



Bengali Refugees: A Non-homogenized Population and its Cultural Politics

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Abstract

The experience of immigrants or refugees in Bengali partition fiction is talked about in prodigious length. In this paper, my objective is to find the status of the subaltern/ Dalit voice of refugees in canonical texts. The *bhadralok* migrant's voice through literature, art and film plays a dominant role in memory-making. The East Bengali elite writer's narrative has often vouched for every other group of refugees, which is not essentially comprehensive. The representation of the non-*bhadra* Dalit perspective can only be traced in works created by them through their language, style and experience. The lacuna between these two often remains grey and put forward as something homogenized. This paper will take up many canonical partition texts to delve into the complex politics of memory-making through the recurrent use of glorified refugee tropes and thereby eliminating the subaltern voice.

Keywords: Subaltern narrative, Dalit partition writing, *bhadralok* refugee, memory, trauma

Introduction

The literary production of Bengal province has largely stemmed from the event of Partition. Though Bengali literature hardly shares the same recognition as the partition fiction of North India written chiefly in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English. Adequate literary initiatives were taken to translate the vernacular works into English so that they become accessible to an expansive readership. Punjab and Bengal were the epicentres of Partition in India but a discursive study would show the archetype of Bengali partition fiction as "sentiment of nostalgia" and "sense of trauma" is an oversimplification. This has ostensibly robbed Bengali partition literature of more acclamation.

Similarly erroneous is our acceptance of certain canonical texts as quintessential Bengali partition fiction. The elite refugee experience revealed through these works is not essentially a heterogeneous narrative of Dalit Hindu/ Muslims and discriminated women. Works of Sunil Ganguly, Jyotirmoyee Devi and Ritwik Ghatak portray the East Bengali *bhadralok* refugee struggle through cultural prints and celebratory texts which do not encompass the narrative of non-*Bhadra* Dalits, peasants and lower caste refugees. The class and caste hierarchy are more deeply rooted than the religious difference displayed in the works of the writers. The consumption of a singular narrative that echoes the stories of refugees from the affluent past, elite issues of struggle in new circumstances, is flawed and partisan. These politically charged voices are culpable of creating biased memory-making and thereby subjugating the subaltern discourses. Urvashi Butalia has depicted in her book *The Other Side of Silence*:

In its almost exclusive focus on Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, Partition history has worked to render many others invisible. One such history is that of the scheduled castes, or untouchables. Harijans, Dalits,

untouchables, by whatever name you call the protagonists of this history, have remained, in a sense, virtually untouchable even in the writing of this history. (Butalia, 297)

Lately, critics like Joya Chatterjee, Jasodhara Bagchi, and Barun Sengupta have shifted their focus on the marginalized experience of the Partition struggle, their communal memories, and their complex citizenship. Authors like Adhir Biswas and Manoranjan Byapari, whose works are not novels but memoirs and testimonials, come long after the blood-soaked history of war and, therefore, present convincing pictures of settlement in relief camps, electoral politics, and displacement.

Nature of Bengali Partition and its Refugees

Historically speaking, the nature of partition is quite different – there is no watershed event like 1947 when people started crossing borders to settle in a new land. The border between West Bengal and East Bengal has always been porous. Refugees have been coming to Bengal from 1947 to 1971, during the Liberation War. The migration of refugees in multiple phases is highly nuanced and has contributed to generalization. The influx occurred mainly in three phases: the first group entered West Bengal until 1958 and began arriving before Independence in 1947. They were primarily elite Hindu migrants who possessed wealth and placed minimal pressure on the government for their rehabilitation. Most of these migrants had prior properties or relatives, jobs, or economic arrangements for settling in Calcutta. The second group of migrants arrived from 1958 to late 1963; they were not as affluent as the “old migrants” but had education and connections in service sectors that helped them find shelter. They, too, refrained from seeking any government financial relief, as their class and pride were too strong, according to critic Ranajit Roy. The final group of migrants, referred to by the government as “new migrants,” consisted of Dalit refugees who entered India between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971, mainly from the peasantry and artisan sections of East Pakistan (Banerjee, 15). The relief camps on the outskirts of Kolkata were already overburdened, and allowing new immigrants into West Bengal meant that the responsibility for food and accommodation would fall on the government. They were permitted to settle only on the condition of relocating outside Bengal to alleviate the struggling economy of Bengal. Sectarian violence had already damaged Dalit Hindu-Muslim unity. They were compelled to leave East Bengal as their previous sources of employment—peasant work and menial tasks for the elite Hindu families—were no longer available; in addition, the new Muslim population seldom provided them with work due to religious retribution.

