Strangers ‘‘here and everywhere’’: the Social Discourse in the Literature of Partition

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> “Many besides Angel have learnt that the magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements but as to their subjective experiences."
>
> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

Abstract

The paper aims to focus how in a literary text, (here Sunil Ganguli’s *East West*) in contrast to any historical record, that is perceived to be distorted at times, through the subjective experiences of East Bengali refugees in West Bengal, a truthful account of dislocation and the consequent human tragedy caused by partition is created. How on part of the refugees, nostalgia for lost homeland causes inhibitions in developing the sense of belongingness to the new land is examined here in detail. To what extent the resettlement becomes a terribly problematic issue because of some crucial socio-political causes like Central Government’s discrimination against them, the hostile and unwelcoming attitude of the locals towards them, is relevantly discussed here. Furthermore, the refugees’ changing attitudes to their lost homeland and the place of migration over generations are captured here alongside their struggles to establish new identities at the foreign soil. More importantly, the author has tried to find out whether the displacement creates more challenges for the refugees in attaining new cultural identities in a new land or not, that is in other words, whether the displaced East Bengali community has to undergo the journey through the ‘in-between space’ of cultural hybridity or not (it happens to be a related crisis of dislocation), is the other major concern of the present paper.

Keywords: displacement, nostalgia, relocation, cultural identity

In August 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned into two independent nation states which immediately caused one of the greatest migrations in human history. The rearrangement of the map unleashed a torrent of bloodshed and violence scarcely seen before or since. An estimated fifteen million people were displaced with close to two million killed. Thus Partition forces millions of people to choose the life of exile. It is rightly said that

“Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent’’ (Dalrymple 2015). "Partition literature" embodies the pathos of dislocation, the insight of hardships that the common innocent people faced and endured. In his editorial in *The Pakistan Times,* 1947, Faiz Ahmad Faiz observes: “The Muslims have got their Pakistan, the Hindus and Sikhs their divided Punjab and Bengal, but I have yet to meet a person, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh who feels enthusiastic about the future. I can’t think of any country whose people felt so miserable on the eve of freedom and liberation.” Partition writers have tried to record the loss of home and identity, trauma and violence that people undergo during and after partition. There have been significant engagements with it in Bengali novels that throw light on the efforts of the East Bengali refugees to rehabilitate themselves in West Bengal. The author here has tried to understand the real nature of the crises of these displaced people.

To know the essential features of the existence of the marginal people the author’s proposition is to explore the experience of the East-Bengali refugees through a literary text and not through historical records because History is, as perceives Butalia, largely “state-centric and nationalistic” (Butalia 1998) whereas literature is people centric in examining the lives of common, ordinary and marginalized people. Dr. Asaduddin says: Partition is “one of the most massive demographic dislocations in history, with its attendant human tragedy… it defies chronicles to come to grip with it in all its dimensions” (Ganie and Rathor 2016). Though the great Indian national leader Mahatma Gandhi was all against partition, his ultimate comment on partition is “Partition is bad. But whatever is past is past. We have only to look to the future” (Nix 2013). But to a poet who experiences partition, “Present means past.” (My translation, ‘‘Ak shringa gandar o nartaki” by Faiz Ahmed Faiz). Thus dichotomy persists to be there between the prevalent political history of a phenomenon and literature reflecting that in its own way. Just before Partition Gandhi says in an interview: “The question of the exchange of population is unthinkable and impracticable. This question never crossed my mind….The logical consequence of any such step is too dreadful to contemplate” (Ajgaonkar 2002). The author tries to explore the ‘dreadful’ subjective experiences of the displaced individuals from various dimensions, keeping in view the related aspects of timelessness and ambivalence of belongingness, nostalgia, confused spatial zones of existence, split identities, hybridity and the question of nation formation beyond boundaries, as are found in Sunil Ganguli’s *East-West* . We are to remember that Partition does not mean the same for Punjab and Bengal as is aptly pointed out by Rituparna Ray (Ray 2009). The author further proposes to examine how does Sunil’s *East-West* besides capturing the consequences of Partition, also gives us a most poignant portrayal of the plight of East-Bengali refugees, the victims of severe injustice.

