“IS SHE A STEP-DAUGHTER?”

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PARTITION OF BENGAL IN ENGLISH ANTHOLOGIES & NOVELS

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When India celebrated fifty years of its Independence in 1997, there were a lot of activities connected with it. Apart from the festivities, seminars and cultural programmes, a great many magazines and journals brought out special numbers to mark the event. But it is unfortunate that the same event, which resulted in the partition of the country, was mostly forgotten. That 1947 saw India simultaneously freed – and divided—resulted in some sort of cultural amnesia and people tended to overlook the fact that with the departure of the British, one million people perished in the bloody partition and over ten million were displaced in the largest peace-time mass migration the twentieth century has recorded. But over the last decade a lot of interest is being generated upon the issue of Partition resulting not only in newer historical interpretations but also in rendering it in fiction and translation. An entire body of historical accounts, literature, films have expressed the angst of the sensitive Indian.

I: HISTORY VS. FICTION: WHERE THE TWAINS MEET

It is a well-known fact that the partition was the bloody curtain call of the struggle for independence. Simultaneously, it became the starting point of more contemporary movements to shape modern nationhood in India and Pakistan. The cause and the effect of this incident have plagued historians for several decades and several new theories are continuously being generated. The desire or dream to be able to write an omniscient account of historical events is something that most contemporary historiographers have openly abandoned. This shift in disciplinary practice is apparent in recent work by historiographers on India’s Partition who have redirected their attention towards explorations of ‘the particular’ rather than ‘the general’ in an effort to disrupt the state’s
universalizing and hegemonic historical narratives. Also several scholars are now seriously questioning the role of the historian in this interplay of the past and the present. They do not want to rely upon recreating the past “as it really happened” or locate it in a larger context. Writers like Gyanendra Pandey and other members of the ‘Subaltern Studies’ group have further obliterated the already blurred line dividing history and fiction, laying stress upon oral histories, obscure diaries and novels in order to enrich history and complement the months of painstaking perusal of official documents generated by the custodian of the state. Pandey even highlights the emotive issue of abducted women on both sides of the communal divide and suggests “the general discourse on Partition still functions as something like a gigantic rumour.”

As against the historians, there are also several literary scholars who dwell on the borderline between history and fiction in another way. Sandip Bandopadhyay, for instance, documents several memoirs of partition victims, some of whom prefer to remain in oblivion and try to completely forget the past. What persists, as memory isn’t simply an outcome of elite manipulation; it is also born of lived experience. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *Epar Bangla, Opar Bangla* is another case in point as the novel illustrates how creativity about the Partition challenges the accepted notion of history. Rittwik Ghatak’s creative output in films, plays, and short stories also question and challenge the platitude of mainstream history. Moreover, trends in recent Partition research represent a shift away from the parleys and betrayals in the domain of High Politics, towards an emphasis on the subalterns as both victims and perpetrators of violence, the sociology and motivation for widespread rioting, the resulting psychological trauma, and most importantly, the feminist concern with recovering lost stories of sexually violated and abducted women during the Partition.

In a recent publication by the unprofessional historian Tathagata Roy, entitled *My People Uprooted*, the dividing line between history and fiction is blurred as it narrates how two generations of Hindus from erstwhile East Pakistan reacted differently to the Partition. Rai Saheb Nagendra Kumar Sur was a leading lawyer of Noakhali in East Bengal in 1946. When the pro-Pakistan riots broke out that year, he was abducted by a Muslim League
gang, taken to a lonely spot and was asked to dig his own grave. Sur told his abductors that since he was going to be killed in any case, there was no reason why he should oblige them. He was bluntly told that if he obeyed he would die swiftly; otherwise death would be slow and painful. Sur is said to have obliged. He was then beheaded. Nagendra Kumar’s son, Prashanta Sur, who fled to India, joined the Communist party, became a stalwart of the refugee movement, and was even Mayor of Calcutta for some time. Interestingly enough, when the author met him on a number of occasions to talk about the refugee experience, he preferred to be silent about his father’s brutal murder.

