped the subcontinent with communal tension and riots immediately, after the creation of those two new states.¹ Communal violence led to killing of thousand of people and millions were displaced in search of a new home away from home. Partition made their homeland hostile as they moved to the other side of the border in search of peace and security. The Partition was traumatic, and people were compelled to leave their homeland to sustain themselves bearing physical violence, humiliation and sexual assaults in an unknown land.

After the Partition in 1947 and the Liberation war, the Indian sub- continent has witnessed many political changes and mass migration. The creation of a new country was greeted with joy but nonetheless Bengalis all over the world and in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere carried a sense of loss because Partition does not only mean an added line to draw on the map, it also symbolizes a person's alienation from his family, society, culture and most importantly from himself. Therefore, the question whether people can be defined by borders, language and religions due to dual migration histories in Eastern India no longer remains an unanswered question today. But what is important is that this leads to the issue of critical identity formation for the Bengalis with the creation of Bangladesh after the war of Liberation in 1971 that led to the greatest population displacements in the history of the world. The consequence of migration was the massive exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan but nonetheless a smaller yet significant migration of Muslims from West Bengal to East Pakistan also took place.² However, the reason behind the mutual migration between the two countries from East Pakistan to West Bengal and vice-versa was because of the closeness of the two communities and their shared language. The intimacy 'epar' Bangla 'opar' Bangla always made them a common linguistic and cultural unit.³ The relationship between the two communities however, started to change in the aftermath of the declaration of Partition when the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement resulted in a rift between the Hindu Zamindars and Muslim

peasants in 1905, especially in East Bengal. Later, in 1947 during the second Partition this relationship between the Hindus and Muslims further deepened the division between the two countries.³

In the period between 1946 and 1971 the Indian subcontinent went through a series of divisions and as a result million were displaced from East Bengal to West Bengal and particularly to Calcutta. In the years following the Partition people continued to migrate even after six decades of independence. The exodus people who came to India in 1947 took place in different directions.⁴ Few crossed into the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys due to its proximity to East Bengal, another wave of people went to Tripura, Mizoram, and Manipur. The displaced Bengalis who came to India tried to settle in the border districts because the geographical features were similar. From the starting of the Noakhali riots in 1946 and the communal upheaval of 1950 in Barisal, there resulted a long stream of refugees. By the first decades of the Partition almost 1.25 million people had crossed over the West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and other states in the North East and eventually in the 25 years after independence the number had reached five million.⁵ From 1947 to 1964 data estimates suggest that almost 1.5 million Muslims migrated from West Bengal to East Pakistan but nonetheless not much has been said about them. In recent times, a few studies have come out as when writer Joya Chatterjee tried to focus on the Partition of Bengal.⁶ but even through the attention was on Bengal, most of the works concentrated on Hindus migrating from East to West Bengal and never the other way around. Critics such as Mahbubar Rahaman and Willem Van Scendel said that the reason behind the absence of writing on the large reverse flow of refugees to East Pakistan is far from easy but the higher literacy rates and sound educational background among the group of early refugees to India, Pakistan's focus on refugees to West Pakistan and a general disinterest in the refugee problem in post-1971. Bangladesh definitely played a role into it. Moreover, it was not until 1952 that Passports and Visas were introduced and as a result much cross-border travel including settler migration, completely escaped the notice of the new state and was never systematically recorded.⁷

Historiography and literature are conceived as complementary disciplines, since both go hand in hand dealing with or reconstructing the past. Yet as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his essay "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition", memory is far more complicated than what historians can recover and therefore it can throw challenges to the investigator-historian who approaches the past with one single agenda. In the memoir we see that the tragedy of the Partition that caused mass migration was not limited to Hindus and Muslims dialectics only but rather it involved other binaries such as Zamindars and landless peasants, widows and married women, the Brahmins and the Kayastha, local Bengalis and the Bengalis located outside West Bengal.⁸ *A Life Long Ago* therefore can be read as an alternative version of history as it can be analysed with respect to its use to different voices through the novelist's emphasis on how history is merely a human construct and how literature brings light to silenced histories by portraying the polyphony of colourful characters. This beautiful autobiography first published in January 2008 narrates the story of ten-year-old Dayamoyee, who was raised in a remote village named Dighpati, in Jamalpur, East Pakistan with her paternal parents lived in West Bengal due to their occupational reasons.⁹ She grew up in close affinity to and under the guardianship of the trusted family servant, a Muslim, whom she lovingly called 'Majam Dada'. She watches with bewilderment the transformation of her village Dighpati which has become part of a new country, East Pakistan and people she knows and loves prepare to leave for India. People from both sides were mutually exchanging and selling land, cattle, homes and moving to the country of their religious affiliation. Soon, Dayamoyee's aunt decides to move out for Hindustan after selling the land and property at a good price and the novel then continues to narrate Dayamoyee's struggles to make sense of the chaos around her as life carried on.¹⁰

