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Homes Across Borders: A Critical Study of Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers*

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Abstract:

One of the most disastrous consequences of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the forced exile of millions of commoners. Theoretically, borders are drawn to mark the distinction between two entities. However, the violence, bloodshed, and uprooting, caused by the border charted by Cyril Radcliffe blurred those distinctions. The pain of losing one's *vatan* (homeland) and its socio-cultural topography alters the perception of home for the victims. In the cataclysm of Partition, the emotive conception of home was clouded by the metanarratives of nationhood. With an objective to bring to the fore the fragmented understanding of home for the Partition victims, the paper critically studies Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers* (2016) to examine the different strategies adopted by migrants to come to terms with the loss of home. The paper problematizes the various motifs of Paul's novel to assert that the understanding of borders is beyond what the historical readings suggest.

Keywords: Partition, Home, Border, Culture, Violence, Heterotopia, Citizen, Paul, Sleepwalkers.

The Partition of India changed the dynamics of human society, relations, and the socio-cultural topography of the two newly independent nation states of India and Pakistan. The kakotopia of Partition forced approximately twelve million people to evacuate their homes and look for one across the border. Such a large number requires the event to be studied from a cultural perspective alongside national history. Home is not only a geographical entity; it is a space that a

person inherits from his/her preceding generations and weaves his/her own identity around. Partition as an atavistic event destabilizes the idea of home as a safe and secure space, consequently forcing human beings to negotiate with the idea of spatial and identity matrix. The connotations of home are not monolithic, they are diverse because of the variegated nature of the departure of the migrants. The cataclysm that followed the independence of the two nations brutally ruptured the composite socio-cultural topography of pre-Partition India. Migrants who left their homeland in hopes of a new nation were disillusioned by the violence and lootings that marked the genesis of their newly founded nation. The baffling awakening to the reality of the present inflicted violence on the psyche of the migrants. The nostalgia of home is a recurrent theme in Partition narratives. The legacy of Partition kept reappearing as communal riots, which made people yearn for their homes across the border while sitting in their newly allotted houses. The longing is for the home of pre-Partition temporality because the same home failed to provide victims with security in the face of communal riots. Partition literature makes available to us the various methods that migrants adopted to deal with the idea of home, wherein each character becomes a site for the negotiation of the event. Partition writers, through their experiences, imagination, and articulation, showcase the rupture in time and space continuum in the concept of something as personal and as intimate as home. The purpose of this paper is to deal with the various strategies employed by people to come to terms with pre- and post-Partition homes, in the light of Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers*. The paper also asserts the importance of Partition narratives as a tool to examine the human history of Partition which fails to make an appearance in the official historical accounts.

In Partition narratives, the grief of lost homes is often articulated as nostalgia. The word nostalgia is derived from 'nostos' (return home) and 'algos' (pain) which explains the longing for a home that people left behind, either for their survival or in prospect of a better future. Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers* critiques the concept of Partition by showing how even after having their own country, people were homeless: socially, culturally, and morally. Home is located in a space, it has a structure in time, and because it provides for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions (Douglas 289). Once the migrants found shelter in the new nation, they realized that they were unfit for this space and in order to justify their decision, they tried to go back to their roots in order to reroot themselves. Paul critiques the two-nation theory by starting *Sleepwalkers* with the superimposition of idea of *desh* (homeland) onto the idea of *rashtra* (nation),

“This is Lucknow. With the Partition of the country the *mohajirs* (migrants) migrated from Lucknow to Karachi” (Paul 12). The nostalgia of home makes *Sleepwalkers*, “a tale of two cities instead of two nations” (Agha 121). It was nearly impossible for them to forget the culture they had left behind, for it was in that society they started acquiring memories, and it is in that very society that they “recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 38). The hiatus in social circles is captured very realistically in the novel in migrants’ search for migrant servants, as it was a matter of trust, “Didn’t I tell you Abbajaan . . . not to employ and trust any Sindhi sain as a watchman?” (Paul 35). The faith in the “other” of the same religion was shaken because of their different lifestyle and nativity. Through the character of Sain Baba, Paul points out the absurdity of concrete borders and nationality, for even though he was a native, he remained homeless. His homelessness is a result of socio-economic borders, borders which cannot be seen but felt. Paul writes, “Sain Baba’s poverty has made him a perfect refugee, running from town to town in his own land, in search of his Pakistan” (115).

