

## **Problematizing Nostalgia: A Study of Selected Short Stories on Bengal Partition**

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**Abstract:** Nostalgia in its myriad forms runs through a number of short stories on Bengal Partition. In stories like Amar Mitra's "Wild Goose Country," Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's "Acharya Kriplani Colony" and Dibyendu Palit's "Alam's Own House," nostalgia acquires complex overtones that lead to a renewed understanding of the concept of nostalgia itself. Wedded with identity crisis, the problematics of uprooting and the issue of resettlement, nostalgia gets a nuanced treatment in these stories. Here we encounter the problematics of memory leading to dehistoricization as the stories emphasize how the overwhelming push of nostalgia substitutes with its essentializing tactics the dynamic reality of post partition life causing a rupture between the protagonist's static vision of past, one she continually juxtaposes next to the reality of the everyday, and the actual reality of the world that is. The hypothesis of the paper is that nostalgia, a leitmotif in stories of Bengal partition, has several ramifications. The nostalgia for a lost space can be both romantic and painful, can be an anchor for the self as well as troubled with the recognition of violence. The paper seeks to read stories of Bengal Partition with a view to understanding their treatment of nostalgia. It attempts to see how nostalgia leads to dehistoricization and an ineradicable connection with a violent past. How migration and memory affect the identity of a subject such that the present is always gazed at through the lens of the past.

**Keywords:** Partition, Bengal Partition. Nostalgia, Short Stories

Whatever surrounded me

Wreckage

Arrows and spears

Home and hearth

Everything trembled in the direction of the west

Memory seemed like a long traveling assemblage

Broken chest lying under a mango tree

In a middle of their stride from one foot to another all became homeless.  
 (“Punarbashan” [“Rehabilitation”], Shankha Ghosh; my trans.)

The Partition of India in 1947 was a watershed that rewrote the historical heritage of the Indian subcontinent. Although the muted severity and fewer instances of actual acts of violence make the episode of Bengal Partition very different from the Partition in Punjab, the trauma and the disillusionment, the effects of rumor on human psyche and the experiences of displacement and resettlement are points common to both chapters of the Partition episode in 1947. Historical documentation of the actual causes of Bengal Partition mention the riots in 1946 in Noakhali and Tripura and communal tension between Hindus and Muslims as important factors. The creative discourse of short fiction, which is the subject of the present paper, explores the unique experiences of the people who were physically affected by the Bengal Partition. These stories enjoy an indeterminate position between fiction and non-fiction and document the historical peculiarity of mass displacement and provide a distinct slant on the overall subject of Partition. In other words, the short stories on Bengal Partition problematize the moment of historical rupture from myriad points of view and in doing so recognize the distance between the mythical nationalist history of India and the actual fragmented reality of its displaced human subjects.

In contrast to the leitmotif of graphic violence in stories of Partition on the western front, creative short fiction on Bengal Partition revolves around the subject of migration. If incidents of embodied gender violence and psycho-somatic trauma crystallize the Partition experience in Punjab as documented by the narratives of Saadat Hasan Manto (“Open It,” “Cold Meat”), Intizaar Husain (“City of Sorrow,” “An Unwritten Epic”) and Khuswant Singh (*Train to Pakistan*), the migratory experiences of people from East Bengal who arrived in West Bengal and in various parts of India on foot, on trains, aboard boats and steamers, with little or no belongings, with or without family members, laden with physical and mental wounds is the subject of Bengali literature on Partition. In Amiya Bhusan Majumdar’s novel *Nirbas (Exile)* we read about dirty bundles, blackened utensils, rope-tied and entangled sets of frayed and faded bedclothes and mats carried by “sick, unfed, unwashed multitude of putrid smelling masses.” We read about the stream of rootless refugees in Narayan Sanyal’s *Balmik*. “People walked on, their bodies touching one another, the extensive railway line is burdened by weight of the swarming crowd. People pushed and jostled— it seemed that the buzzing multitude thronging the few miles were one giant cobra whose serpentine body

writhed along relentlessly! It seemed people had no separate entity,” (qtd. in Sikdar 35). These creative episodes crystallize the immediacy of displacement and the vicissitudes that the rootless Bengali refugees experienced leading ultimately to dystopic futures where the utopia of nostalgia becomes the keynote of their lives.

