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Partition and its Afterlife: Tracing Home, Memory and Longing in the Imagination of the Displaced Sylhetis

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Abstract:

As people had to choose between one nation and the other during and after the Partition of 1947, homes were lost and lives were altered forever. India's northeast, despite continuously bearing the consequences of this historical experience, remains largely an unacknowledged area in Partition studies. Any cursory exploration of Partition scholarship would reveal that Punjab and Bengal remain the primary sites of investigation. Where does one locate specificities of Partition experience of India's northeast? Creative writers and artists in this region have also engaged with Partition and its seminal impact on the society and culture of India's northeast. Through a study of select Partition writings from India's northeast, this paper will examine the different registers of public and personal memories of Partition and its afterlife in the literary imagination of the displaced Sylhetis to bring forth a better understanding of the perpetuity of dislocation, loss and anxiety in the spheres of everydayness. Drawing upon Memory Studies and discourses concerning home and identity, this paper aims to explore how literature becomes important vehicle for representing inscription and transmission of Partition memories and connected idea of a lost home.

Keywords: Partition, Northeast, Sylhet, Memory, Home

To Remember:

To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.
(Sontag, 2003, p. 115)

The act of remembering is compulsively tied up with the act of forgetting because one initiates the occurrence of the other. This phenomenon of simultaneity is symptomatic of various registers of remembering- collective and individual. Paul Ricoeur in his exploration of *ars memoriae* observes if "a measured use of memorization also implies a measured use of forgetting" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 68) and proceeds to further explicate issues concerning the relationship shared between remembering, forgetting and memory. Ricoeur, in his analysis of this complex and layered relationship, contends that it is the initiative to recall or remember that provides crucial scope to reframe forgetting. (Ricoeur, 2006) The idea of ethics and aesthetics of memory and its working also assumes significance in our understanding of this connectedness between remembering and forgetting. As a conceptual framework for analyzing historical events, Memory Studies as a discipline offers useful insights and valuable interpretations. This subject of memory and its concomitant dimensions have attained crucial potency in the context of renewed interest invested in addressing and understanding the Partition of 1947 and its afterlife. As people

had to choose between one nation and the other during and after Partition, homes were lost and lives were altered forever. Shelley Feldman (2004) while discussing the subject of displacement and its cascading effects in the context of Partition comments pertinently:

For those who chose to move from their place of residence after that date, they were no longer merely changing residence, as in shifting from one city to another for employment or education, but instead were risking immigrant or refugee status in a place that had been, only the day before, part of a shared national space, their home. (p. 113)

The tormenting process of displacement entailed devastation of lived space, cultural practice and social ties. It also signified violence of loss and the unsettling emergence of an immensely difficult life for the displaced. Appropriately noted by Ayesha Jalal (2013) as Partition being “a defining moment that is neither beginning nor end”, it continues to remind us that its perpetuity belongs to our time, to our everyday realities. (1) To this day, this historical episode which is more of an ongoing process significantly impacts discourses concerning identity formations, dynamics of nationhood and communal politics of entire South Asia. The chief engagement of this paper is with select Partition writings from India’s northeast to situate memories of this catastrophic event and the bearing of such memories on constructions of home and identity among Sylheti community residing in the northeast. Through an analysis of chosen narratives, this essay proposes to examine the different registers of public and personal memories of Partition and its afterlife to bring forth a better understanding of the perpetuity of dislocation, anxiety and longing for a lost homeland in the spheres of everydayness as shared by the displaced Sylheti in different writings.

India’s northeast:

India’s northeast remained primarily an unacknowledged and unexplored site of analysis in Partition studies till very long. However, the story of Partition here, like many other marginalized narratives, has curiously entered the realm of visibility and scholarship only at the present times. Any discussion of Partition experience has addressed Punjab and Bengal as two sites that suffered the violence and loss triggered by division and associated dislocation. It is important to note here that for a very long-time official projects and academic endeavours tended to overlook the primacy of Partition as a seminal occurrence altogether. Instead, one witnesses that maximum attention had been directed towards celebrating and marking 1947 as a glorious historical juncture of the end of oppressive, long-drawn colonial rule. Kavita Daiya (2008) in her discussion on Partition points out how after 1965, Partition violence largely disappeared from public discussion and how it was relegated to a remote past from the perspective of Indian nation-state. It was desirable that the past should be forgotten to maintain harmonious communal relationships within the nation. In his plea for an appropriate revision of historiography, Gyanendra Pandey (2004) has rightly argued that a very simplistic separation has been made between Partition and violence which in turn has led to omissions and erasures of important truths and insights pertaining to Partition experiences. David Gilmartin (1998) in his essay, “Partition, Pakistan and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative”, had pointed out that the primary issue is the apparent irreconcilable dissonance between articulating a history of ‘high politics’ and that of ‘popular violence’. However, over a phase of the last few decades, historians, ethnographers, anthropologists, and memoirists have directed their attention towards the duality of

independence from British colonialism and the enormity of complexities that characterize refugee issues and idea of nationhood. As Tarun Saint (2010) argues in his study of alternative modes of representation and contends that “such counter-narratives allow for the voicing of alternative perspectives and a reckoning with some of the more unpalatable and even grotesque aspects of the Partition experience and its aftermath.” (2) Seeking to retrieve undisclosed gaps and silences, recent studies have initiated valuable discussions about what happened and how things happened. These findings have helped in mapping out the complex nature of Partition legacy and its connected ramifications.

It also remains true that these alternative trajectories of Partition studies have compellingly been centered around Punjab and Bengal experiences. Even today a major research gap in Partition scholarship is inadequate engagement with India’s northeastern region. It is important to remember that Partition has not rendered uniform experience shared by those who crossed borders in the east and the west, it altered on the basis of ethnic, class, caste, gender differences. The case of India’s northeast reiterates the dimension of characteristic heterogeneity of Partition history. Because of the paucity of scholarship on this area, very little has been known to the rest. This contentious past rooted in individual historical constructions and notions has “produced and reproduced the kind of social and political milieu within which the North East region (NER) is situated at present.” (Yumnam,2016, p158) Sanjib Baruah’s contention that in the case of Assam, specifically, the meaning of Partition which has been opening slowly and gradually over time through a tortuous process renders important meaning in the context of understanding multiple truths about Partition in the northeast. (Baruah,2015) When Partition became a reality it impacted community lives, social fabric, and culture of northeast in more ways than one. The displaced communities had to negotiate with numerous problems in the aftermath of the division of the country and continue to remain affected because “India is yet to frame transparent policies linking rights and laws regarding them.” (Sengupta,2016, p. 192) It separated northeast India from the rest of newly formed India except for a slim passage commonly referred to as chicken’s neck. Udayon Mishra (2000) in *The Periphery Strikes Back* provides an assessment of how Partition made Assam a landlocked province because Chittagong port which was a major outlet for Assam tea became a part of East Pakistan due to Partition. It had an adverse impact on the socio-economic structure of this region. Not only that, it immensely affected societal compositions and everyday realities of various linguistic and ethnic communities who were part of the people of northeast. Binayak Dutta (2019) in his discussion on this aspect pertaining to the Partition experience in India’s northeast alerts us:

The Partition of Bengal and Assam in 1947, culminating in the Radcliffe Line of 1947 divided not only the Hindus and Muslims of this region on religious and ethnic lines, it also divided the smaller ethnic communities like the Khasis, Garos, Hajongs, Rabhas, Karbis Koch-Rajbongshis, the Reangs and the Chakmas, to name a few. (para.9)

This wide-scale diversity of cartographic ramifications and border alignments with altered realities of belonging and identity reminds us of the urgency to recognize Partition as a defining moment that has had far-reaching consequences in the larger scheme of South Asian politics and culture and which to date remains unscripted and unacknowledged.

