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Nostalgia, Refugee Identity and Disillusionment after Partition in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *East-West*

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Abstract:

The essay explores the theme of nostalgia and refugee identity in Sunil Gangopadhyay's epic-scale Bangla novel *Purba-Paschim*, translated by Enakshi Chatterjee as *East-West*. The novel, with its two expansive parts, is a monumental study of displacement and relocation. Using Homi Bhaba's notion of hybridity and third space, the essay will interrogate the new identities that emerge from interaction of two cultures, and how it is beyond one to commit oneself to a particular identity in case of diaspora of any kind. It will also explore the function of nostalgia and the difficulties faced by refugees in the attempt of resettlement. The essay also looks with a Marxist perspective at the different effects of Partition on different classes of refugees, and examines how class was a major factor in hatred towards refugees as well as communal disharmony, as represented in the novel.

Keywords: Partition, identity, hybridity, class conflict, refugee, diaspora, communal relations, resettlement.

"The country was divided on the basis of religion. But it was soon found, that religion was no barrier at all, but at the same time religion could not form the basis of union among individuals"(Gangopadhyay 38)*

Diaspora of any kind entails nostalgia for the former homeland. This often involves an imaginative reconstruction of the home that is lost in time. Also, new cultural forms and new identities emerge from the diaspora process, resulting in the origination of what Homi K. Bhaba calls the 'third space' in a slightly different context. This essay will examine Sunil Gangopadhyay's epic-scale Bangla novel *Purba-Paschim*, translated by Enakshi Chatterjee as *East-West*, to explore the theme of nostalgia and imaginative reconstruction of lost homeland effects on refugees of different classes, and also try to find out the economic roots of the racial hatred towards refugees. It will also argue that the novel successfully demonstrates that resettlement is as complex a predicament as displacement. In conclusion, the essay will draw attention to Gangopadhyay's non-partisan stance by bringing to focus his delineation of the economic origin of communal animosity during and around the time of Partition, and his contention that there are other components of identity more crucial than religion.

In Bengal, the Partition did not spark off genocidal violence comparable with the scale of Punjab massacre. The killings tended to be localized and sporadic. Hence, unlike North India where almost fifteen million people crossed the western borders in 1947 itself, the refugee influx in Bengal did not happen in one tidal wave (Chatterji 4). Refugees kept trickling in across the eastern frontier over a period of many decades. This explains the initial reason why the government took distinctly different approaches in dealing with the refugee crisis in Punjab and Bengal. Very unlike the speedy rehabilitation of refugees from West Pakistan in evacuee property, the Bengal crisis was ignored and denied for a long time.(Chatterji 7) Gangopadhyay's epic-scale novel often takes breaks from the fictional plot and devotes chapters to retelling history. There, the central government's apathy towards Bengali refugees draws his ire when he mentions how "The Bengalis were a constant source of headache" (47) to "pukka sahib" (44) Nehru. Gangopadhyay, who had clear communist sympathies, vehemently disapproves of Nehru who was compassionate towards the poor but "One couldn't possibly think of them after the sunset" when time had to be devoted to "parties, dances, some mild flirting, drinking a peg or two"(45).

The novel is a testimony of how the original inhabitants of West Bengal, who, in common dialect, are referred to as Ghotis, were initially hospitable to the well-off refugees who were capable of looking after themselves, and brought material and intellectual assets to West Bengal. However, the rehabilitation of millions of unskilled, impoverished refugees was not something West Bengal was keen to be burdened with. The novel represents two classes of refugee families, the erstwhile wealthy Majumders and the lower class squatters, and the very different fate that they share.

It is not to say that the relatively well-placed refugees were heartily welcomed by residents of Calcutta. Quite naturally, the sudden influx of innumerable refugees cannot be a welcome event in an already overcrowded city. With the rise of the Bangal, that is, East Bengali, intellectual, the emergence of Bangal women in the public domain, and the proliferation of refugee colonies in the very heart of the capital city Kolkata, the West Bengalis naturally feared an erosion of their cultural space. This resulted in negative stereotyping and derogatory cultural codification of East Bengalis. The novel shows how this cultural insecurity, apart from bursting forth as open denigration of all things Bangal, also took the apparently innocuous form of laughter.

Supriti, an East Bengali woman married into a nouveau rich family in Calcutta, is the recipient of her marital family's resentment when her husband gets killed in a scuffle with the refugees. Compelled to leave home with an underage daughter after her husband's death, she complains, "To them everybody from East Bengal is the same" (142). Unconcealed hostility towards refugees becomes resplendent in her husband's uncle, the affluent landowner Jaladbaran's internal monologue, "All the bastard refugees- they are all the same...I shall kick your ass and send you across the Padma" (119).