However, it is when the news of her most loving Majam Dada's death reached her much later after it happened that prompted her to put down her memories into words even though she tried her best to deny her own existence between the years 1951 to 1960. Moving to India in 1961, to join her family in Calcutta, where she had to acquire the new identity of Sunanda and leave behind the past enshrined in the name Daya. Therefore, the tragedy of this inheritance that was decided a few years after her birth left her being an inheritance of uprootedness, a nostalgia and angst for the homeland and a performance of an imagined, constructed identity imposed upon her by force.¹¹ The society in Dighpati, Dayamoyee's native village was still a feudal one and the story revolves around her family memories. The autobiography describes the pre-migration life in East Bengal even after the declaration of the Partition. Dighpati was going through a disturbing transition but one mostly untouched by any sort of communal violence. The consequence of the migration was massive the migration of Hindus from the East Pakistan, but also a smaller yet significant movement of Muslims from West Bengal to East Pakistan. People were leaving for India forever quietly wiping the tears. People had to face eventual eviction of the Hindu families as their number was decreasing day by day.¹²

Partition events have different meanings for different people as categorization can be done according to various criteria such as time of arrival, causes of dislocation, class, gender, religion, ethnic or language group or the course of post-arrival life. But, Bengal Partition Studies in the subcontinent has not received adequate attention and therefore throws up faulty perspectives as Asis Nandi writes in his foreword to *Mapmaking*¹³ on why there is a need to re-examine the Bengal Partition stories from the two Bengals with fresh perspective. Therefore, I have chosen narratives from both West Bengal and Bangladesh explore fresh views and adopt new approach making a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics and therefore question the homogeneity of nationalist discourse. The narratives document and recognize the importance of personal memory to demonstrate the plurality of how we remember the Partition inflected through themes of gender, caste, and class variation.

Therefore, this article deals with six translated short stories with specific focus on the Partition by writers from West Bengal namely Ritwik Ghatak's 'The Road', Manik Bandyopadhyay's 'The Final Solution', Pratibha Basu's 'Flotsam and Jetsam', Dibyendu Palit's 'Alam Own House', Atin Bandyopadhyay's 'The Infidel', Sunanda Bhattacharya's 'The Narrative of Kerech

Buri', and six stories by writers from Bangladesh namely Syed Waliullah's 'The Tale of a Tulsi Plant', Hasan Hafijur Rahaman's 'Two More Deaths', Akhtaruzzaman Elias's 'Another Room, Another Voice', Selina Hossain's 'An Evening of Prayer', Imdadul Haq Milans's 'The Ballads of Sonadas Boul', Hasan Azizul Haq's 'The Cage' from the book of *Mapmaking* (2011) edited by Debjani Sengupta. These stories explore some of the very important theme of the 1947 Partition the fragility of borders in the construction of identities and the continuities and disruption of memory. The literary canons dealing with the Partition in Bengal are comparatively larger than its historiography, but its effect has still remained unknown for the readers outside of Bengal. In recent times, a few studies have come out like Debjani Sengupta's *Mapmaking*, Willem Van Screndel's 'I am not a Refugee: Rethinking Partition Migration', Joya Chatterjee's *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*,¹⁵ Jashodhara Bagchi and Subharanjan Dasgupta's edited book *Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* contains interesting and few rarely known material.¹⁶

Some of the short stories also often share common themes of partition/loss of homeland and interpret how 'home' is a problematic symbol for the uprooted refugees as eventually Muslim migrants try to start a new life after crossing into East Bengal or Bangladesh and similarly Hindus cross into West Bengal. All the short stories represent either the themes of communal violence, pain and suffering or harmony and humility. All these partition stories also deal with various sub- themes and the impact of Partition and the turbulent times of the ordinary people in all its totality. These stories present the tragedy of the marginalized through different angles and reflect them in different ways and provide ruptured experience. For example, in a short story like Atin Bandopadhyay's "The Infidel" we see how violent communal killings erupted during the Partition.