I discuss the story of this book in details because it elucidates certain important issues. Roy’s polemic on the post-Partition trauma in Bengal attempts to grapple with the phenomenon of silence and amnesia. A refusal to reopen a family trauma could be a reason for this silence. An entire community, it would seem, went into a state of denial about its collective misfortune. It seemed as if all the victims were desperate to pretend that a horrible ethnic cleansing had not taken place in East Pakistan. A community that was in the forefront of military nationalism during the freedom struggle was cornered into forgetting the assaults on its dignity. In his narrative, Roy goes over the history of the exodus of some six million Hindus from East Pakistan – it did not happen at one go in 1947 but was spread over 25 years – and locates the willful denial of the past in a spurious reconstruction of the state’s Hindu-Muslim relations. He narrates a forgotten story of how intimidation, rape, murder and religious terror contributed in the dispossession of Hindus after 1947. Or rather we can say, even with sometimes-imperfect handling of evidence, focusing upon the micro-issues of particular individuals and events is now helping historians like Tathagata Roy gain greater understanding of that macro-event named Partition.

There are many more examples to prove that recent works mark a departure from causation and elite politics and the history of blame. This paradigmatic shift in approach is also not accidental or coincidental. Rejuvenated by a surge from the 1990 onwards, ‘Partition Studies’ is now a truly interdisciplinary domain. Violence, trauma, and the struggle for rehabilitation is the concern of scholars using unorthodox sources such as
fiction, memoirs, interviews, films, etc. to reconstruct alternative accounts of the Partition. The subjects of these narratives are naturally, ordinary men and women of the divided nations. The scholars are also crossing physical and administrative boundaries to come to terms with a common difficult past. There have been several instances of social scientist’s referring to Saadat Hasan Manto’s oeuvre. Alok Rai, for instance, interrogated the literature produced in the immediate aftermath of the partition in “The Trauma of Independence: Some Aspects of Progressive Hindi Literature.” Veena Das and Ashis Nandy too demonstrated an early interest in Manto in an article: “Violence, Victimhood and the Language of Silence.” Urbashi Butalia wrote on women’s memories of the patriarchal violence during the Partition in the special issue of *Oxford Literary Review* 16,1-2 edited by Suvir Kaul & Anita Loomba. The issue entitled “On India: Writing History, Culture, Post-Coloniality,” has important contributions from Susie Tharu on Partition literary narratives, Ravi Vasudevan on the 1950s cinematic imagination, and Dilip Simeon on contemporary culture and terror during the *Tamas* telecast and the secular responses, among others. Mushirul Hasan continued with his journey into the Partition and beyond in his *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom*, 2 vols. (New Delhi, Roli Books, 1995) and *Legacy of a Divided Nation* (New Delhi: OUP, 1997). All these examples amply prove the fact that the Partition is best understood through a holistic approach and by crossing interdisciplinary borders. Thus the way new archives of survivors’ memories are being created to supplement the available sources such as autobiographies and biographies, poetry and fictional accounts, reminds one of the researches that scholars conducted on the Holocaust.

II: EAST VS. WEST

It is true that from 1997 onwards, there has been a marked reappraisal of the traumatic event of the Partition. But equally well known is the fact that the partition of the country in the eastern sector has remained largely ignored. Scholars have rightly pointed out that there was a qualitative difference in the nature of migration arising from the partition of the eastern and the western segments of the Indian subcontinent. In Punjab it was a one-time event with mass migration of the population from the three communities – Hindus,
Muslims and Sikhs – beginning in 1947 and going on to 1950. On the other hand, the human dislocation in the east has never really stopped. Every political upheaval has seen an exodus of the endangered community whose members have poured into West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, with serious demographic implications. This migration from East to West, that is from former East Pakistan and Bangladesh to West Bengal is still an inescapable part of our reality – following from 1947 to 1962, 1964, 1971 and the post-election violence in October 2001.