In the context of Bengal Partition, nostalgia functions within the spatial-temporal constraints of refugee life and registers an imaginative utopia that is problematized in a series of Bengali short stories. Stories like Amar Mitra’s “Wild Goose Country,” Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay’s “Acharya Kriplani Colony” and Dibyendu Palit’s “Alam’s Own House” deal with the problematics of nostalgia. Here nostalgia gets a nuanced treatment in that the allure of a utopic lost home has nothing in common with the reality of the everyday. In these stories and in others dwelling on the theme of nostalgia and displacement, we encounter the problematics of memory leading to dehistoricization. They point out how the overwhelming kinetic push of nostalgia substitutes with its essentializing tactics the dynamic reality of post partition life resulting in a rupture between the protagonist’s static vision of past, one she continually juxtaposes next to the reality of the everyday, and the actual reality of the world that is.

In the introduction to the book *The Future of Nostalgia*, the author Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a longing for a lost home that no longer exists or has ever existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.” Coined by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, nostalgia was once commonly held as a disease of the displaced. Shorn of its medical history as a disease the symptoms of which could be soothed by “Leeches, warm hypnotic emulsions, opium” and the Alps (Boym 4), nostalgia has now become the ailment of the avant-garde reflectively reminisced in popular culture. A striking example of reflective nostalgia would be Mohini in Mahasweta Devi’s *Kagabagagitika* who wants to convey the East Bengal to her present locality. She would plant the same shrubs, worship the goddess Lakshmi like before and drink from a bell metal glass like she used to. Amar Mitra’s story “Dam Bandha” (“Suffocation”) Prabhamayee recalls her days in East Bengal. She listens to the news of her lost country on the transistor radio and even keeps tracks of new roads that operate in her erstwhile land. The smell of the river seems to permeate through the walls of her home. If she chances to hear the accent of Khulna, she gets startled. The reflective nostalgics are “amateurs of time,” “epicures of duration” who derive sensorial delight in temporal movement immeasurable by “clocks and calendars” (Nabokov

Vladimir, “On Time and Its Texture,” in *Strong Opinions*). These examples necessarily draw a picture of nostalgia as a longing for a lost home. In all these stories the characters conspicuously strive to obliterate the present. As memories of halcyon past life, real or imagined, compete with an actual post-partition reconstruction of life, the nostalgic subject is distracted from the present and ends up considering it as discordant against the homogeneous fragments of village life lost for good. Hence nostalgia is a utopic illusion of a reality that never was and what the stories of Bengal Partition analyzed in the paper do is read the destabilizing effect of nostalgia in the lives of the refugees. The status of a nostalgic as indulging in mythic reality has significant implication in the narrative resolution of the stories henceforth analyzed and suggests how an illusory construction of non-reality can have lasting impact in the material reality of the present.

In Bihutibhusan Bandyopadhyay’s “Acharya Kriplani Colony” the writer plays around the quintessential obsession of refugees with the setting up of a home. With emotionally charged images of verdant shrubbery, extensive fields, delicious food, sunshine, and the general warmth of the lost home rife in their minds, the refugees inevitably searched for the halcyon peace in the present displaced state of exile. In “Refugees: One Memory and Locality” by Manas Ray published in *Refugees in West Bengal*, a collection of essays edited by Pradip Basu, the writer speaking about Netaji Colony, says, “In the beginning the people tried to recreate their *desh bari* in Netaji Nagar; the landscape of Netaji Nagar was the landscape of nostalgia.” The protagonist in Bandyopadhyay’s story chances upon a newspaper advertisement for a plot of land that spells his utopic vision of nostalgic idealization. The “Acharya Kriplani Colony” is advertised as “being built on the vast and adjoining land of a certain station, only a few miles away from Kolkata, amidst beautiful natural surroundings. The clear and holy waters of the Jahnvi River flow past its southernmost point...” (240). Rachel Weber in her paper “Re (creating) the Home: Women’s Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta” has focused on how the buildings in the colonies “emphasize the village-like ambience” (195-210). The romantic portrayal of the Promised Land of Acharya Kriplani Colony here reeks with a similar earthy romanticism of a utopic past and acts as an objective correlative to the protagonist’s yearning for building a home. The emphasis on water and extensive land in the advertisement must be noted. The fixation with flowing water is a leitmotif in refugee testimonials. Jayanti Basu in her book *Reconstructing Bengal Partition* asks a refugee respondent what he remembered most when thinking about the past. “I remember water. Everywhere there was water” (31). Another