Manik Bandopadhyay's "The Final Solution" is also a story of the suffering of a displaced and uprooted refugee family but with a difference. In this story Mallika, her husband Bhushan, their two-and a half-year son Khokon and her widowed sister-in law somehow survive and reach India. They take shelter on the railway station and spend a few days and nights in an unhealthy and overcrowded environment.¹⁷ such scenes were common when hundred of people migrated from East Pakistan to India and huddled together like herds of cattle in the railway stations. Many men from the different 'Help Societies' or organisations visit and express their concern over the migrants' difficulties but none the less many people like Pramatha accompanied by Ramlochan try to use such needy people like Mallika for their own profit. They promised a job ton Mallika and fulfil the primary needs of her family. However, very soon Mallika could sense the nature of the job she has been appointed to after seeing a married woman. He is the offender in guise of sincerity, and Mallika accepted the fact that Pramatha was going to engage her in prostitution. The pathetic conditions of the family and the hunger of the child forced Asha, the sister-in law, who was not ready to get into prostitution even if it meant her death to go Pramatha when he sends for Mallika is the one wanted. The story thus, depicts the critical condition of the women who were the most exploited class during and after the Partition.

Pratibha Basu's "Flotsam and Jetsam" is also a story about the suffering of women survivors after and during Partition. The country was in the grip of terror and the protagonist of the story, Bindubasini had to migrate to India with her widowed daughter-in law and two grandchildren. She had plenty of property but leaving all of it to Jamir, her Muslim tenant she left the country wearing whatever gold and carrying as little as possible. The story depicted the horror of the situation as 'million forced their way through the gap, squashing small children and trampling over pregnant women. Taking advantages of the circumstances, some men slyly stroke the bodies of girls and women or sneaked away rippling off the daily sustenance that people carried in the folds of cloths tied round their waist.'¹⁸ However, after two old days of untold misery, struggling against all such odds, Bindubasini with her daughter-in law and two grandchildren set foot on Indian soil I a state almost bereft of life with other destitute families. They took shelter in a soldier's camp. They hope that all their troubles would surely come to end once they entered the borders of Hindustan where so many volunteers, social workers and charitable institution abounded providing milk to the children and flattened rice and molasses to the grown-ups. But even after all these the condition of the refugees who was deteriorating day by day. On an average, 'forty-eight children.... Of four to each of the twelve families, remained stuck to their mothers, face buried in their breast. Babies sucked the nipples dry. The starved and exhausted men and women, collapsed on the ground, one after the other like felled wood'. Men search for work and women look for service as domestic helps. Small children started begging and unfortunately to add to her difficulties Bindubasini's ten-tear old granddaughter Balu suffers from high fever and dies. He takes them to his Ashram is an isolated and unfamiliar part of Calcutta and provides her twenty rupees and tempts her widowed daughter-in law Uttara with a job offer to get rid of their destitution.

Sunanda Bhattacharya's "The Narrative of Kerech Buri" revolve around Hemantabala, who was a dark- skinned poor old women with a large bone underneath, nose broad and flat, and dull eyes. She was left alone in East Bengal when her nephews and relatives crossed into India. However, she was a skilled cook and could work like a horse. She began selling *Kerech oil* (Kerosene oil) and eventually becomes popular as 'kerech buri.' However, one day after having heavy lunch she fell sick and died to acute dehydration. Probodh, a far relative of Hemantabala performed the funeral rites and everybody sat watching attentively. If only Hematabala had commanded so much attention while she was alive.¹⁹

Imdadul Haq Milan's "The Ballads of Sonadas Boul", Sonadas Baul used to sing in the market and beg, so people called him a *Baul*. He later works in Gagan Babu's paddy godown. Gagan Babu was one of the well-to-to Hindus who still lived in East Bengal and refused to leave his old ancestral business. But Gagan Babu hoped to join his family in Calcutta eventually. However, this made Sonadas think of his unsustainable future, but he never spoke about it to anyone. Gagan Babu would also help the traders to fulfil their lust for women. At last, Gagan Babu sold his godown and prepare to leave for Calcutta and to join his family. When he left Sonadas Boul felt an uneasy pain in his chest. He was left alone in his world and there were very few places for him to go to.²⁰