In the field of literature too, it seems that apart from a few enthusiastic novelists and translators we seem to forget that the holocaust had also affected the East; that though different in nature and degrees, along with Punjab, Bengal also suffered the trauma and it is high time that more focus is laid upon this. Moreover since the issue in the eastern sector is not fifty years old but present-continuous – a “continuing process.” it is high time writers also studied this phenomenon in greater details. Urbashi Butalia, author of The Other Side of Silence and a keen activist in women’s issues wrote in the August 1994 issue of Seminar:

A serious gap is the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan (Bangladesh). But these require detailed attention of their own: better not to pay lip service by including an interview or two.”

Confining themselves to the West, even Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon, co-authors of another anthology on the gender accent of partition narratives, are of the opinion that the partition of Bengal in the east deserved a special treatment. This “borderless reality of diurnal existence” (to quote Bagchi & Dasgupta), finds some literary expression in Bengali novels and stories, but is unfortunately not adequately dealt with in creative writing in English or even in English translation.

In trying to pinpoint “the problem” in their introductory essay in Seminar # 510 (February 2002) on “Porous Borders, Divided Selves: A Symposium on the Partitions in the East,” Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjani Dasgupta opine that the partition of Bengal, despite
some obvious political and existential convergences, differs from the partition of Punjab in at least four important aspects:

a) The partition of Bengal has turned out to be “a continuous process.”

b) The extent and depth of sheer violence and cruelty leading to a massive two-way exodus in Punjab was not repeated in the East. The *kafilas* from East Bengal to West Bengal were not matched by *kafilas* from West to East. The ‘one fell swoop’ in Punjab was far more bloody and destructive. In contrast, the partition of Bengal has produced a process of slow and agonizing terror and trauma accelerated by intermittent bursts of violence.

c) While history and politics have been constant and definitive in the context of Punjab, the partition of Bengal has been refracted through conflicting prisms during the last six decades. For example, the two-nation theory, which proved to be sacrosanct in Punjab, was challenged for the first time in East Pakistan by the historic language movement, which erupted in 1952. A series of determined resistances against the rulers of West Pakistan followed, ultimately leading to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. As Tasleema Nasreen eloquently phrased it in one of her poems, “1971 challenged and rejected 1947.”

d) Compared to the nature of border and boundary in the West where political, strategic and military considerations have converted the entire region into two rigid divisions, the dividing line in the East is porous and flexible.

Under consideration of such differences, the impact and reflections of the Partition upon literature is also bound to be different. But this does not really explain the dearth of more publications on the Bengal partition.

III: A CASE OF ANTHOLOGIES & NOVELS IN ENGLISH

As suggested by the title of this article, it is a well-known fact that Bengal and the post-partition exodus in the East has been grossly misrepresented in all recent spate of anthologies being published in English (and also in English translations) from various mainstream and parallel publishing houses throughout India. Whereas Rajinder Singh Bedi’s short story “Lajwanti” features in three different anthologies as does Saadat Hasan Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh”, there are seminal stories about the partition that do not even get a mention in any critical work or anthology. To authenticate this point I now wish to focus the reader’s attention upon some of the contents of recent publications and through this bibliographic overview reiterate the point I am making.

In 1994, Alok Bhalla compiled and edited a huge collection of stories in three volumes published as *Stories About the Partition of India*. In the back cover of the anthology Bhalla states:

> This volume brings together for the first time in English translation, a comprehensive selection of stories about the partition from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Invaluable as literary texts and social documents, the stories serve as a grim reminder of how urgent it is not to forget the horrors of 1947.