respondent too spoke on the same lines when asked a similar question, “It was a land of rivulets and lakes. The jute plants were tall as full-grown men, but water flowed above them.” The nostalgic *idée fixe* with water would after Jungian psychoanalysis be related to “birth ideations, as water is the archetype of birth.” Otto Rank might associate this obsession to the pre-birth security in the mother’s womb surrounded by amniotic fluid (Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*). In the end, the metaphor of flowing water and extensive premises with all modern amenities sounded too attractive a proposition to the protagonist to be missed and therefore he registered. When he ultimately visits the land, owned by a doctor with an unenviable medical practice, he discovers the advertisement was an eloquent panegyric, an ironic compliment to the material reality of the swamp land that Archarya Kriplani colony actually encompassed. “The roads were damp and muddy. There were cowsheds and cattle grazing grounds everywhere. A foul smell filled the air, and mosquitoes buzzed all around ... A mile away, by the side of the road next to a forest, I saw a metal hoarding which displayed in bold letters the words—“Acharya Kriplani Colony” (245). Struck with amazement, the protagonist realized how in juxtaposition with the material reality of the actual swamp land as unenviable as the medical prospect of its owner, the metaphorical panorama of the advertisement stood unnervingly in his mind. Bibhutibhusan here captures the anxiety of refugee relocation that made them easy prey to exploiters at the time of partition. He also points out how the profiteers used the idealized nostalgic perception of past life in a lost homeland with the prospect of a second homecoming to woo their customers. The doctor waves a wad of receipts in the narrator’s face to show him how profitable the prospect of establishing the colony has been for him. It is only the narrator who realizes that the promise of the primordial stability of the past is paradoxical in the swampy marshland setting of the colony. The advertised rural setting that is an ideal and an idyll is eventually contrasted with the reality of the overcrowded city bereft of greenery wherein the refugees are forced to survive on railway platforms and in congested colonies. Bibhutibhusan points out that the idea of a second home-coming is a generic dream that can never be fulfilled because, ultimately, a lost home defies spatial transference into a reconstructed present. Therefore, any relation, except imaginary, between one’s former and latter home is conspicuous by its absence.

Joseph Brodsky, a quintessential artist of exile, while reflecting on home wrote “Calling home? Home? Where you are never returning. You might as well call Ancient Greece or Biblical Judea” (38) suggesting the idea of home with all its warm domesticity as unstable. One might preserve the tectonic quality of the home’s architecture, but once one leaves the

abode behind one becomes a perpetual foreigner in one's own land. In Dibyendu Palit's "Alam's Own House," the protagonist cannot transplant his rootless cosmopolitanism, his estranged consciousness on his erstwhile home. "Like everything else there, there's also a time frame for returning. And once the point is past, there's a feeling that it's not going to happen" (453). Palit here ironically commemorates Alam's homecoming to Kolkata which becomes a reverse mimesis of celebratory homecomings in popular culture. After a private exchange of property during the Partition, Alam's father had left his family home to Anantashekhhar and migrated to Dhaka. Alam stayed back with Anantashekhhar's family to finish his studies and during that time became particularly attached to his daughter Raka. Although Alam eventually migrated to Dhaka after his father's death, he regularly exchanged letters with Raka. Raka gradually became the root of his longing for home, the *nostos* to his *algia*. Alam felt that if "her anatomy could have been analyzed, instead of her body, arms, legs and head, he would have seen graceful doors windows, stairs and attics!" (468). To the romantic Alam, a journey back to Kolkata three years after he left it for Dhaka to attend a conference on friendship between divided nations therefore seemed incomplete without a visit to his natal home and a meeting with Raka. The journey back home is flooded with memories and saturated with nostalgia. Kolkata with its familiar localities of Park Circus, Maniktala, Narkeldanga, the *Kathchampa* (Plumria) tree at the gate of Alam's old house, the picture of Gandhiji in the old living room and the oil painting of the Battle of Plassey conspicuous by its absence all bear the imprints of Alam's nostalgia, only the spiritual foundation of his home has wandered. As soon as Alam enters his old home and senses Raka's absence, he understands that his home has become an alternative space where he lives in an impersonal guest bedroom. Alam never meets Raka during his visit. A letter from her informs her of "a resistance" in her that prevents her from following her heart and has made her run away to Delhi during Alam's visit. The letter becomes a souvenir of the fragmented love life of Alam and Raka. He yearns for a precarious domesticity in Raka's home reminiscent of his pre-emigration pedestrian past and finds cynicism instead. "Certain lands are meant for certain roots only" (453). Alam realizes he has become deracinated. At the end of the story Alam recognizes that despite a shared culture and a memory of a shared home, he and Raka have become citizens of different nation-states whose difference instead of unity is reiterated in the organized seminar on amity between divided nations. The non-meeting of Raka and Alam symbolizes the intimacy of two nations chipped by estrangement. Palit's story deals with the indecisive syntax of Alam's nostalgia. In the end, however, Alam finally outgrows the imagined domesticity of his home and realizes his own house has now become

an estranged cultural space that resists absorption into an unremembered past when Alam assumed that he and Raka had no barriers between them because they had shared a home.