In *East-West* the characters of Sunil never forget the reality of displacement. The novel opens with Pratap's family's annual visit to Deoghar. Pratap seems to be depressed throughout the journey and when Bablu asks Kanu, to tell him the reason of his father's depression, Kanu significantly says: ''because we are going the other way…''. When Bablu fails to understand it clearly, Kanu insisted: ''our own place is not in this direction. It used to be over on the other side'' (10). The narrator says: ''with the death of his father his links with his ancestors were severed, it was as though a growing tree was yanked off its roots. For him the rivers and fields, the sweet breeze, early mornings with a taste of date palm juice...– all these were gone for ever. He would have to spend the rest of his life in exile, in dark, stuffy tenanted rooms in Calcutta'' (19). On Independence Day, at Sealdah, while conversing with Biman Bihari, Pratap took one old beggar woman for Kalu's mother, the delivery nurse from Malkhanagar. The incident, though unimportant, is significant in one way as it highlights the fact that internally Pratap Mazumdar still clings to his past as the narrator says a little later: ''Pratap still identified himself with them[the refugees]''(458-459). On yet another day, Pratap's impulsive buying of a large *hilsa* fish points out the fact that though East-Pakistan is no longer his country, he remains an East-Bengali so far as his liking and disliking, habits – particularly food-habits are considered. Repeatedly he goes back to his childhood days – the blissful days he has spent in Malkhanagar. The memory of those days sustains him throughout his life. Nostalgia, on the one hand does not let Pratap to have the sense of belongingness to the land of displacement. On the other hand, it does not let him visit his homeland as he is doubtful of being able to find his roots there anymore. Amrita Ghosh significantly observes: " Thus they led a dual existence where one part of their being yearned to be a part of the present social fabric while the other part put a check on that desire by constantly engulfing them in the nostalgia of their bhitamati(home and hearth)"(Ghosh 2019). Thus the dual belongingness further questions the physical space of nation too. Either they are nowhere or they are "In a Free State'', in an imaginary space, beyond boundaries. Actually in this particular case of buying the fish, Pratap was ''prompted'' (894) by a childhood memory. Another day a sudden hailstorm reminds him of his days at Malkhanagar (953). The East-Bengalis' desperate attempt to cling to their past is clearly evident again in the conversation between Pratap and his relative who cannot but mention: "But you still cling to that old place? As though your Tollygunj home is only a temporary abode—your real home is still in Brahmanbaria! (1016-17). Later in life when Mamun, attempting to know his feelings in relation to his roots, asks him: ''Can you deny your roots? Wouldn't you go visit Malkhanagar once the country becomes free?" Pratap says something that puts into words the heart-felt feeling of the East-Bengali refugees. He says: ''…What is the use? ...No Mamun, let me retain the beautiful memory of the house. I don't want to spoil it (494). Pratap tries also to go back to his past, to ''retain the beautiful memory of the house'', of the homeland as it had been at the time of departure. In relation to mohajirs'

feeling of nostalgia, the narrator's observation may be suitably quoted here: ''They say people come and go, places stay where they are. But, in this case, the mohajirs had transported an entire city within the folds of their hearts. With some came the bricks of their houses, some carried entire homes intact'' (*Sleepwalkers* 2001).

People of Pratap's generation are more East-Bengali in their habits, language or life-style than that of his children's. After spending so many years in Calcutta, Pratap and Mamun are surprised to see that they still retain traces of East- Bengali accent. Once after taking their seats at a teashop, Mamun asked Pratap ''…how could he make out I am from Joy Bangla?'' Pratap says: ''your accent!'' Mamun is reluctant to accept the truth as he says: ''But I have spent so many years here, my Calcutta accent is perfect.'' Pratap's answer is remarkable to note: ''Traces remain, you know. I have been here quite a while but people can make out. But my children don't have any East-Bengal accent. You can't change accent in one generation'' (490). Furthermore, there is the question of difference between the first generation and the subsequent generations in their respective attitudes to their lost homeland and to the place of migration, the new land. As Avtar Brah puts it: ''Clearly, the relationship of the first generation to the problem of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was recently left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to re-orientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities'' (Brah 1996). And the same is applicable to the case of East-Bengali refugees as it is applicable to the people of any diasporic community. Undoubtedly Harit Mandal's generation has to bear immense torture and suffering whereas hopefully life would be little easier for the generation of Harit's grandson. First generation's emotional involvement with the lost homeland is also greater in comparison with that of the second generation. Bablu, Piklu or Tutul are least worried about what is happening at their motherland but Pratap is remarkably concerned with that.