In the detailed introduction, the editor cites his personal interest and his mission in great details stating clearly that he has “put together this anthology of stories about the partition not in order to exorcise the past, but in the hope of initiating an ethical inquiry into the
history of [his] age and place.” Posing before the readers “a series of doubts and questions” relating to the partition, he admits that even though the partition was a decisive event in our social and political life, it has yet to become a central part of our nationalist discourse:

There are hardly any chronicles of those days, written with any degree of objectivity and trustworthiness, which can serve as aids to reflection and offer a reliable set of explanations.

But what really irks the Bengali psyche is that imbalance in the representation of stories from the eastern part of the country. In the first volume, there are altogether nineteen stories out of which only three are either originally written in Bengali or deal with the predicament of the people of Bengal. These are, “The Dressing Table” by Salil Choudhary, “Childishness” by Manik Bandopadhyay, and “The Champion of the People” by Satinath Bhaduri. Again, out of the total number of twenty stories that comprise the second volume of the anthology, only three represent Bengal. These are “The Four-Poster Bed” by Narendranath Mitra, “The White Horse” by Ramesh Chandra Sen and “The Story of the Tulsi Plant” by Syed Waliullah. [The last writer can now be rightly claimed by Bangladesh.] The representation is poorer in Volume III where out of a total of twenty-two stories only two, namely “Adab” by Samaresh Bose and “Jatayu” by Dipendranath Bandopadhyay represent the East.

Bhalla also clarifies that the largest numbers of stories included in these volumes belong to a group that is “marked by a sense of rage and hopelessness.”(xxx) One cannot challenge an editor’s individual selection, but does this mean there is really a dearth of stories from Bengal that reflect the trauma of partition with “rage and hopelessness”? For a layman reader the selection of stories would invariably send wrong messages or create a false impression that the situation in the western part of India was probably several times more serious and grim than the situation in the east. The editor also states that since these stories “offer no historical explanation for the carnage and see no political necessity for the suffering, they are brutally ironic in tone and fragmentary in form.” (xxxi)

Though Bengal cannot boast of her Bhisham Sahenis or Saadat Hasan Mantos, Bengali fiction, short stories in particular, abounds in stories of Partition violence and of Hindu-
Muslim riots. Had he tapped the resources in greater earnest, the editor I am sure would have discovered scores of tight-knit narratives that highlight the situation in Bengal.

In 1997, Salman Rushdie along with his then wife, Elizabeth West published an anthology “selected from the best Indian writing of the half-century since the country’s independence” (ix). Entitled The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997 its aim was to celebrate “the writers who are ensuring that, fifty years after India’s independence, that age of obscurity is coming to an end.” (xxii) This anthology became the center of great controversy because in his introduction, Rushdie made a radical statement diminishing all literature that had been produced in the 16 official languages of India and claimed “the prose writing of Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work.” Unfortunately, this so-called seminal representative anthology has three entries related to the Partition, without any mention of the holocaust in the east. The first is an extract from Rushdie’s own novel, Midnight’s Children. Saadat Hasan Manto’s most repeated story, “Toba Tek Singh” is the second entry. The third is an extract from Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, Ice-Candy Man.

In 1999, Professor Niaz Zaman of the Department of English, University of Dhaka published A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. This book is perhaps the first one to analyze Partition novels in three major languages of the Indian sub-continent: English, Bengali and Urdu. In addition, the author has really done justice to the entire partition scenario by also including Punjabi novels available in English translation. The book is thus an important addition to the numerous writings that have appeared in recent years on an event that not only created two nation states but also affected the psyche of the people who had been thus divided. Part of the collective memory of the sub-continent, the Partition generates diverse responses from the generation that witnessed it and the children who inherited their legacy. A Divided Legacy therefore examines both the detailed narratives that have been written on the Partition as well as novels that, either written in the late forties or situated around 1947, choose to be disturbingly silent.
In the first chapter of the book, Zaman highlights several salient features regarding the overall literary scenario of Partition fiction. She points out that the Indo-English writers who had begun writing in the twenties and thirties fell silent in the years immediately succeeding Partition and the creation of the two states of India and Pakistan, or chose to write about the years before Partition – if they did not avoid this subject altogether. She even quotes from K.K. Sharma and B.K. Johri’s book to support her viewpoint:

This unfathomably tragic and momentous event has not stirred the creative imagination and urge of many Indian-English writers; only a few novelists have treated it seriously and what is more surprising is that none of the foremost fictionists – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Bhabani Bhattacharya – has concentrated upon it in any one of his novels.