Ritwik Ghatak's "The Road" portrays the agony and pain of a young Bengali man, Emdad who is forced to flee his home to escape the riot. His house has been occupied by a refugee old woman and her grandson from East Bengal. He takes shelter in a refugee camp but loses his son to violence there. "The Road" elucidates this unanswered question 'who is the enemy?'. The story depicts people like Emdad who are only left with the nostalgic memory of his native soil and the shock of the migration. This short story is concerned with the sorrows of the migration, metaphorically represented by the child's nostalgic song about the beauty of their land that they had to leave.²¹

Dibyendu Palit's "Alam's Own House" is a beautiful story about Alam who was born in Calcutta, Park Circus but had to exchange their home with a Hindu family of East Bengal, Dhaka after Bangladesh became an independence nation state. Ananta Sarkar Sanyal and Alam's family exchanged their property with each other. Later, Alam also had to leave for Dhaka after the sudden news of his father's death. However, he remained in touch with Raka, Ananta Sekhar's daughter through letters and Alam never forget that he was born in Calcutta. Three years later, Alam was in India for a seminar but he was more excited to have finally got the chance to meet his friend Raka, whom he secretly loved.²² While coming with his friend Feroz in the flight he had an argument with Feroz who believed that the cultural identities of the two countries were separate. The fact of rootedness and uprootedness from the birth place because of religious affiliation made Alam's rational mind keep on looking for the answer the question like did tradition get wiped out of the movement one gained independence? An Alam would answer himself being the mouthpiece of the writer 'Religion is imposed as a fad, it is blind and therefore, easy to believe in. That journey was accomplished in despair and fear – the Calcutta they loved was no longer safe, communal riots made it more and more dangerous for the Muslim family to live in a locality surrounded by Hindus. Their beloved house in Park Circus, with the kanthalichampa tree near the front gate.²³ He reflects on Raka's letter that makes clear how the journeys will forever remain incomplete yet one's hands stretch out over the walls to touch and to embrace:

We had to change our address – this wall dispossessed us and
Many others too, before us. At the same times we would never have
Come to know each other- nor indulged in this love...now I am
Running away far from your love.... Keep in touch, if you want to.
If you write, I will write back. We know some things are a lie, but
We do go on, don't we.

Selina Hossain's "An Evening of Prayer" is also an example of how the attacks uprooted many Muslims and forced them to leave West Bengal in an overwhelming atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Selina Hossain captures the suffering of a few Muslims survivors who are on their way to a new nation, East Pakistan.²⁴ Hossain writes how Pushpita suffers from labor pain during her long journey to Rajshahi, East Pakistan. This story again depicts the deep sense of displacement and loss that the Partition caused ordinary Muslims. Every passenger from the boat escaped by different routes, they all lost everything and became refugees. Khala, the elder women from the boat lost sixteen members of her family few days back before the turmoil. They were hacked to death, their home looted... burnt down. The story primarily revolves around Pushpita and her family. Her husband Ahmed is a liberal Muslim who still believes in humanity and harmony. Ahmed's wife's and son's name (Pradipto) are common Hindu names that hint at his attitude to towards Hindu-Muslims unity. But their Muslim identity was enough to make them lose their home and their land. From now on, the new nation Pakistan was their real abode, where they would be sheltered. Finally, after extreme struggle Pushpita does manage to give birth to male child name Prateek. In Bangla language Prateek represents a symbol of humanity and harmony which Ahmed himself relied upon as Hossain writes.

Syed Waliullah's "The Tale of Tulsi Plant" is a remarkable story set when the entire country was convulsing under the impact of Partition. The story begins with a description of a large dislocate house in East Bengal where a few Muslim refugees from Calcutta had found asylum inside it. The empty house also symbolizes the untold story of uprootedness of the original inhabitants and becomes a new home for the refugees at they start settling in.²⁵ However, soon the Muslim refugees become worried by the discovery of a Tulsi plant in the yard since it is associated with Hindus who perform their morning and evening prayers around it. But the men in the house gradually accept the Tulsi plant as one of them and start nurturing it even when it seemed to have laid bare the secret soul of a Hindu family. The Tulsi plant remained unharmed marker of domesticity in a Bengali Hindu household. But ultimately after the government had requisitioned the house the gap of men became homeless once again. Hence, the Tulsi plant in the courtyard languishes once more as the refugees who had been forced to leave their homes in West Bengal and make a new home in a different country.