In order to live in the present, the migrants started living in the past by creating what Foucault refers to as “heterotopias” (Foucault 4). In the novel, the heterotopic reconceptualization of homeland destabilizes the utopic vision of the nation space. In their sleep, migrants shout slogans for the creation of Pakistan while walking on the streets of Pakistan. The construction of their spiritual Lucknow done on the geographical space of Karachi problematizes the concept of nation space. Heterotopias create an illusion and construct a double opposition to the real world outside, either denouncing the reality as illusion or creating a space that is as ordered as the real world is disordered (Vidler 19). Paul also discusses how these heterotopias problematize language. In *Sleepwalkers*, language becomes an integral part of one’s identity and an essence of home. Urdu speaking Lucknavis make the Sindhi natives of Karachi feel homeless in their own land. Fakir Babu feels intimidated by Ishaq Mirza’s fluency, “Your pure Urdu makes me nervous. What is important is that when we start talking to you Urduwalas we forget what we want to say and end up speaking like you” (Paul 27). As the heterotopia and the reality entered into each other’s domain, the inhabitants of both the spaces felt threatened. Paul uses the trope of madness in Deewane Maulvi’s character to depict the internalization of the native land by the migrants. The mass migration due to Partition was a historical fact but the innocence of Deewane Maulvi gives it human dimensions and transcends it to the level of tragedy. Hakim Jamaluddin is not mad but he has his identity deeply embedded in Malihabad, his homeland. Even after building a replica of

his old *haveli* (mansion), he looks for the essence of home in Malihabadi mangoes and the stolen family tree. The stolen family tree becomes the token of connectedness with the ancestors who lie buried in a land that he has no claim on. Paul's writing technique grips the reader with his witticism. All the petty issues converge together to critique the major event of Partition. The instance of the theft of the family tree poses an ironic stance at the creation of borders that denied migrants their historiography, leaving them in "profound uncertainties" (Rushdie 10). The extent of connectedness with the roots was such that Achhi Begum personifies Lucknow, "Such a shrunken little face it had" (Paul 16). By creating a simulacrum of Lucknow, they were not just bringing Lucknow to Karachi but also turning Karachi into Lucknow. The illusion of home becomes as real as their pain. Paul presents the psychological state of migrants with a very poignant statement by Deewane Maulvi, "Our Lucknow is the only Lucknow. We don't recognize any other Lucknow" (18). Even after decades of Partition, memories of old home haunt these people like "ineradicable and insistent shadows and continue to provide images of the desired community" (Bhalla 44). Natives are the extensions of their native land, as Paul writes, "Natives do not just represent their land, they become the native land" (18). The language, food habits, dressing styles, and musical preferences add on to the distinctions between the migrants and the natives. Achhi Begum's habit of consuming one paan after the other is symbolic of her Lucknavi lifestyle, while Ishaq, who is aware of the present scenario, starts eating more in order to fit in a Sindhi neighborhood. Almost all characters in *Sleepwalkers* are migrants, including Sain Baba, their entire life becomes a constant hunt for stability of home. The collective voice of migrants says, "Even after creating a whole Lucknow, exactly as it was, over this long period of time, why do we still have this gnawing sense of being strangers in our own homes?" (Paul 17). They are existing in a liminal space, not only in between the two nations and the national identity, but also in a liminality between the reality and dream (Ghosh 2). The loss of home becomes tragic because it goes beyond the material things they had left behind; it is the essence of their being that they try to get back.

The reality of the supposed *hijrat* (pilgrimage) came with a disillusionment which reversed the preconceived notion of the sacred land. Here, the starting point became the religious destination of the migrants, where only a few could reach. Salman Rashid calls his journey to his ancestral home "pilgrimage" (Rashid 17). No religious redemption, which was the primary reason behind the formation of a new nation, is shown to be happening after Partition. With the pain of separation

and the alienation from reality, the lost home not only becomes a refuge but also undertakes spiritual connotations. In *Sleepwalkers*, no one forces Deewane Maulvi out of his spiritual space. Living in a liminal space becomes an intimate act. Although Ishaq Mirza was growing out of his personal space to become a part of cosmopolitan space, he respected the liminal space of Deewane Maulvi. Paul writes, “If his pleasant dreams were to shatter, he would be a broken man, she felt. Let him live happily in his ancestors’ house and city- just as he is- at least he is at peace” (59). By turning Karachi into Lucknow, migrants recreate their past through the collective framework. The act of writing also becomes a refuge for the victims of Partition. Ishaq Mirza and Hashim’s exchanging of letters in *Sleepwalkers* becomes an intimate act of sharing the same feelings of homelessness and alienation. The sustenance of their friendship through letters provides them with a space of relief from the constant migration.

For many women, however, it was not the first migration. In a patriarchal set-up, a woman is given an identity by her male kin. In *Sleepwalkers* there are women whose first migration was from their paternal home to their husband’s home, which did not come with the loss of homeland. If Partition rips migrants off of their identity, then women migrants were doubly affected by the loss of identity. Thus, the memories of home bring along with them the memories of first migration. In *Sleepwalkers*, the first migration of a woman is described through a folk song, “*Hum to babula re / Khoonte ki gaiyaan / Jidhar haanko hunk jayen re*” (“Oh father dear/ We are but cows tied to your stakes/Going only where you herd us”; Paul 57). Instead of giving migrants a distinct identity and security amongst people of their own religion, Partition created a sense of anxiety and disharmony. Taking the case of Hashim, his search for stability does not end in Pakistan. As a new citizen, he felt betrayed by the economic institutions of Pakistan. Nationalism and nativity were interfering in the economic domain as well. Nawab Mirza pays the cost of being a migrant every time he is faced by his workers. The differences between the Sindhi neighborhood and their self-proclaimed Lucknow were so stark that Chand Bibi is concerned about her husband dashing “off to Pakistan every morning” (Paul 22). Paul presents the irony of borders through the constant violence at the backdrop of the novel, which ultimately takes the front stage with the bomb blast at Nawab Mahal. Deewane Maulvi’s family was punished for claiming the geographical, social, and economic spaces of the natives. On the other hand, the Hindu Judge, Chandani, who continues to live in his native land had lost his nativity to the Partition, “one word