For the immediate impact of Partition on creative writing, Niaz Zaman suggests that one must turn not to Indo-Anglian fiction, but to Urdu writing, particularly to Saadat Hasan Manto. Most of the novels of north India, in Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi – and later English – tend to focus on the violence attending Partition. Train massacres, murders, abductions, rapes are recurrent motifs in this fiction in which the displacement of population forms just one additional theme. Bengali writing, on the other hand remains primarily silent over these issues. Representative Bengali writing does not deal with riots and murders. Instead, in both the Bengals, East and West, the fiction is concerned with displacement rather than with violence and death. Despite the riots that occurred in Calcutta and Noakhali, the stories that emerged from Bengal have not been about looting and killing as about leaving and loss or, in the writing of the East Bengali writers, either the hope of a new dawn or the search for a new identity. In the east, the business of adjusting to the new life took considerably longer and Partition was thus in a sense never really over. Hence the nostalgia about homes left behind, hence also the absence of a new beginning.

Another reason, conscious or unconscious – for the reluctance of the Bengali writer to bring in the violence of Partition might also stem from the commonality of language, which for most writers socialistically inclined – as most top-ranking Bengali writers have been – superceded the difference created by religion and the politics of Partition. Just as Qurratulain Hyder in both Aag ka Darya and Fireflies in the Mist, omits the Partition year,
the Bengali writers of both East and West Bengal obliterate the violence from their racial memory. For the East Bengali writer, Partition and independence were soon followed by the Language Movement and the consciousness of the differences that existed between them and the people of West Pakistan rather than the differences between them and West Bengal. Thus the predominance of the motif of displacement which occurs either as a historical necessity or because of the manoeuvres of politicians – not because of irreconcilable differences between Hindus and Muslims. Niaz Zaman also reiterates:

Briefly then, looking at the fiction of the fifties, one can see a distinct pattern emerging: in the west and north, Partition is attended by violence, by rape, by massacre and mutilation. In the east it is attended by displacement. These are, of course, not always mutually exclusive.

Apart from the detailed discussions of various Partition novels, the most interesting contribution of Zaman is the inclusion and discussion of voices from East Pakistan and more recent novels written by Indian writers in English. These include, Abul Fazl’s *Ranga Prabhat*, Abu Rushd’s *Nongor*, Sardar Jainuddin’s *Anek Suryer Asha*, Shaheedullah Kaiser’s *Sangshaptak*, Alauddin Al Azad’s *Kshuda O Asha*, Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Purba-Paschim*, Syed Waliullah’a short stories “The Escape” and “The Story of a Tulsi Plant”, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, Taslima Nasreen’s *Phera*, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Zaman concludes with the grave truth that neither did communal tension end with the Partition, nor did the countries come closer. Whereas in the novels we occasionally get scenes of people moving back and forth across the borders, movement became restricted, dependent on visas. Moreover, even though the Partition made people aware of their differences, after Partition, the need for identity – ethnic, linguistic, religious – seems to become even more acute. Despite the collective memory, each writer still sees the Partition differently.

*Translating Partition* ((2001) edited by Ravikant and Tarun K Saint is an interesting anthology in the sense that it gives its readers a holistic view of the partition by offering stories, critical commentaries and overviews within its two covers. But unfortunately, among the eight stories, four critical commentaries, and five overviews, Bengal is
noticeable by its total absence. Of course, Unlike Alok Bhalla, the editors of this volume clearly state at the beginning of their introduction that they include writings in Urdu and Hindi and shall be focusing only upon the “North and North-Western part of India, the region which witnessed the worst of the carnage unleashed during this time.” It is refreshing to read such writings “that have stood the test of time, moving beyond simply attempting to record what was incomprehensible” but a simple mention about their inability to access literature from the east should have made things more authentic.