It is obvious that those who are members of any displaced community, are to experience the eventual slow erasure of their own cultural heritage and are simultaneously to go through the process of the formation of new cultural identities. Besides, this kind of eventual erasure of whatever the displaced people can call their own heritage _ religious sustenance, cultural constructs, language, habits, social norms _creates in them a sense of loss and further increases the feeling of rootlessness among them as the host country never ceases to be alien in their perception. This sense of ''loss'' and yearning for the lost homeland is most pathetically portrayed in the last wishes of Pratap and his mother at their death-beds. Pratap's mother's last wish has been to return to Malkhanagar. At his death-bed Pratap remembers the last words of his mother ''Khukon, can you take me there, just once?'' At the last moments of his life Pratap is visualizing his return to Malkhanagar, to his mother, in blue sari. ''He looked on, at the house, exactly the same, the thatched shed

of the atchala, …everything as it used to be. …There is mother, I am going to her… He closed his eyes in great contentment'' (705-706). But significantly Pratap is to wash his feet before touching his mother. There is mud all over his body. The mud seems to speak of his strained, unhappy life as a refugee in Calcutta. Pratap's death relieves him.

Border crossing is an unavoidable yet almost inevitable human movement against the backdrop of history. It is extremely engaging to see how the alienated, homeless individuals tend to build homes in their imaginative spaces as well as in the foreign lands and to what extent this effort leads to the fragmentation of their selves or their conversion into hyphenated identities. Perhaps, the concept of identity has become very problematic in post-colonial world. Identity has to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group being able to continue to be itself and not as someone or something else. According to Woodward, identity tends to be defined in terms of oppositions as woman/man, black/white, culture/ nature, beautiful/ugly, extrovert/ introvert, honest/dishonest, self/other etc (Woodward 1997). ''Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past…identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall 1990). Identities are subject to continuous change and therefore always are at the state of 'being'. Identities constantly redefine themselves; in fact they are established through the play of differences and are perceived in and through their multiple relations to what came to be termed as the 'collective self'. 'Collective self' refers to the collective identity of a community. Min Zhou observes that in spite of internal diversifications and complexities, a community is conceived as a 'unitary and homogeneous entity' (Zhou 2015). What Benedict Anderson terms as 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), is the representative of this collective identity that comprises same set of traditions and heritage, same set of value system, unique mode of signification. An individual's cultural identity is considered to be largely subservient to the cultural identity of the community he or she supposedly belongs to. Hall elaborately argues that cultural identity is at once marked by fixity and fluidity as it is both a matter of 'being' and 'becoming', as it "belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 1990). Cultural identity is a matter of past as it is largely derived from "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning" (Hall 1990). It is a matter of future in the sense it is the subject to continuous change because of unending interactions of different cultures. Here comes the aspect of 'hybrid' culture. Bhabha notices: ''Thus the issue of identity is naturally more complicated for the colonial. The moment he desires the identity of the colonizer, the splitting begins because while he transforms himself in order to claim the image of identity he produces for himself, the displacement of the self happens simultaneously. The travelling of this self between the original place and the place it longs to occupy will produce what Bhabha calls a 'hybrid' identity (Bhabha 1994). Concept of hybridity "has been seen as part of the tendency of

discourse analysis to dehistoricise and delocate cultures from the temporal, spatial, geographical and linguistic contexts, and to lead to an abstract, globalized concept of the textual that obscures the specificities of particular cultural situations" (Ashcroft et al 2007). According to Bhabha, "The meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity….It is the 'inter'- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space that carries the meaning of culture"(Bhabha 1994).