out of his mouth and he would be nabbed as an alien in his own Sindhu-desh" (49). These people were the victims of maps.

While struggling with their present state, migrants often turn to nature, sometimes, to reroot themselves with the familiar trees they used see back at home. "Hakim Jamaluddin, after carrying scores of chemical experiments, has performed a miracle of growing in the soil of Karachi rows and rows of trees of Malihabadi mangoes" (Paul 28). In the backdrop of violence, Deewane Maulvi's gentle conversation with the flowers becomes a respite. In Partition narratives, the technique of intertwining a love story with the pain of separation from home is often used. Love evokes a range of emotions in the characters, making the distance between the lovers all the more painful to be covered. In *Sleepwalkers*, Achhi Begum embraces Deewane Maulvi's *deewanagi* (madness) for Lucknow. And after her death, which Deewane Maulvi refuses to believe, her imaginary presence in Lucknow makes him believe in his ultimate return to home. These love stories do not lose their essence amidst the tragic consequences of Partition. The psychological struggle of coming to terms with the memories of lost home and the reality of present home starts from the cover page of Partition novels. The cover of *Sleepwalkers*, published by Katha, depicts a picture of a man sitting on a mat, with his arms around the whole city of Lucknow. The mat signifies how the memories of past became an *ibaadat* (worship) for the migrants. Deewane Maulvi never lets his Lucknow get separated from him. The deracination from homeland led people to live a fragmented life, wherein, they became mere apparitions with their identities lingering between who they wanted to be and who they ought to be, as citizens of a nation. Any space that had once provided a person with fulfillment and security bears the "essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard 5). The tragic harvest of partition made people yearn for the soil of their homeland. After being shocked into awareness, that for last fifty years he had been living in Karachi, Deewane Maulvi Sahab tells Ishaq Mirza, "I have seen your Karachi to my heart's content. I am homesick now. Send me back to my Lucknow. If possible, today itself, in fact, just now, beta!" (Paul 109). No matter what the reason of departure had been, the memories of pre-Partition days come to rescue the riot-stricken refugees. Millions of people migrated, thinking that the replacement would be temporary, but the reality of permanent uprooting made them mourn the loss of home. The idea of home gets further problematized when Nawab Mirza's children, Salim and Dillo, start considering Ishaq Mirza's Sindhi wife as their mother and Karachi as their home, Lucknow. With the third generation, migrant culture starts merging with the local culture, finding

its roots in the new soil. However, the home is still referred to as Lucknow, “But *this* is Lucknow, Bade Abbu” (Paul 110). Their reference to home as Lucknow is because of the legacy of their predecessors, who experienced the trauma of losing their home. This legacy becomes a “postmemory,” creating a conflict between their inheritance and experiential reality (Roy 12). Another instance of postmemory can be seen in case of the young Hindustani (Indian) Sindhi lawyer who comes to Pakistan to see his father’s old house and city. Even after having a home in India, he has come to see his ancestral home in Pakistan.

Joginder Paul’s novel gives a psychological glance at the violent event of Partition. It shirks the glories of freedom and nationhood aside and gives center stage to the sense of loss for the natal homes. The borders were successful in forcing people to migrate, but proven feeble at separating them from their native culture. They departed from their natal land but never arrived. *Sleepwalkers* marks the journey of sustenance, restructuring, and negotiation with the present, which is subjective to all. The grotesque idea of creating a civilization based on religion snatched away the sense of belongingness from millions of people, rendering them homeless and houseless, left with memories to cling on to. In the hostilities of the present state of homelessness, memories of the lost home survive intact. Partition problematizes the idea of home by creating a conflict between the idea of a citizen of a nation and an inhabitant of a culture. Over the years, people have settled and adapted to the alien culture, but they still struggle with the concept of home. Partition narratives impart as a historiography, an episode in history which had been marginalized. The resettlement and rehabilitation of migrants have been recorded in historical accounts as mere allotments of houses but Partition narratives present the human dimensions of it. Migrants reconstructed their lost homes through memories of the past on their present locations. *Sleepwalkers*, by showing the dichotomy between Deewane Maulvi’s romantic idealism and Ishaq’s pragmatism, sensitizes us to the concept of homelessness that was predominant after Partition.

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