The oeuvre of Bengali partition fiction is not slender, but most of the writings are produced by *bhadralok* authors who belonged to the upper crust of the society in terms of their caste and urban elitism. Their narrative unequivocally mimics a similar trope of refugee struggle. Through the works of – chiefly Brahmin, Kayasth and Kshatriya – authors, a completely homogeneous pattern can be followed across literary texts. These stories often posit issues of working-class refugees who are impoverished, but the non-*bhadralok* or lower castes refugees (*namashudra*, *sadgop* and *rajbanshi*) never truly make their way to the mainstream partition narrative. Their conspicuous absence from the narrative is a covert elitism that makes them invisible. The presence of marginalized voices can unduly affect the sophisticated ‘refugee struggle’. In concurrence with phases of migration, Hindu refugee migrants’ experiences were also pluralistic in nature and their actual struggle traces long back before even coming to West Bengal. Their life in East Bengal was not perfectly pleasant as often portrayed, the reason for their predicament is usually associated with the rich, affluent Hindu *zamindars*. The labourers’ grinding and plodding in the fields or homes of prosperous households are presented as amicable services in the meagre exchange of livestock.

The Dalits were tillers of agricultural land, they did not own any land. As a result, they cannot claim any kind of proprietorship for land. The actual owners of the lands were getting compensatory land from the government, which somehow was depriving the Dalits of their rightful claims. Extended idleness and sustenance on the dole made them deflated, their rehabilitation was necessary. Throughout their lives, they worked on land and water, to adopt any other vocation was not possible for them. The Dalits of East Bengal lived in riverine terrain, which massively impacts their livelihood; fishing and harvesting in fecund plain lands were an integral part of their life. But bleak prospects from the government made them inert and unmotivated. Activist Manikuntala Sen has rightly pointed out:

I have seen with my own eyes how camps debase human respect wandering through multiple camps. They are all my people of East Bengal. Their distress hurt my soul deeply. In almost every camp, they complained to me how ragged clothes are given to them. We even appealed to the government about this. But we also told them that there is no quality in alms. You should demand work, and with earnings, you can have food and clothes. Then, you can throw them their poor charity. But this hardly had any impact.

They were not like this. In native villages, they worked whatever they had. Never bothered about any dole. This prolonged stay in the camps had made them parasites who lost their dignity and self-respect – this was the most pathetic sight. (Sen, 38, Translated by self)

Used/ Abused Tropes in Partition Literature

Unlike the usual sophisticated refugee voice, a *bhadralok* author like Prafulla Roy shows the disparity between the Dalit refugee struggle and the *bhadra*, educated refugees in *Keya Patar Nouko*. The representation may not suggest the complex caste system but shows the formation of a subjugated class through hegemony and practice. Jugal, the young man who worked in the household of Hemnath belongs to the marginal class. He does not realize the difference as problematic and the hierarchy is never addressed indignantly. The events of both refugee classes are also diverse; the *bhadra* refugees are dealing with ‘*dhan*’ (wealth) and ‘*maan*’ (prestige) whereas the suppressed class are fighting for ‘*praan*’ (life). Jugal has created a colony in the suburbs of Kolkata, gathering people from East Bengal after facing lots of resistance from the landowners and hooligans. The sole purpose of his visit to Sealdah station is to find people from his village because he believes living together with familiar faces enhances grit. Uneducated, ordinary Jugal has impressed with his intention and planning for survival in coping with the changing circumstances.

