

Partition of Bengal: a Posthumanist study of select literary works

Indra Sankar Ghatak

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. E-mail: indrasghatak16@gmail.com

Abstract

The Indian Partition ushered in one of the most historical migrations in human history where millions had to change their native affiliations. This event led to the formation of two nation-states (India and East Pakistan) out of a single cultural geography and the drawing of boundaries (Radcliffe line) disrupted the emotional, cultural and spatial link of the people with the native countries. Selected short stories from Bashabi Fraser's *Bengal Partition Stories* and the memoirs in Adhir Biswas' *Border: Bangla Bhager Dewal* encapsulate the variegated experiences of the dislocated during 1946-1955, who were sabotaged by fellow Bengalis in the name of gender, community (*bangal-ghoti*), and religion. This paper looks at select samples from the collections mentioned above and correlates them with the history of the period. It raises the question "of which 'human' is the posthuman a 'post'?" (Ferrando, 2019, p. 9) The narratives from the Bengal partition capture the phenomenon of border crossing which had led to fluid identities (refugees/migrants/infiltrators) as individuals had been deterritorialized and reterritorialized. The migrant bodies symbolize an anthropogeographic entity that had been exploited severely, and the refugees present themselves as the cultural metaphor in order to capture the traumatized and ambivalent condition of post-national human beings.

Keywords: partition, posthuman, identities, boundaries, cultural.

The violent legacy of Indian Partition ushered in one of the most historical migrations in the human saga where millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs had to change their native affiliations in favour of something unknown and unbeknownst. The formation of two nation-states (India and Pakistan) out of single cultural geography and the drawing of boundaries (Radcliffe line) did not entirely disrupt the emotional link with the native country rather it stressed upon the equivocality between the border and boundary, nation and homeland, nostalgia and trauma. This historical occurrence uprooted inhabitants from their ancestral space, dislocated individuals from their familial territory, and rendered them powerless by the creation of a current international barrier of which the locals neither wanted nor created. The asylum seekers come across as 'infrahuman', sabotaged by their species through various historical records and stories. As "Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent" (Dalrymple, 2015, para. 4), hence, it has led to the formation of fluid identities namely refugees/migrants/infiltrators. So, the paper focuses on these partitioned creatures who are perceived by Donna Haraway (2007) as the 'Humanimal', where human development is 'less about being' than a 'becoming-with.'

The historic phenomenon of Partition led to the genesis of memory studies within this field of study which entails the precepts of how we remember the catastrophe and how it should

be represented. The remembrance and representation can be in the form of either fact or fiction. While facts, encapsulated in the historical narratives of governmental bodies talk about 'absolute truth', the fictional chronicles laid forth in the novels, short stories, poems, etc, narrate an 'alternate truth'. Hence, there needs to be a holistic approach in combining both the meta-historic archives and the literature of this event.

Literature, from the neo-historicist perspective, which believes that "...we don't have clear access to any but the most basic facts of history...our understanding of what such facts mean...is...strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact" (Tyson, 2006, p. 283) asserts history. Similarly, cultural materialism "believe[s] that all societies operate according to a model in which production [of facts] and reproduction [of history] dominate and determine...all cultural development [of migrant life]." (Buzney & Marcoux, n.d., para. 3) Therefore, from this aspect also, literature proclaims history. Corollary to this, literary fiction too states history, as a scholar opines "fiction must surely take its cue from history, as surely as it takes its place in history..." (Savvas, 2011, p. 1). Thus, we can deduce that fiction can be further divided into lived and represented histories. The latter can be discovered in history books, annals, etc. while the former exists in the form of recollected personal accounts (diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies). These accounts on being grounded upon reminiscence sometimes may have fictional elements as well. But memoirs are fundamentally non-fictional as they recall lived experiences. Hence, non-fiction also asserts and avows history. Moreover, Robert Fogarty (2011) claims "most memoirists tell the truth as they remember it...In that sense the memoirist is like the fiction writer who creates a character on the page, thereby compelling the reader to imagine that figure as they enter a story" (p. 781). So, the paper attempts to express that the fictional and non-fictional narratives of the partition of Bengal of a given period do reflect the sanctioned facts, official descriptions, and historical standpoints of that particular phase.