Sylhet and its specificities:

“My heart cries for the islands on the river Padma, o my dear compassionate folk

My heart cries for the islands

Who shattered my peaceful home, my happy dreams- o my dear compassionate folk?”^[ii]

As in the case with many cultural and ethnic communities in the northeast, Sylhetis have also been crucial recipients of the Partition experience and its associated terrains of subject formations. The story of Sylhetis in the context of Partition is not the story of a moment, it is the narrative of a continued exile, movement, and resettlement. Sylhet Referendum that had happened around seventy-four years ago and which led to the Partition of Assam is a crucially significant episode that has not been told adequately in mainstream Partition histories. The subtext of Partition (Sylhet) is more absorbing than the dominant text of Bengal Partition because it offers an entirely new perspective to our understanding of Partition politics. (Hossain, 2013) In recent times, questions have started being asked about the reasons behind such absence of representation and inadequate visibility of this important chapter of Partition. It had in reality permanently changed the lives and futures of generations of Sylhetis who were displaced from their homeland to arrive as refugees in the newly formed nation-state. In the wake of the decision to hold the Sylhet Referendum, there was a sincere assumption that Referendum would initiate a proper, clear mandate on the issue of Partition. Unfortunately, the reality was otherwise, a great number of people were displaced, dispossessed and rendered homeless within a very short span of time. Subsequent to the Referendum, most of Sylhet, except the three and a half thanas of Patharkandi, Badarpur, Karimganj and Ratabari, was transferred to East Pakistan. Referring to the complex layers of contextual politics and machinations that shaped the orchestration of the referendum, Mousumi Dutta Pathak (2012) notes that it was the “shared responsibility of the two religious communities of East Pakistan- the Hindus and the Muslims and the two linguistic communities of Assam or specifically the Brahmaputra Valley- the Assamese and the Bengalis.” (159) Because a sense of unpreparedness prevailed around the event, the displaced community struggled hard to negotiate with the changed circumstances. This forced displacement of Sylhetis, as argued by Anindita Dasgupta, “created and erased the newly drawn national boundaries by building diasporas and ‘de-territorialized’ fractured identities across South Asia on the one hand, and by raising serious questions about the authenticity and citizenship of Partition migrants on the other.” (2014, p.15) Seven decades on, this specter of the past and contentions surrounding its materiality raise fundamental questions about memory, home, and identity.

In this context, it is useful to indicate the potential of literary representations of Sylhet chapter of Partition to understand the negotiations of the public as well as personal memories of this historical experience. Literature is perhaps one of the most potent means of properly expressing essential truths about human dilemmas and understanding the world around us. It is useful to recall what Svend Erik Larsen (2016) notes about the role of literature:

Human experience, broken or not, is always local; it takes place as it were. But literature is always invested with translocal motifs, genres, metaphors, symbols, plots; characters travel across cultural boundaries in order for any local literature to come into being and, hence, to suggest interpretations of a local life world. Literature makes possible a shared

understanding of human experience, but it does so by turning it into memory in a translocal perspective. (514)

The issue of how and what to represent in the midst of loss and crisis of displacement was not easy to resolve, especially keeping in mind the fraught history of Referendum politics and its connected dissonances. Furthermore, people who were at the receiving end of Partition-induced displacement were intensely busy resettling and starting life anew. These groups of displaced Sylheti people were engaged in rebuilding lives and homes in different parts of northeast. Moreover, the experience of loss and pain was raw and fresh for many to be able to come up with meaningful articulations. A sense of reticence marked literary imagination of creative writers and artists who could have taken this up. This initial lack of literary responses, in the words of Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and Dipendu Das, should be viewed as a failure of the writers to “distance themselves from their immediate context and explore the themes in literary productions.” (Bhattacharjee & Das, 2012, p.xi) It is pertinent to note that Barak Valley of Assam, which is Bhattacharjee and Das’s point of reference, happens to be the primary locus of most discussions concerning Sylheti culture and society in a post Partition milieu. Speaking about this pall of silence surrounding Partition, Amitabha Dev Choudhury points towards the lack of any internal evidence which may bring any ready-made answer to the issue. He further contends that “there is not a single signifier anywhere that can tempt the reader to read this silence itself as a narrative.” (Dev Choudhury, 2013) Eventually, this silence was challenged and new voices emerged to embody different layers of issues signifying post Partition predicament. One witnesses how the experience of loss and pain, consequent to displacement, produced important reflections on exile and memories of a lost home. A popular folk song records this measure of dispossession and vulnerability poignantly:

“O dear kin, you have visited my home after a long time
 What shall I offer you here at my place?
 I have neither roof nor hearth, only endless woes
 Selling off all my possessions, I am bereft of all savings
 I left my homeland because of Partition....” [iii]

This song further tells us how home before Partition meant prosperity and availability, this lost world, described with markers of plentitude, is reflective of an intimate, endearing and everyday memory. Here, this powerful engagement with Partition through the lens of memory is suggestive of a larger issue predicated on emotions of longing, loss, and return. The evocation of a lost place and longing connected with it is central to the analysis of literature written about a home left behind by the Sylhetis. And while memory of a lost homeland is invariably imbued with a discourse of loss, the idea of return is something that remains deeply problematic. As Stephan Feuchtwang (2003) has posited that a home is a mappable place of shared memory, acts of remembering, grieving and yearning demonstrate avenues for multifold layers of understanding home and belonging. It is interesting to note here that quite a few fictional representations written about lost home in Sylhet and subsequent trauma play out in various ways this interconnectedness between territory and self. Jhumur Pandey’s short story “Lost and Found” (originally published as “Mokkhodasundorir Haranoprapti”) is an apt example of this. At one point, Mokkhoda, the central

figure in the story, reflects how her life is “based on memories; on dreams; on pain.” (Pandey, 2017, p.283) In exploring the relationship between mapping of places and the functional aspect of nostalgia Elizabeth Wilson (1997) points out that romance of nostalgia is tied both to a place which is lost and that we tend to understand our present through the remote perspective of the past. A complex web of desire and memory through which homeland is constructed by the protagonist here is symptomatic of many such constructions by survivors of Partition. Lore Segal in her work “Memory: The Problems of Imagining the Past” (1998) claims how recollection is a double experience like a double exposure, the time frame in which one remembers superimposes itself on the remembered time and the two images fail to synchronize perfectly at any point. The short story is replete with a delirious outpouring of an individual about a spatial entity of the past that is defined through its plentitude, bountifulness, and a kind of emotional comfort that is completely absent in post Partition life. The fragmented, non-sequential narrative switching continuously between past and present is heavily invested on the production of a sheltered home which is profoundly connected with the identity of the speaker. Her desire for her village concentrates equally on objects and activities thereby representing an affective intensity for a world that was known, whole, and that also must be experienced as a lack in the present context. This compulsion, as explained by Halbwachs, (1950) is the reason for remembering places and objects. Focusing on an amalgamation of objects and activities, Mokkhoda remembers her land, the sky, the water, and the sports had she indulged in:

“Mokkhoda remembers playing prisoner in the rain. She remembers Bamacharan Bhattacharya’s little school. Steamed leaves of amrul, the soft flesh inside palm fruits, tall tamarind trees, Karimchacha, the banks of the river Manu, Nehru at Panchabati, Aminabibi, a sweet dish made of taro roots. Some patchy visions and memories assail her.” (Pandey,2017, p.283)

Her remembrance in terms of earth, water, plants and other elements of nature can be read as a layered lamentation of emotions she associates with the topography of her erstwhile home and it also serves as a reminder of an embodied experience of a territory with which she shares a deep sense of belonging. The noted author Amit Chaudhuri, discussing Ritwik Ghatak’s engagement with Partition in his films, records how air, water, and sky are invoked as properties available to the homeless to embark on the task of memory-making. Chaudhuri notes:

Ghatak’s images of Partition, thus, are the elemental ones of land, water, and sky, suggesting the composition of the universe in its original form, and belonging to mythology of creation. It’s not so much history-book Partition we have here as the world as an immigrant or exile or newcomer would see it, starting from scratch and reconstructing his life and his environment from nothing.” (Chaudhuri, 1997, p.95)

Mokkhoda with her lost son and husband seeks out an escape from a life that has turned topsy-turvy owing to Partition and which shall not offer her any relief from her immediate circumstances of destitution and denial. Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2013) in her analysis of Siddharth Deb’s novel demonstrates how this “spatio-temporal elsewhere” with its vivid description of “tempestuous rivers, fishes and snakes, its groves overflowing with mangoes, guavas and jackfruits” is lost to Dr. Dam’s mind. (111) Kabir further contends how that left behind place is “a knot around which swirls remembering and forgetting, narrating and silencing.” (77) The concluding part of the story

foregrounds the need for connecting Mokkhoda's personal narrative of loss and rumination with the larger narrative of country's Partition and how she finds her lost husband and son not in the real sphere of existence, but in the realm of a fractured, dream-like sequence of narration. The final lines of the story which say, "the shower of memories and dreams are running in rivulets down her shrunken body" (Pandey, 283) and also how "Mokkhoda spreads her arms out in deep and longing" (Pandey, 283) give a sense of the merger of the linguistic with the somatic to establish an illusory reconciliation.