Apart from this very obvious and open slandering of East Bengalis, cultural anxiety also expressed itself in the form of seemingly harmless banter. From children's comic books like *Hada-Bhoda* and *Nonte-Phonte* to the representation of the immensely successful comedian, Bhanu Bandopadhyay, in popular cinema, the apparent cultural superiority of West Bengalis shows through in their derision of the food habits, dressing pattern and accent of Bangals. When the Natun Bangla Bank closes its shutters and drowns the Majumder family in misfortune, the pater familias, Pratap, has to endure his friend's jest, "the owner of the bank is a countryman of yours" (378). The East Bengali accent, provoking laughter even till present day, is ridiculed when Pratap's professor "affectionately" says, "where are you from my dear child? From the other side of the Padma, I suppose! Do not fracture the English language with your atrocious accent" (56).

Gangopadhyay depicts that the ambivalent standpoint of the residents of Calcutta was the natural response in a situation so convoluted. Thus, Tridib, although sympathetic to the cause of the refugees, hesitates to entertain the presence of refugee leader, Harit Mondol, in his residence. Thus, Pratap's otherwise innocuous and inoffensive friend, Biman Behari, gets embittered with Pratap's violent reaction to his joke about refugees. He finds ridiculous the refugees' attempt to preserve their separate identity and reference to East Bengal as their home even after Partition. Thus, men of "cultured and refined tastes" (240) discuss over a cup of evening tea how the refugees should be "scattered"(239) all over the country instead of making the economy of Bengal bear the entire burden of Partition. The rehabilitation program for refugees, which the squatters describe as pushing people to "the jungle of Dandak", seems like a constructive creation of "Bengali pockets" in the Calcutta bhadraloks' perspective" (239).

Such cold and grudging reception in West Bengal was unforeseen by the refugees, and, as the novel shows, their response to the situation was equally problematic. The opportunist Kanu dispassionately decides 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). The classical singer, Biswanath, falls into times so bad that he ends up singing for the prostitutes. Unable to deal with the unhappy turn of fate, he resorts to alcoholism and dies of tuberculosis.

Gangopadhyay skillfully juxtaposes impersonal government accounts with individual stories of trauma. Refugee identity was most notably marked by the contradictory as well as complementary sense of nostalgia and memory of trauma (Chakrabarty 2). By making space for historical narratives between chapters pertaining to the main plot where characters express sentiment of nostalgia and trauma, the novel brings out the truth of the observation, "memory begins where history ends" (Bose 85).

The traumatic experience of being uprooted from one's homestead leaves a permanent mark in the refugee psyche in the form of 'desh'. As Raychaudhary observes, the idea of 'desh' for

Bengali refugees is very different from the patriotic construction of nation that the term generally evokes. The poignance that the word carries in Bengali is lost in translation. The word runs through the novel as a late-motif. The Majumder family refers to their present abode in Calcutta as “basha”, that is, a temporary place of residence, whereas the abandoned homestead in East Bengal continues to be imagined as “bari”, that is, the permanent dwelling (Raychaudhary 6). As can be seen in Pratap and his mother Suhasini's incurable nostalgia, “desh” is associated with the foundation that their ancestors had laid over generations. “Desh” is an enduring constituent of their self-identity. Being the place of their birth, childhood and growing up, it remains in their mind irreplaceable as home.

The refugee psyche consistently juxtaposed the cacophony of Calcutta with the tranquility of Eastern villages. To become displaced from one's “vastubhita”, that is ancestral land, to become an “udvastu” or a refugee is persistently considered as the gravest of misfortunes (Chakrabarty 4). Thus, Harit Mondol says, “I don't blame any of you, it is our bad luck that we have become refugees” (242). Even he, who had been a lower caste, lower class farmer in East Bengal, and could not possibly have led a utopian life earlier, idealizes his past (240). Amidst a scene of family reunion after many years, what looms large in the minds of the characters are the family gatherings in the ancestral house and how “The Ratcliff decision has put an end to such scenes of happiness” (145). Milan Kundera describes nostalgia as “something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing”. Suhasini exemplifies such kind of nostalgia. She finds it more strenuous to come to terms with the loss of her homestead than the loss of her husband (22). She cannot think of India as anything more than a provisional abode and longs to return to her ancestral Malkhanagar, “Why can't we go back to our own place?” (146). Recalling memories of beauty, sacredness and enduring cultural values, she is unable to understand that her return is impossible because their ancestral house has been appropriated and turned into a government office.