The history of the Bengal partition is quite elaborate as it changed considerably after the passage of each decade. For my paper, I have tried to delimit the phenomenon to the late 1940s and the early 1950s- a period leading up to the partition (1947) and the initial years of independence experienced by the populace in the territories of West Bengal and East Pakistan. The late 1940s, after the end of World War II, was a period of total unrest when the freedom policy slightly started changing from 'nationalism' to 'communalism'. Joya Chatterji (2002) claims

"This movement was led by the very same section of Bengali society that had dominated its nationalist politics since the time of Bengal's first partition: the so-called *bhadralok* or 'respectable people'. In less than forty years, *bhadralok* politics had come full circle, moving away from nationalist agendas to more parochial concerns." (p. 1)

The rise of communal tensions in Bengal sparked off the rivalry between the Hindus and Muslims on either side of rivers Ganga and Padma. The partition of East India (1947) did not sever the links between common myth and folklore, or a shared language and culture. My paper enunciates this through the selected short stories from Bashabi Fraser's *Bengal Partition Stories* (2008) and the memoirs in Adhir Biswas' *Border: Bangla Bhager Dewal* (2016) where the facts and fictional as well as non-fictional elements complement each other.

The paper uses the lens of Critical and Philosophical Posthumanism to analyse instances of denigration of immigrants present in these select narratives. Traditionally, humanism views humans as the centre, i.e., the most important creature of the universe. P.K. Nayar (2014), within this convention, opines that "Critical humanism proposes that the very idea of the universal human is constructed through a process of exclusion whereby some of these ethnic and religious groups or races are categorized as less-than-human." (p. 23) Hence, Francesca Ferrando (2019)

proclaims that we can be posthuman now, by wholly “embracing the consequences of the historical and material deconstruction of the notion of the human” (p. 28). So, the theoretical framework of Posthumanism as proposed lays forth the variegated experiences of the fugitives who were affected by sectarian violence and denied human status. This also situates the expatriate, the emigrant, and the insubordinate evacuee within the aforementioned hierarchy.

My paper, taking a cue from ‘Philosophical Posthumanism’ poses radical questions like “‘Who am I?’ in conjunction with other related questions such as ‘What am I?’ and ‘Where and when are we?’” (Ferrando, 2019, p. 99) while shaking our epistemological experiences where it “is genealogically related to the radical deconstruction of the ‘human’”. (Ferrando, 2019, p. 2) Further, the paper assesses the ‘lived’ and the ‘represented’ narratives concerning crucial tenets of ‘Critical posthumanism’ which calls for a “radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines.” (Nayar, 2010, p. 11) Here, this theoretical framework has been utilised to perceive human aptitudes, potentials, and awareness as evolving in concurrence with barbed wires and borderlines and different socio-cultural and politico-religious ecosystems. So, my paper tries to co-relate the refugee experiences in memoirs and short stories, as well as migrant coercion in historical accounts through arguments like crossing the border, treatment of refugees, development of fluid identities, exploitation of the human body, and nostalgia for cultural roots and trauma arising out of it.

Posthumanism, as Ferrando (2019) echoes, on the ostracized human subject, accentuates the human as a process, inherently branded by differences and shifting identities, particularly during the crossing of borders. This is evident in Jyotirmoyee Devi’s ‘The Crossing’ (2008) where banished populaces are seen leaving their household and cultivable land and crossing over to “a happier hell” (Fraser, 2008, p. 33) of West Bengal. The story indicates how migrants like Sudam are exploited by the “guardians of the border” (Fraser, 2008, p. 68), who are forced to pay an absurd fee (money and other basic amenities) to get his young and beautiful wife Durga onto the other side. These bizarre proceedings lead to a menacing end as the wife drowns herself out of uncertainty of her husband’s arrival from the other country which exposes the perils of border crossing and throws light upon the treatment of refugees.

The scholar Geoffrey Galt Harpham remarks in his work *Shadows of Ethics*, literature is also a site where we can witness the Other and the different. It is not only viewed as “space where Otherness is assigned to some individuals, races and ethnicities but also where Otherness is engaged with.” (Nayar, 2014, p. 49) This ‘otherness’ can be ascribed to the uprooted inhabitants who were rendered powerless by the creation of a new international border. So, the eastern refugee had been transformed into ‘alien’, as *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (8 August, 1948) records, huddled in thousands, provided about fourteen latrine-bathrooms, fed only on *chire* and *gur* in hellish rehabilitation camps, who spent distressful days and nights. Furthermore, Ranajit Roy (1972) records that about the East Pakistani refugees “the Government took an unshakeable stand that they were not entitled to compensation” (p. 64). In concurrence with this report, Shanti Chakraborty in his memoir also recorded something similarly ironic that people in railway stations were eagerly waiting to be shifted to the refugee encampments. This proves that an efficient humanitarian programme of recuperation of the East Bengali refugees was lacking in Central Government policies.