At the beginning of 2002, the voluminous *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* edited by Amit Chaudhuri was published. The dust jacket of this volume states that it is “the most informative and important anthology of Indian writing to date.” Attempting to “shatter many contemporary illusions about the literary and intellectual traditions of this continent” this anthology is said to go “against the grain”, giving the reader a “vivid sense of the amazingly heterogeneous and complex literary practices and debates that have engaged writers in India from the nineteenth century to the present.” Chaudhuri’s book is also said to be a pan-Indian effort. “Translations from Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Tamil and the languages of the south sit alongside writing in English, bringing to light the greatest and most engaging writers from a modern India, for the first time truly putting in context the recent ‘resurgence’ in Indian writing.” What is most frustrating is to find that the first section entitled “The Bengal Renaissance and After” contains selections from Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Roy, Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee, Parashuram, Buddhadev Bose and Mahasweta Devi. Though one can hardly comment against an editor’s individual preferences, one cannot accept the absence of any excerpts from writings on the Partition of Bengal. [That Chaudhuri, himself a ‘Probasi’ Bengali, writes only in English and therefore not conversant with texts in Bengali seems poor excuse.] The four entries from Urdu literature – namely two stories by Saadat Hasan Manto, (“Peerun” and “The Black Shalwar”); “Memories of an Indian Childhood” by Qurratulain Hyder and “Sheesha Ghat” by Naiyer Masud also do not relate to the experiences or the trauma of Partition. The only exception is an excerpt from Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in the English section.
Another 2002 contribution to the genre of ‘Partition Studies’ is an anthology of short stories by Prafulla Roy entitled *Set At Odds: Stories of the Partition and Beyond*. Translated from the original Bangla by John W. Hood, it is a commendable volume consisting of twelve short stories written during various stages of the writer’s oeuvre including his first story as well some of his most recent. In the background of the Partition of India, Roy looks beyond conventional communal labels to write about the essential humanity in people whose destinies, to varying extents, have been taken out of their hands by those who have propagated the politics of difference in the pluralist society of contemporary India. His characters are everyday, humble folk, whose predicaments are real and dramatic; their stories are told with an often-disarming candour. But what is the most interesting fact is that the translator of these stories is no one from Bengal but had to be an Australian scholar who earned his doctoral degree in Bengali historiography from the University of Melbourne. In the introduction, Hood almost repeats verbatim the subaltern theorists and states how the author’s interest lies with the marginalized people:

> No matter how history is written, we frequently have to be reminded that what captures the interest of historians has ramifications for ordinary people, usually too ordinary to feature other than as statistics in the columns of newspapers or as generalizations in the pages of history books. Literature can often go a long way in sharpening our perspective on the past, and Prafulla Roy’s stories focus on the anonymous, ordinary people who bore the brunt, in one way or another, of the grand designs of those who sought to create history.