In postcolonial world any migration or forceful displacement can expose a group to such a fluid zone of hybrid culture. Now, it is to be examined whether in Sunil's *East West* mass migration of East Bengalis to West Bengal after and before partition cause such dislocation of culture and consequent journeys through hyphenated identities in their struggles to re-establish themselves in a new land or not. Partha S. Ghosh notices that "East Bengali migrations to West Bengal and other places in Eastern India were not like the Muslim migrations from these places to East Pakistan….East Bengali refugees neither implanted new cultural values of any vast magnitude on their new neighbours nor the vice versa because both had more or less the same cultural patterns. Whatever was there in terms of food…" (Partha S. Ghosh 2016). In absence of any significant cultural variation, the East Bengali refugees in West Bengal have not faced notable challenges of cultural assimilation though they have faced difficulties in the question of adaptability and acceptability here. The phenomenon named partition has caused variation and enrichment in Bengali literature, Bengali cinema and obviously at Bengali cuisine. "The East Bengali refugees, who mostly belonged to the lower castes, introduced the new ways of cooking fish and vegetables to the West Bengali (*ghoti*) upper castes. Prior to the refugee movement, West Bengali food was relatively bland. East Bengalis introduced spicy and hot cuisines. Since the refugees provided cheap maids and cooks to serve at West Bengali homes, this culinary passage occurred without being noticed" (Partha S. Ghosh 2016). On the other hand, the first generation migrants, as it is noticed by Sunil also (490), could be easily distinguished from their East Bengali accent that however gradually fades away in subsequent generations. There remains still minor differences in marriage rituals but those have not undergone changes as with the progress of time the initial denial of acceptance gets decreased; the several re-habilitation plans of the government, lead the people of the newly born nation-state, that is, West Bengal , to have increased sense of security and with lessened amount of perceived threat caused by the migration, they grow to give natural acceptance to the migrants that results into increasing their adaptability in return. In contrast to the people of any diasporic community, the identity crises of the East Bengalis here, is not therefore extended to the crises of their cultural identities because of the less variation in dominant culture of West Bengal.

To what extent displacement is an important phenomenon so far as the trouble of establishing one's subjective self or identity is considered is evident also in *East-West*.

The novel shows how the refugees – a portion of them was obviously economically comfortable not long ago_ are bound to turn to menial jobs after displacement. The novelist says: "this hurt their ego initially but hunger was a great leveler" (270). Pratap's discomfort at travelling in third class, his desperate attempt to maintain tradition of distributing gifts during Durga Puja amidst financial challenges, his struggle to come to terms with the reduced resources of his family are parts of this crisis. Here there is the identity crisis of Atin too. In the final section of the paper however, the author is going to cast a look on the pathetic plight of the East-Bengali refugees in West Bengal – their hunger, their poverty, their wandering from one place to another and obviously the torture they are to bear. The Central Government's apathy towards Bengali refugees from West Pakistan is not beyond the periphery of the novel. It is observed that "The Bengalis were a constant source of headache" (47) to Nehru. It is expected that "with a common background of Bengali tradition, a pervasive Hindu religion, ties of common national kinship, similar systems and cultural values and familiar pattern of community behavior, the displaced concerned should not have any formidable hindrance to resolve problem of accommodation and assimilation" (Pakrashi 1971). But the real scenario remains something else. *The Economic Weekly*, 1954 reports, "They are given land. But they complain that they cannot live in, or cultivate, the soil that they do not know. Some of them were helpless to set themselves up in some occupation. They tried; but failed to fit in, because the type of artisan work they used to do in East Bengal is different from what they are now asked to do ….They reveal poignant signs of frustration and incompetence, even as they deepen the doubt whether Government will ever succeed in rehabiliting them. Unlike the Sindhis and Punjabis, the East Bengal refugees lack adaptability" ("East Bengal Refugees" Oct.26, 1954). East Bengal refugees are termed as 'outsiders', 'mere parasites' and 'escapists'. For the people of West Bengal, "the simple equation was that more the amount of relief measures, more will be the number of refugees.…The local population questioned-why should we sympathize with them when they themselves show no affinity to West Bengal, consciously and constantly harking back to their glorious past''(Ghosh, Subhashri 2013). The refugees accuse the local people of failing to understand their wounds whereas the locals point out the refugees' lack of obligation for refuge and shelter with which they are provided. Besides, the Calcutta bhadraloks' perspective that the refugees should be "scattered" (239) all over the country instead of making West Bengal bearing the entire burden of them or their support of the rehabilitation program of pushing them to "the jungle of Dandak" (239) are expressive of the initial hostility the refugees are to face in a new land. Such reception leads one character, here Kanu, to decide to get married into a family from West Bengal "so that no son of a something could sneer at me because I come from the East" (425).