In Alam's case, border crossing has unequivocally become a "transformative experience" (Boym 330) that grafted his status as an exile. In Amar Mitra's story "Wild-Goose Country," set on the Hili border of West Dinajpur in 1996, it is the reality of borders symbolized by the barbed wire fence India has decided to put up to define the border with Bangladesh that is tinged with nostalgia. The author here has wished to convey the futility of national borders as political divisions and in his critique has used the symbol of a lone goose, separated from its flock, unable to control the "vertigo of fate" (Boym 280). Michiel Baud and William Van Schendel in their study of borderlands, use the term "border" for the "political divides that were the result of state building" (214) point out how "all over the world borders became crucial elements in the new, increasingly global system of states" (214). They argued that "from the perspective of national centers of authority, the border between countries is a sharp line, an impenetrable barrier" (216) but from the perspective of the border "borderlands are broad scenes of interactions" (216) between people on both sides of the border. Just like in Taswi's "The Wagah Canal," ("Wagah ki Nehar") where we observe an unanticipated union of divided communities at a market place, the borderland in the Hili area too has a life of its own where communal markers are conspicuous by their absence. In the pedestrian reality of their lives there "was no sign of ... the border ... there was just a sea of people who has swallowed up all the marks which demarcated one country from another" (294). People with a house on the opposite site of the border come to mow grass to the other side, sugary treats are sold and smuggling is an unequivocal reality here. These complex network borderland transactions may have led to political histrionics culminating in the decision to erect a barbed wire fence to keep trespassers or "infiltrators" at bay. It is only the wild geese in the sky that they cannot trap. The birds that Mazrul sees are a leitmotif in the story signifying his nostalgia for a lost homeland. "On tremulous wings, these flew across from the east towards the north-west" (579). Subir thinks they are war planes but Mazarul is sure that they are geese. He himself is akin to the lone goose that had presumably strayed away from its flock staggering across the sky. Partition has divided the families of Mazirul, Aloka and Subir. Two of Mazarul's uncles left with their families in 1953 and yet when Mazarul meets Amal Bhattacharya, who has stayed on in Bangladesh, memories of his family, his beautiful aunt and his cousin all flood back. He yearns for news about them and makes frantic enquiries about their whereabouts to Amal who is their acquaintance. In his urge to walk back in time

and transcend the reality of Partition, Mazarul grips the barbed wire that cuts through his skin leaving bloody patches testifying to his failed attempt to infiltrate the past. As Aloka, Subir and Amal try to release his grip on the wire they realize that despite the enchantment of nostalgia, restoring a lost home is impossible. The border has indeed trapped these people and have transformed their identities. Like the flock of wild geese that has drifted away to oblivion leaving behind the straggling lone goose, Mazarul too with his hypertrophied sense of the past is left trailing in disenchantment. He refuses to cross the border, the presence of which has already denied the very possibility of homecoming. Partition, in the end, he realizes is break in destiny, it is symbolized by barbed wires cutting through one's flesh.

### **Conclusion**

A study of the architectonics of the world of nostalgia creatively problematized by the writers of the short stories studied for the paper reveals that far from being a reflective vision of the past, nostalgia in the refugee community of Bengal supervened with their Post-Partition future public and private experiences. Each story read in the paper suggests that despite the cartographic negotiation of national borders that caused the refugees of Bengal Partition to leave their home and hearth, the frontiers of the mind failed to mark territories between their past life and their present life such that an *idée fixe* with the vocabulary of the past engendered a perpetual discrepancy between the lost home and a reconstructed second-hand home. Nostalgia, the stories seem to suggest, is not a simple backward vision, but a complex phenomenon of a mind preoccupied with prefabricated visions of perfection that the nostalgic perpetually strives to realize in the present. The stories underline the failure of such an attempt of subverting chronology as neither Alam, seeking a revival of his romantic relation with Raka, nor the protagonist of Bibhutibhusan's story seeking a home that is an embodiment of his past domestic space, nor for that matter, the central character in Palit's story remembering his old relations and wishing to walk backward into their lives that he vacated after the Partition, are successful in their attempts. They are left with the realization that nostalgic vision is essentially lateral; it can never be a parameter to the construction of reality. Nostalgia may give us the freedom to pick and choose the narratives of the past, build us a Potemkin village of sorts, but a home once lost can never reconstructed despite a paranoiac resolve to perform that feat.

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