The first three stories, namely, “The Boatman,” “One King Goes and Another King Comes,” and “The Island in the River” are set close to the time of the Partition and the focus is on little people. Whether it is east Bengal governed by the white saheb, or East Pakistan governed by the brown saheb, life goes on unchanged for the humble people, battling with nature simply to eke out to existence. Much of the relevance of all these stories lies in their reflection of the persistence of a partition mentality in contemporary society where such notions as homeland, mother tongue and identity are so often given an exaggerated significance.
As mentioned earlier, the magazine, *Seminar*, in its issue no. 510 of February 2002 has done commendable work in revisiting the 1947 Partition of Bengal. Comprising of “Voices of Women in Bengal Partition,” an ongoing research project by Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, it is a unique attempt at filling that void. Funded by Oxfam, this project under the aegis of the School of Women’s Studies at Jadavpur University attempts to chronicle the voice of women, oral and written, and their role in the “heroic struggle of Bengal’s refugees.” Bagchi’s independent research on girl-child and rehabilitation, and Dasgupta’s on the literature of the pre- and post-Partition Bengal have merged together in what is essentially, an exploration of Partition vis-à-vis Bengal’s women. The succinctly-worded introduction, has set the tone by discussing how the partition of Bengal was different from that of Punjab. The creative examples selected cover poems, short stories, novels and films. These include “Haina”, a short story by Santosh Kumar Ghosh; extracts from the film script of Rittwik Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, and poems by Jibanananda Das and Taslima Nasreen. The anthology also includes eyewitness accounts of people who lived through Partition. Ashoka Gupta who was a relief worker in the riot-scared Noakhali in 1946, has recounted his experiences, as has Suhasini Das, social worker and Gandhian activist, who refused to cross the border to India in 1947. The holistic approach of this volume is not only praiseworthy, but also tries to fill in the void that I have been mentioning so long.

Recently, a revised and enlarged edition of this volume has been published as *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*. (2003). As the dustjacket statement goes, the book discusses the trauma of the Partition in Eastern India “in a way that has not happened before.” The writers make it clear that the lack of overt public discourse has meant that people outside Bengal have tended to believe that the impact was very much less on the people in the eastern region. In truth, the sufferings, the loss of life, livelihoods and of shelter were very real but of a different nature from the fast-moving horror of the Punjab. It was more like an oozing wound that seemed not to heal than a one-time clear severance of a limb. Among the commendable additions, mention must be made of Selina Hossain’s ‘Butterfly on Barbed Wire’, ‘Re-(creating) the Home: Women’s Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta’, and ‘The Widows of
Brindaban. 'Weaving together the voices of many women and incisive analysis, the book provides an invaluable discussion on displacement, rape, loss and why women pay the price. It thus traces the strenuous triumph attained in the crucible of suffering.

IV: WOMEN’S ISSUES

The differences between the situations in Punjab and Bengal have been reiterated upon. But one point where the twain did meet was in the case of women and women-related issues. As Jasodhara Bagchi aptly points out:

The only compelling similarity between these two experiences is that in both the cases, women (minors included) were targeted as the prime object of persecution. Along with the loss of home, native land and dear ones, the woman, singularly, was subject to defilement (rape) before death, or defilement and discardment, or defilement and compulsion that followed to raise a new home with a new man belonging to the oppressor-community. Creative texts which are now being analysed focus on this distinctive tragedy of the woman who at times chose to commit suicide in order to thwart the corporeal holocaust.

More often than not, the woman’s voice in times of conflict like the 1947 tragedy remains submerged as scholars and historians concentrated more on analytical studies of the cause and effect. Recently though, the partition story through the woman’s eyes has also found an expression. Anthologies like Urbashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India* and Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* are eye-openers to events that threw women of both the countries into a no-man’s land of anguish and suffering in the western frontier. Published in 1998, the latter anthology attempts a feminist reading of partition, providing for the first time, testimonies and memories of women caught in the turmoil of the time. The authors make women not only visible, but also central, by looking at the general experience of violence, dislocation and displacement from a gendered perspective. Interviews with women – survivors, social workers, government functionaries – form the core of the book, supplemented by a narrative based on documents, confidential reports, parliamentary debates, letters and diaries.
Though Punjab and Bengal both had to tackle the refugee problem, there were certain differences, aside from the anomaly in the compensation package between the two. For example, the atrocities on the women, their physical mutilation and rape as a show of power, or killing in the name of ‘honour,’ as the case may be, as happened on the western border, were much less in evidence in the East. Bengal also did not have to bear the brunt of the ill-conceived idea of “restitution of women” which uprooted women faced for the second time by plucking them from homes they willingly or unwillingly had accepted after the Partition. As Bagchi and Dasgupta mention, in the struggle for existence and thrown into the role of breadwinners, Bengali refugee women helped alter the whole socio-economic scenario of West Bengal. For one thing, as an earning member of the family she changed the woman’s role in the family, albeit not without inherent tensions. For another, the higher educational status of Hindu women from East Bengal had a salubrious effect on the existing educational standard.