In Amitabha Dev Choudhury's short story "Wake Up Call" (originally published as *Ghoombhanganija*), it is possible to discern an interweaving of the theme of memories sweeping across generations and the texture of longing for another time and place. This story told from the perspective of a second-generation recipient of the Partition experience represents the trope of interconnectedness and entanglement of impressions of homeland and mental cartography remembered, desired and articulated by different subject positions. Just as arbitrariness of political boundaries and new forms of belonging and citizenship had assailed Thamma in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, similar mode of affliction is conveyed through the character of Masi, an elderly woman in the neighbourhood of the narrator.

Alastair Bonnett, (2015) talking about the persistence of loss in the realm of migrant nostalgia, makes us aware about how loss and longing have different consequences. He states how this sense of loss and longing "range from and shift between creative attempts to re-script identity in new contexts to forms of exclusionary identity politics" (p. 97). Masi's persistent yearning for home and concurrently her desire to return that remains unfulfilled imply a loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty which is examined as an important component in Bryan Turner's discussion about the second level of nostalgia. (Turner, 1987) Masi's mental map cataloguing "lush green fields; vast horizons, endless expanse of water, full-grown crops of corn bending downwards in the vast open golden fields; the archetypal dwelling places of rural Bengal; the big ponds; the clamouring fish; the village barns spilling over with the overflowing reserve of harvest..." (Dev Choudhury, 2012, p.142) is indicative of a reflexive, interminable relationship that she shared with her village. Edward Said contends in "Invention, Memory and Place" that in recent years it is possible to witness an increasing interest in the interface between humanities and social sciences: memory and geography or, more specifically, the study of human space. (Said, 2000) This aspect is evident in most of the stories discussed in this paper. Anjali Gera Roy in her essay, "Memories of lost homes" (2020) provides compelling insights into the ongoing debates surrounding notions of home, displacement and longing in the context of India's Partition. She notes, "The choice of places and objects- a street, a terrace, a fruit, a snack, a sport or a melody- that evoke sentiments of longing in Partition refugees is inexplicable to those who have not partaken in the cultural memories of those shared pleasures" (Gera Roy, 2020, p.138). The overt source of pain and loss in "Wakeup Call" is a kind of irresolution that will forever affect generations of displaced community in the northeast because of Partition's cartographic consequences. What Jahanara Kabir terms as "Cartographic Irresolution" (Kabir, 2013, 72) while contextualizing northeast's marginalization and its consequent identity politics is powerfully evoked in the narrative through constant endeavours to arrive at an understanding of a settled home. The emotional anatomy of Masi in relation to the territory she is unable to go back to throws out the set of complications unleashed by political conundrum on individuals who must wrestle with multiple identities, pasts and presents. Masi's

chronic 'out of place' situation is set in parallel motion with the narrator's own sense of exile and longing. Focusing on inter-generational dynamics of remembrance and forgetting, the story is structured around a complex encounter between two generations' affective ties with their partitioned pasts. For the narrator, a historical event that had happened much before his birth continues to influence his identity formation and determines inscription of such formations within particular spaces. The author examines psychological effects of quest for a stable and settled home on a subjectivity that does not remain unified, it gets blurred between the narrator, his mother and the character of Masi, as he reflects, "I wonder, after all these years, why couldn't this land become her own? The search for one's homeland eventually becomes synonymous with the longing for one's childhood. Isn't it a familiar adage that in old age a man enters his second childhood?" (Dev Choudhury, 2012, p.144) Fragmentation of memory is the tenor of this short story and it is through this fragmented and oblique representation of memory that one discovers a concern with deeper patterns underlying everyday experience of dislocation and longing for an elsewhere.