The refugee psyche found it arduous to undergo the abrupt and unforeseen change in economic circumstances. Not long ago economically comfortable people were required to turn to begging or menial jobs. As the novel shows, “This hurt their ego initially but hunger was a great leveler” (270). Any work, however poorly paid, was a blessing to the destitute refugees illegally squatting on government or private property, on the receiving end of police and landlord violence. Pratap's inability to come to terms with the reduced means of his family is unambiguously expressed in his discomfort in travelling amidst ‘plebeians’ in third class compartment. One witnesses Pratap struggling to keep up the family tradition of distributing gifts during Durga Puja even though he is financially drained in the process. His shift from smoking Players Number Three to Maypole subtly reveals how drastically the family fortunes have gone downhill.

The novel makes it clear that the remembered homeland in refugee nostalgia is at best a fantasy, an idealized recollection. Even though the visualization of the past makes refugee characters

idealize the villages of the East as idyllic haunts of tranquility and contentment, Gangopadhyay punctures those romanticized flashbacks with instances of communal intolerance that were a part of their mundane reality. He holds up the mirror to the communal disharmony that showed through in quotidian life prior to Partition, and thus, asks readers to take with a pinch of salt the Bengali-Hindu's nostalgic reconstruction of the past.

Back in the pre-Partition days, refused shelter in high-caste Muslim friend's house who pride themselves on being "a family of Syeds"(65), Pratap receives a jolt. He had been used to "Muslims having a servile attitude towards the Hindus and the Hindus put on a patronizing air" (75). Being considered low caste by the Muslim patriarch, his professed secularism takes a blow as he swears never to set foot in a Muslim household again. Memory of exclamations such as "That boy is a Muslim? I had taken him to be a Bengali!" makes Mamun support the cause of Pakistan (147). Refused food in glass utensils and forced to eat from paper packets in Hindu eateries, the once secular Mamun gets drawn into communal politics. Thus, when the enraged refugee leader, Harit Mondol, accuses the "educated mussalman", that is, the Muslim League, of having "ruined the country through their politics"(240), the novel compels readers to recall that Bengal was no paragon of communal harmony even before talks of Partition began.

The novel shows class antagonism was a major strand of the religious bias that alienated the two communities. This is best exemplified in a heated argument that the two friends Pratap and Mamun have regarding the appointment of a Muslim professor in a university. The League ministry selects a Muslim candidate with a third class M.A. even though a Hindu candidate with first class marks was available for the post. Pratap is dismayed by what he thinks is his friend's support for "dirty politics" but the novel asks us to consider the validity of Mamun's argument as well, "Hindus and Muslims can't live in harmony unless they are at par." When Pratap retorts, "It never occurs to me that I am a Hindu, but you keep harping on it", one is reminded that only the privileged can afford to ignore the social imbalance around him (150).

The communal blame game continues for decades after Partition as Pratap fumes indignantly, "they have driven us out" (140), "they" clearly referring to the Muslims. Communal tensions escalate in a heated argument between affluent Indian Muslim Shahjahan Choudhury and Harit Mondol. Harit cannot reconcile himself to the fact that apolitical farmers like him were ousted from their homesteads, their livelihoods snatched away whereas "educated mussalmans", who, according to his understanding, are the root cause of their troubles, get to "drive cars happily" in India, "You will be living in Calcutta and we are being pushed to Dandakaranya" (241). Shahjahan admits to the distance that has erupted between Hindus and Muslims after Partition. A realistic man, he declines to blame refugees for nurturing disdain for Muslims because he recognizes the extent of their suffering which drives them to anger. He understands that it is fruitless to take offence at the words of a poor, uneducated refugee when his own educated circle shows the same signs of estrangement. He acknowledges how both Hindus and Muslims cease to

express their authentic feelings about sensitive issues in the presence of anyone from the other community.

In the end, the novel seems to demonstrate the futility of dividing the country solely on the basis of religion. As the novel shows, both the Hindus and Muslims of erstwhile East Bengal realize to their dismay that there are categories of identity more important than religion. The Bengali Hindus of the east and west “were more like two nations” (38). The refugees realized that in spite of the ostensible dissimilitude in the social behavior of the East Bengali Muslims, they were psychologically closer to them than the Bengalis of the west. Bengali Muslims like Mamun who had supported the formation of Pakistan get disillusioned when their Bengali identity comes into conflict with the form of religion and patriotism that West Pakistan attempted to promote, “a rice-eating Bengali cannot possibly adopt Urdu culture in one generation” (166). The novel’s enduring message seems to be that “tyrants and exploiters have no religion- they were everywhere”. This is the lesson that both the communities of Bengal learn through the catastrophe of Partition.

Notes:

*Gangopadhyay, Sunil. Trans. Enakshi Chatterjee. *East-West (Purbo-Paschim), Part One*. Sahitya Akademi, 2000. Further references to the text will be indicated with page numbers in brackets.

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