Edward Said says: “Once you leave your home, wherever you end up you simply cannot take up life and become another citizen of the new place” (Said 1996). In the case of the East-Bengali refugees it seems that this dream is never to come true. Forever they are to live in a limbo; insecurity leads them to leave their land and they are not accepted wholeheartedly by West Bengal government. In the words of Harit Mandal the plight of the refugees is evident: ‘‘the government wants to send us to the Andaman for a life of exile. The other alternative is Dandakaranya…to them we are not Bengalis, we have run away from East Bengal of our own sweet will, so West Bengal won’t have us.’’(178). These refugees have lost their home, are being driven like cattle and this homelessness is leading most of them to a frenzied state of mind. In the words of the narrator ‘‘…They had no place in the new country, nobody welcomed them. They are putting up by the road side, on railway stations, in camps of charity. They were half-starved and sick’’ (301). Thousands of refugees are to live in conditions worse than human. They are treated with extreme indignity. Naturally what they internally want most is to return to their lost homeland. Finally inspired by the communists’ coming into power – the Left parties had championed their cause for the last two decades – the East-Bengali refugees start to leave their camp life in Dandakaranya settlements for West-Bengal in order to fulfill their dream, that is, to have a home of their own. At Morichjhapi they try to build a new life, to survive in a new way. They were self-reliant and when in 1979 the Left government was against these settlers—an environmental issue was supported in place of their case -- they were defiant unto the last. Against the government’s injustice they fought till their last breath. Their slogan has been: ‘‘*Amra kara? Bastuhara. Morichjhapi chharbona’’.* ‘‘Who are we? We are the dispossessed. We’ll not leave Morichjhapi, do what you may’’ (*The Hungry Tide* 254). The forced eviction of the settlers in the islands of Sunderban or in other words the Morichjhapi massacre brings to an end the refugees’ final attempt to build a home of their own. Through ironies Sunil expresses explicitly that the most common lot of these marginal people, is to live in this terrible plight – unnecessary and unaccommodated.

The paper thus brings out how the novel can be studied as an effective portrayal of displacement and relocation caused by partition, in the context of East Bengali refugees in West Bengal. The role of memory (the abandoned homestead in East Bengal is constantly revisited as ‘bari’ and their present abode is continuously referred to as ‘basha’) , the function of nostalgia (their ‘desh’ or ‘bastuvita’ is maintained as an ordered, intelligible and habitable land, against their disordered present and their wishes to revisit their homeland are therefore kept alive which in turn provides them with necessary sustenance), are examined here with much poignancy so that the collective experience of those who are denied wholehearted acceptance here, can be felt in its real pathos. Further, the author has tried to show how the personalized versions of the experience of border crossing – identity

crisis and fight for survival in a new land being essential parts of this experience – become more revealing when crucial socio-political issues regarding the challenges of rehabilitation program, posed both by Central Government and the locals, are brought into focus. This on the one hand brings out the real nature of the crisis of the displaced community and on the other, highlights the impossibility of making a foreign soil one's own (the contrast of 'desh' and 'nation' being always there). The relevant discussion on the difference between the first generation and subsequent generations of migration and the problematics of cultural identity of a displaced community (here East Bengali refugees) analyzed here, specifically from the aspect of cultural hybridity, contribute in large in understanding the discourse of displacement, as delineated in the novel, from a crucial theoretical perspective. Moreover, it opens up the scope to study further, the literature of partition and literature of diaspora in a comparative and contrastive mode.

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