Svetlana Boym (2001) talks about restorative nostalgia as something that involves a desire to "rebuild the lost home" and views the past with an eye towards reconstituting and recreating it, it also implies a desire to relive those special moments. Very often, for the displaced community, it is used as a kind of strategy to ameliorate struggles pertaining to the experience of dislocation. It becomes important to draw on the restorative potential of nostalgia for the native home to cope with their existing dilemmas. Anjali Gera Ray gives an insightful analysis of emotional affiliation and affective belonging to the homeland and its subsequent impact and in this regard, she comments that nostalgic recollections oftentimes in selecting the convivial "exhibit an exilic yearning for a lost home and are coloured with emotions of love, care, attachment, friendship, happiness and comfort for spaces, objects, practices and people." (Gera Roy, 2020, p.132) Mukti Choudhury's memory piece "Tale of Broken India" (originally published as "*Bhanga Bharater Kotha*") is another reminder of the role of memory-work in which identity of the displaced is brought into being at the intersection of place and selective remembrance. The narrative conducts a motion towards a place and time, a journey back in time from the ruins in the present. Like many other Partition survivors, the narrator places an array of visual detailing to establish his affiliation with lost physical space with all its material features and also to underline the close connection between memory and displacement. As the author describes:

Who do I explain and how do I explain that a sense of *Viraha*^[iii] plays through my entire being? Through a journey into that remote homeland, I derive a wonderful pleasure, I smell the earth of my motherland. I feel the soft touch of paddy grain and I affectionately embrace the fragrance of shiuli-rose-gandharaj flowers. I rest my head on the shore of Manu listening to fairy tales, at midnight of Monsoon I hear the cacophony of the boatmen of Hakaluki, I listen to the tune of Bhatiali, I take a long walk amidst Surma Valley touching the tealeaves on my way to the villages of Baramchal, Samser Nagar, Sreemangal, Chhatak, Sayestaganj, Chunarughat, Habiganj and immerse myself.... (Choudhury, 2013, p.245)

The author clings on to his personal memories describing and evoking haptic, sonic, and visual dimensions of his own place in the midst of decreasing collective anchoring and attempts to bring forth a unified locality with an enshrined past that will activate a better understanding of his self.

Raymond Williams (1985) noted that “landscape takes on a different quality if you are one of those who remember” (72) and the remembering agent here through his cognitive mapping brings alive distant Sylhet land with all its everyday splendors and that mapping is constitutive of his own sense of self. It is useful to note here that remembrance, time, place and loss are phenomenological realities and it clearly implies how echoes of past places might resonate with displaced people also it is easy to map how the loss of a particular place produces a keen sense of nostalgia. One finds a similar resonance in Margaret E Farrar’s essay, “Amnesia, Nostalgia and Place Memory” (2011) where she argues how “accounts of people’s experiences of displacement—whether as a migrant, exile, or refugee—repeatedly emphasize the interconnections between body, mind, and place.” (728) Choudhury’s narrative shows how investment in memory entails the opening of a repeated process of continuous and fragile negotiations that may always remain a risk and may never offer final reconciliation. This is an essential point of view that runs through most of the narratives written about Partition. Indeed, this study has attempted to demonstrate how forms of longing and mental cartography assume a new poignancy in the context of newer battles of identity politics. The canvas of representations produced by Sylheti imagination insists on the layered nature of memory and illuminates our understanding of how home might not be a palpable, tangible entity, it might just exist only in writing.

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- [i] Hemango Biswas, the noted singer, composer, poet and political activist composed these memorable lines to convey his pain and angst after experiencing dislocation in the wake of Partition. The composition, in a way, talks about collective sense of suffering and longing for homeland.
- [ii] This widely sung Sylheti folk song brings forth the idea of dispossession and vulnerability that attends to it. The entire song echoes a kind of sadness for having lost everything due to Partition and it is sharply contrasted with prosperous life before the division had happened.
- [iii] Viraha refers to an emotion of separation and realization of love through that phase of separation. It is a common trope used in Partition fictions and reminiscences to express the intensity of longing for homeland on the other side of the border.

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