Likewise, there had been a myth of ‘Promised Land’ (Fraser, 2008) with manifold opportunities for reintegration, which, in actuality were the uncultivable lands, hostile terrain, and virgin forests of Marichjhapi, Dandakaranya, Koraput, and Bastar and in Bettiah camp. So, the

non-recognition of East Bengali/Pakistani fugitives alongside arrests, mass eviction have led to the burning questions of who a refugee or an economic migrant is, of whether they are not entitled to rights and respect as citizens of humankind, and since our origins and histories are merged, and we share our mortality and vulnerability, then how can the fellow men participate in this othering process of refugee treatment. Debes Roy (2008) treats this kind of irrational behaviour with black humour in his story where a family does find some solace in their miserable refugee housing in West Bengal but are harassed recurrently by the local authorities to prove their own official identities. So, these illustrations of the dehumanisation inherent in the endless strife, loss, and rehabilitation of the refugees on either side of the Radcliffe line elucidate the relevance of the question- “How did the excluded subjectivities perceive themselves in relation to the notion of the human?” (Ferrando, 2019, p. 10)

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2004) highlights something essential to the posthumanist theory, that is, ‘the historical construction of the human’. He says:

The anthropogenic...machine . . . is an optical machine constructed in a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape. *Homo* is a constitutively “anthropomorphous” animal . . . who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human. (pp. *ivi*: 26–27)

Ferrando (2019) also concedes that “The production of this ‘ape’ which deforms the image of the human is based on some, partial, human experience of the ape, which does not inform us about the ape itself, but about the formulation of human systems of knowledge” (p. 73). These human systems of knowledge of the deterritorialized populace (here considered the ‘ape’) after partition led to the formation of an incongruous notion of identity and selfhood. This absurd nature of identity formation is evident in Narendranth Mitra’s ‘Illegitimate’ (2008) where Sudatta conceives a baby with her husband Mriganka after Independence but decides to abort it due to the latter’s urge for a comparative study of “hereditary versus environment” (Fraser, 2008, p. 71) between the earlier ‘illegitimate’ child born out of a rape encounter during the communal violence of the late 1940s and the new-born ‘legitimate’. This notion of fluid identities led to an existential crisis amongst the hapless migrants.

Within this argument, one can relate to Robert Pepperell’s (1995) idea of the human as ‘fuzzy-edged’, ‘profoundly dependent on its surroundings’. “It sees the human’s subjectivity as informed by lived (biological, embodied) experiences in an environment...” (Pepperell, 1995, p. 21) This kind of subjectivity is found in a memoir (2016) where Ismail (a Hindu boy adopted by a Muslim couple) writes in his suicide note that- If I convert to Islam at this moment of time, everybody would label me as an opportunist in this new country [East Pakistan]. Moreover, after Partition, where should I migrate to in Hindustan? Hence, I do not have any path left but to commit suicide. (Sanyal, 2016, p. 23) Furthermore, this reminiscence throws light upon history where there was a mounting rift between ‘bengal’ and ‘ghoti’ identities especially done by the Communist party for mobilizing the masses for the impending elections. This is made explicit by Fraser in her ‘Introduction’ where she recounts how the ruling party (Congress) was not dedicated to refugee rehabilitation as they were not politically viable to them. But the communist leaders seized the opportunity and with the help of leftist organisation UCRC (United Central Refugee Council), mobilised the refugees politically and socially, who later on decided the fate in favour of a United Left Front governments in the Assembly elections (1967 and 1969) of West Bengal. (Fraser, 2008) These instances accentuate the distinct nature that identities played within the aforementioned timeline and context of the East India partition.

The construct of identity is social, psychological, and existential whereas the torment upon human bodies is actual and somatic. “Geo-historically situated, the human body can be perceived as a symbolic text of cognitive and social processes.” (Ferrando, 2019, p. 81) Debjani Sengupta in the ‘Introduction’ to her work (2016) asserts that “For more than 80 thousand women, independence came accompanied with abduction and sexual assault.” (p. 3) This is especially the case when Sudatta’s (in the ‘Illegitimate’) and Kusum’s (in ‘The Girl Was Innocent’) bodies are violated by the insurgents and mutineers of Partition. While the former’s illegitimate child is handled like a ‘guinea pig’ by her husband to ensure research on cross-breeding, the latter is forced to commit suicide after she and her Hindu husband had been beaten and humiliated by her community. Thus, Wolfe (2010) promulgates that ‘the human is always heterogeneous to the human’, hence “‘we’ are not ‘we’...Rather, ‘we’ are always radically other, already in- or a human in our very being- not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability...”(p. 89). Therefore, it is pertinently debatable whether all refugees/migrants/infiltrators have “been considered less-than-human?” (Ferrando, 2019, p. 80)