“He chose such land after searching. Built a colony clearing all the waste of bushes and trees. Trying to establish themselves by fighting snakes, insects and ruffians of landowners. ... Those who are gasping in the refugee camps and rail station if they had confidence and adventurous spirit like Jugal!” (Roy, 602, Translated by self)

On the contrary, a humanitarian approach which is expected from the higher society, from Hemnalini to accept Jhinuk, a girl of the same caste and class, is not found. Her treatment of Jhinuk like an untouchable is a testament to the contemporary ‘Hindu *bhadralok*’ society because she was violated. The ingrained humanity in Jugal cannot be missed, he is more concerned about Jhinuk and proclaims that their colony is a space where nobody will judge her. The colony is a community of rootless people having shared trauma and experience. Similarly, in *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*, Sutara’s bonding and association with girls of the refugee colony stem from her inherent past of trauma. Sutara found solace in that colony where she can be unashamed of her past without uttering everything through cumbersome words. Here, Jugal is an empathetic figure and well aware of the ill-treatment a girl is likely to receive after getting vilified. Jugal’s hospitality and respect towards Binu even in the shack of the squatters’ colony may be interpreted as embedded serfdom. But his respect towards his earlier masters, even when he knows they no longer have opulence and power, is not questionable. His transformation from a house help to a ‘*bhadralok*’ in the true sense of the term is perfectly poised along with the so-called ‘*bhadralok*’ which is a mere social status.

Examining major Bengali partition fiction, it can be found that certain tropes are used, overused and abused in literature, whereas a greater segment is almost untouched. The similarity between experiences and plots is a regurgitation of the same storyline – a well-to-do if not rich, native East Bengali family is struggling with impoverishment. In Narayan Gangopadhyay’s *Bidisha*, the eponymous protagonist found herself in a colony with the peddler, bailiff, clerk and prostitute as neighbours. She is a teacher who is not supposed to be in this scenario, but after partition, she is in West Bengal, and somehow manages to save herself from immoral men and secure a job. When that job is taken away on false charges, she is not wanted even in her relatives’ house. Her whole life becomes uncertain in an unknown place. Similarly, in Narayan Sanyal’s *Balmik (Anthill)* a schoolmaster Haripada Chakraborti’s struggle is portrayed when he has lost his house built on loan money and now lives in a deserters’ shack. He has lost his eyesight and has no proper clothes to cover his daughter and daughter-in-law, everyone is living in an extremely impoverished condition. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* delineates the recurrent trope of partition. Another common image is the portrayal of a compassionate Muslim man, mostly a teacher who stands as an emblem of communal camaraderie and creates an alternate voice in a time of mayhem. The character of Ramjan Ali in Sunil Ganguly’s *Arjun*, Motahar Hosain in Prafulla Roy’s *Keya Patar Nouko*, and Tamijuddin in *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* are identical Muslim school teachers who bear the torch of harmony against a dogmatic class.

Questioning the Mainstream Narrative in the Post-Partition Indian Cinema

The weakness towards certain tropes of memory and dismissing the complex memory has been a problematic approach by mainstream writers and filmmakers. Their perception often focuses on the niche tropes of public sentiment that they are already aware of and make use of time and again. But often in the process of glorifying those mapped areas of memories, we tend to marginalize other modes of memorizing. A close

inspection of the films of Ritwick Ghatak would allow an understanding of the concerted effort to create a sophisticated notion around the perfect immigrant woman. The female protagonist Neeta, the eldest daughter of the family, from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* epitomizes the emblematic refugee woman in Bengali cinema who had literally sacrificed her life. The condition of her frail father and aspiring-singer brother force her to be the breadwinner in order to support the family. The younger brother becomes invalid after an accident, and the younger sister, Geeta, selfishly takes her sister's suitor as her husband. Ironically, Neeta belongs to the *bhadralok* reputation of society but in the face of an adverse situation, she took up work to sustain her family and sacrificed her pursuit of higher education and a probable happy marital life. She becomes the sacrificial lamb for the family and her health deteriorates, only to spend her last days in a sanatorium with tuberculosis.