Hasan Azizul Haq's "The Cage" gives a glimpse of the minority Hindus who are left behind in East Bengal even after the Partition. Ambujakhyo and Sharojini would often indulge in arguments about living in East Bengal even after the country is partitioned. They suffer from the dilemma to leave or to die amidst the cloudy sky, cool rooms, the pond, white paths around it, the sweet smell of creepers Jamir Shaikh, Padma pishi to die within all this and the find life again. This story reveals that the refugees always tried to move somewhere that bore similarity to their country. But as they could not decide given the many loopholes of leaving the country they ultimately decide not to move. For people like Ambujakhyo it was nice to think about leaving homeland and cross over man-made Partition but not easy to do so.²⁶

Hasan Hafijur Rehman's "Two More Deaths", explores the theme of silence in Partition literature. Rehman's is a remarkable tale of a flight and death. The narrator, a middle-aged Muslim doctor, is travelling by train from Narayanganj to Bahadurabad when he notices a Hindu man entering the compartment with a woman is pregnant and in labor. Every jerk of the train convulses her body. The narrator waits with breathless anxiety, unable to do anything, made impotent by guilt. Agonizing moments pass

till the women crawls to the toilet.²⁷ The narrator waits to hear the wail of a newborn, but a deathly silence greets his ears. A significant motif in many stories of the Partition written in the years after 1971, is again the trope of the exile journey.

Atin Bandopadhyay's "The Infidel" begins when the entire population was in flight, making an escape into the darkness of the night when Paran was looking for his wife Kironi. Paran is being helped by Hashim and his wife Zubeda. The story dealt with a cordial relationship enjoyed by the two dominant communities of Muslims and Hindus before Partition. It was a dark time for humanity as he tried hard to save Paran or lose his self-respect, his humanity. This story further states how in certain regions not directly involved in the violence, killing and ethnic cleansing was endorsed to clear the minority population in the intensity of genocide.²⁸

Akhtaruzzaman Elia's "In Another Room, Another Voice" is about a journey undertaken from the other side. The protagonist Pradeep goes to his ancestral house in Bangladesh to visit a branch of his family who had opted to stay back after the Partition. Pradeep lives in Calcutta, but he is always restless and unable to settle down in one place.²⁹ His work takes him all over Northeast India and he often crosses over to Bangladesh. Their old house in Narayanganj is now bigger, where is Pishima, his father's sister, lives with her son and his family. Pradeep's journey through the familiar landscape is coloured by his memories and the newness of what he sees.

The stories by Dibyendu Palit, Hasan Hafijur and another by Akhtaruzzaman Elias written in 1970s, and separated by a national boundary, have remarkable similarities of theme and an ironic and indirect condemnation of the violence that Partition caused to the minority communities who were forced to abandon their homes for an uncertain future. Palit's protagonist is a Muslim in Calcutta while Elia's is a Hindu in Bangladesh, yet they represent the plurality of existence, a negation of Partition along religious and communal lines. These short stories from both the Bengalis thus testify that different people experienced the Partition in different ways. All the narratives encompass different themes of identity, home, nationhood, motherhood, women, the evocation of memory or nostalgia, silence about the complexities of the Partition and give a glimpse of new political realities of the state through significant analytical representations.³⁰

Conclusion

This article having set out to explore the dynamics of history through a critical examination of the autobiography and short stories written on the theme of 1947 and 1971 Partition, has also brought to the fore certain relations between historiography and literature. The literary pieces examined in this article offer an alternative depiction of everyday life rather than rely on the state-sponsored historiography and of powerful men's sentimental stories.³¹ This research argues that the partition was something more than a political divide. It had far-reaching socio, economic, psychological and cultural consequences on the lives of the migrants and concentrate on the life history of the marginalized people who migrated around the period 1947 and 1971 from West Bengal to East Bengal or vice versa in search of a safer place. The writers from West Bengal focus on the plight of thousands of refugees who had crossed over from East Bengal to West Bengal and their struggle for rehabilitation.³² In contrast the writings from East Bengal though the express certain misgivings are shown to welcome the Partition because it offered a space to claim a separate identity. This can be seen in Selina Hossain's story 'An Evening for Prayer' which is about a birth in transit and metaphorically the birth of a nation. Birth of a nation is followed by the child. This story revolves around the strengthening of the claim for a separate Bengali Muslim identity and nationalism. Partition literature of Bengal stands as a testament to resilience, remembrance, and reconciliation. It invites readers to recognize that borders may divide lands, but not memories; nations may be created overnight but the human longing for connection endured across generations.³³ In retelling the stories of Partition Hindu and Muslim writers alike affirm a universal truth that shared histories cannot be entirely divided, and that through memory and literature, the two Bengals remain forever intertwined.

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