The bodily incursions as mentioned in the above stories correspond to the inherent melancholy that churns the mind of the memoirists as well. Nityapriyo Ghosh’s in his memoir (2016) claims a melancholic conundrum of having and having lost. In a sentimental tone, he remembers how his family had to leave behind an established life and liberty and settle down in a slum with a tin-roof and hardly any place to accommodate the entire family. This nostalgia brings into focus numerous uneasy incidents that have been recorded in the memoirs of various partition survivors who attribute a kind of traumatic rumination with these remembrances. Further, this is advocated by Debes Roy’s (2008) fictional tale where a migrant woman’s modesty and honour is being questioned by the local authorities, doubting her as a prostitute and even “jeopardizing the very identity of her offspring.” (Fraser, 2008, p. 76) Hence, a bioethicist construes that “Posthumanism [i]s both a reflection on what has been omitted from the notion of the human and speculation about the possible developments of the human species.” (Miah, 2008, p. 23)

Thus, we come across Partition as something which ushers a kind of postcolonial modernity as nation registers its nationals within new territoriality, yet these characteristics of modernity are unable to capture the fugitives’ experience as they struggle in the unfamiliar metropolis. Here, P.K. Chakrabarty (1999) notes the words of Dr. T. Sen (Education Minister of post-independent India), “the painful toil of beginning life from scratch...the trauma and agony” particularly of the migrant populace who were treated as aliens (p. xvi). This shows how partition has not been a proper resolution towards the distribution of the population according to their religion, livelihood, and ancestry. These treatises, illustrations, theories, and assessments of the phenomenon of Partition of Bengal establish the marginalization of refugees, migrants, and infiltrators as ‘other’ beings, and deconstruct how they are treated with diffidence as non-human. Therefore, the discussion shows how the fictional and non-fictional narratives assert the same diabolical saga of Partition.

Literature, historical accounts, memoirs, poetry, and periodicals have kept this phenomenon active in the minds of people among the Bengalis. Indeed, West Bengal and East Pakistan’s (now Bangladesh) political reality had flowed like the Ganga and Padma in different directions, yet there has always been a sense of brotherhood, sectarian harmony, and the recognition of a common ancestral culture. This is the uniqueness of Bengal Partition and this unison is the lifeblood of future research work. It is a very important part of our collective

community consciousness that we can collect, collate the variegated narratives distinctively, for present and future analyses.

References

- Agamben, G. (2004). *The open: Man and animal*. (K. Attell, Trans.). California: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 2002)
- Buzney, C., & Marcoux, J. (n.d.). *Cultural Materialism*. Anthropological Theories. anthropology.ua.edu/theory/cultural-materialism/
- Chakrabarty, P.K.(1999). *The Marginal Men*. Lumiere Books.
- Chakraborty, S. (2016). Border. In A. Biswas (Ed.), *Border: Bangla BhagerDewal*, (pp. 38-51). Gangchil.
- Chatterji, J. (2002). *Bengal divided: Hindu communalism and partition, 1932-1947*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dalrymple, W. (2015, June). The great divide: The violent legacy of Indian partition. *The New Yorker*. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple
- Devi, J. (2008). The crossing. In B. Fraser (Ed.), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, (pp. 247-254). Anthem Press.
- Sengupta, D. (2016). *The partition of Bengal: Fragile borders and new identities*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ferrando, F. (2019). *Philosophical posthumanism*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Fogarty, R. (2011). Memoirs True and False. *The Antioch Review*, 69(4), 780-785. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/41330958
- Fraser, B. (Ed.). (2008). *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Anthem Press.
- Ghosh, N. (2016). Udbastu, udbastunahoyeo. In A. Biswas (Ed.), *Border: Bangla BhagerDewal*, (pp. 52-66). Gangchil.
- Haraway, D. (2007). *When Species Meet*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Harpham, G. G. (1999). *Shadows of Ethics*. Duke University Press.
- Miah, A. (2008). A critical history of posthumanism. In R. Chadwick, & B. Gordijn (Eds.), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, (pp. 71-94). Springer.
- Milan, I. H. (2008). The girl was innocent. In B. Fraser (Ed.), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, (pp. 489-516). Anthem Press.
- Mitra, N. (2008). Illegitimate. In B. Fraser (Ed.), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, (pp. 297-313). Anthem Press.
- Nayar, P. K. (2014). *Posthumanism*. Polity Press.
- Pepperell, R. (1995). *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*. Intellect Books.
- Roy, D. (2008). Refugee. In B. Fraser (Ed.), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, (pp. 399-414). Anthem Press.
- Roy, R. (1972). *The Agony of West Bengal*. New Age Publisher Pvt. Ltd.
- Sanyal, T. (2016). Bangal bamun-er border. In A. Biswas (Ed.), *Border: Bangla BhagerDewal*, (pp. 19-28). Gangchil.

Savvas T. (2011). Introduction: Representing history, re-presenting the past. *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tyson, L. (2006). *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge.

Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.

Indra Sankar Ghatak is a temporary member of Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA). He is currently a PhD Research Scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, KHARAGPUR under the supervision of Assistant Professor Dr. Somdatta Bhattacharya. His research areas are Partition of Bengal and Urban Studies.