Quite interestingly, two other female protagonists from Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* and Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* – Arati and Seeta – had a similar predicament but they never came even close in terms of public acceptance which Neeta garnered. It is echoed in the words of Somdatta Mandal:

“If we are asked to choose a single film which captures the trauma and tragedy of the Bengal Partition with unmatched power and sensitivity, we choose, without question, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star/The Star Veiled by Clouds). Hailed as an unqualified masterpiece, it is a seminal depiction of the existential dilemma of the Indian lower middle-class, where the sacrifice of one good, meek, dutiful daughter ensures the survival of the rest of the family. (Mandal, 69)

The most admissible reason could be Arati and Seeta did not succumb to the crushing pressure of sophisticated refugee feelings. They failed to reach the pedestal of martyrdom that the ‘popular consciousness’ expects them to reach as a culmination. They come out of the garb of *bhadra* Bengali refugee women, Seeta is pushed to the verge of prostitution, Arati is turned into a saleswoman from a housewife.

The unconscious acceptance of one character over others by the audience leads to a complex discourse of selective yardstick regarding the iconic female refugee. The film propagates a pattern of refugee life which comes at the cost of demoting other narratives. The Bengali audience's psyche comes into scrutiny while accepting a certain type of refugee woman – Neeta who breaks the status quo of patriarchal family structure to support the family financially – but other women like Seeta and Arati remain less identified with the populace which may be influenced by socioeconomic and gender nuances. Here, by attending certain tropes of refugee sensibilities and gender roles the filmmaker is normalizing particular patterns in the psyche of the audience. Consequently, a micro-narrative of partition is getting etched as the paradigm of partition experience. Any other experience by film characters who did not adhere to that archetype or chose to come out of the stagnant pattern is considered an aberration and often rejected by the mass. The image of the struggling refugee woman becomes a universal image which transcends the simple depiction of art and craft. Through this character Neeta, Ghatak perpetuates an archetype of a refugee Bengali woman, she endures the hardship of family and inevitably chooses to sacrifice her dreams and prosperity for the nourishment of the family. Her sacrifice becomes the point of contention for every other survivor who leaves the traditional gender roles, and consequently, they are relegated to women who have transgressed the expected outcome.

Conclusion

But the alternate narratives have gradually come into the ambit of academic discourse to make it holistic in terms of chronicling the actual event and testimonial writings. Dalit writings like Bama's *Karukku* and Sharmila Rege's women's testimonials were autobiographical, writers like Adhir Biswas and Manoranjan Byapari too had taken up the testimonial method as a counter-narrative to the existing mainstream narrative. In the established *bhadralok* narrative, the elite class speaks for everyone through their medium – the publishing media, the film and art world – which is of course dominated by the upper caste gentlemen. The Dalit perspective, hitherto unheard in print form, came to the fore through works *Deshbhager Smriti*, *Allahar Jomite Paa*, and *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, who hardly had any conventional education. Their narrative in their language gives a sense of ‘lived truth’, no obligations to adhere to any prevailing literary tradition of *bhadralok*. The genuine narrative in autobiographical mode gives testimony about the true nature of suppression, the structure that works as discriminatory machinery and above all creates a socio-political awareness. Unlike the detailed chronicling writing style of Byapari, Adhir Biswas's writing captures events happening inside, deeply impacted by the outside world, they do not follow any linear narrative pattern bound spatiotemporally. His writing style is more modern and replete with fragmented images of trauma and memory. This knowledge of pluralistic voices also includes women's narratives from the margins.

The number of fiction is plenty that has dealt with the theme of Partition in Bengali, but it is predominantly an elite, urbane voice expressing the arduous struggle of refugees in Bengal. Hindu refugee struggle has been the locus of the general narrative as well as the study. An alternate view would reveal the similar fate of native Muslims of West Bengal who had to leave and settle in a new country, but there is hardly any mention. The main reason behind this is that most of the writers belonged to the Hindu community and their affinity and empathy go easily with the Hindu refugees. The 'collective memory' is shaped by refugees who hold vast power over mainstream art and culture, our viewpoint becomes myopic and it needs the effort to keep that search alive for heterogeneous voices.

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