Both in Punjab and Bengal, they [women] displayed exemplary resilience, fortitude, patience and strength to emerge victors against the combined nightmare of assault, exodus, displacement, grinding poverty and broken psyche. They not only kept their new shelter in camps and refugee settlements intact but also ventured out to acquire skills and earn. In West Bengal, in particular, the historic assertion of the refugee-woman as the tireless breadwinner changed the digits of feminine aspiration and irrevocably altered the social landscape.

Nita’s plight as depicted in Rittwik Ghatak’s seminal film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* highlighted such a situation long back, but anthologies of stories reiterating similar situation in the lives of scores of other Nitas has long been overdue.

That some scholars at least have been worried about this lacunae of representation of the East in Partition anthologies is evident from a very recent and commendable publication entitled *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from the 2 Bengals*. With “The Days of the Hyena: A Foreword” by Ashis Nandy and edited by Debjani Sengupta, an English teacher in Delhi, and albeit a Bengali herself, it is probably for the first time that an entire volume brings together ten Bangla stories from Bangladesh and West Bengal in a unique attempt to see
how Partition has shaped the narratives of the two regions that share a common
language, culture and heritage. Many of the stories have been translated for the first time
into English and carry the evocative, ironic tone that is a special flavour of Partition stories
from the East which question the finality and resolution of the act, the insufficiency of
memories and the instability of borders. As the editor highlights in the afterword:

In Bengali literature, Partition is often seen in metaphysical terms – the hurt is not in the
body but in the mind, the soul. Madness is not a trope in the Bangla stories, rather, it is
nostalgia and a constant dazed search to know how and why and wherefore. Instead of a
pathological experience, Partition is seen as a cosmological occurrence, a loss of a world
rather than a loss related to prestige. Hence, Partition narratives from the two Bengals are
less violent, less pathological than the narratives from the West. In the two Bengals,
because of the commonality of language and culture, there is perhaps a greater ‘leaning on’
the other; the self is not monadic – Muslim and Hindu identities are blurred, fluid and open.

Though this last-mentioned slim volume is a commendable step in the right direction, I
conclude with some rhetorical questions. Why do publishers and translators have this
step-daughterly attitude towards the holocaust of the East? Is it because it is a continuing
process as exodus of the Hindus and the marginalized from Bangladesh continues even
today? Since the distancing factor is absent in the case of Bengal as it is in Punjab, do
literateurs think of it as a natural ongoing process and not as something special to focus
attention upon? Or is it the typically proverbial Bengali lethargy to wake up to the need of
the hour? What bothers me is the fact that over the last decade and a half with the
emphasis on Indian Writing in English gaining great attention of world-wide readers,
anthologies in English that are now publishing stories about the partition of India (albeit in
translation) will once again add to the misconception about India that already plagues the
average Western reader (or for that matter readers of only English publications in India
too). The over-representation of stories and writers dealing with the partition of Punjab
and the under-representation of that of Bengal is surely a serious issue that needs to be
addressed immediately. Since there is no dearth of stories and novels about the partition
written in Bengali, why can’t we take it as our collective responsibility to engage in more
translations, more publications from this part of the country? The commendable
translation done by the Australian professor from Melbourne should be enough stimuli to
wake us up. Though I might sound parochial, in future I would like people who talk about
the stories of the partition and the related works of Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan
Manto, or Joginder Paul to also mention Satinath Bhaduri, Shaktipada Rajguru, Nimai
Ghosh, Atin Bandopadhyay, Prafulla Roy, Narayan Sanyal and Jyotirmoyee Devi and
many other Bengali writers at the same breath.

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