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**THE PARTITION OF INDIA & CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN TWO BENGALI SHORT STORIES FROM BOTH THE SIDES OF INDO-BANGLADESH BORDER**

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**Abstract:**

*The Partition of India was perhaps the most tragic event in Indian history. It not only divided the country but also divided the mind. It had a great impact on the lives of people, turning the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs into one another's enemies. With the arrival of the theme of partition come the issues like dislocation, loss, trauma and relocation. This had a gripping effect on the minds of those people who suffered it. After a long lived life if somebody had to leave his/her homeland, he/she is destroyed from within. Moreover, a strong sense of loss and alienation in a new and unknown surrounding, led to an identity crisis. The present paper takes up two short stories from both the side of the border and shows identity crisis in them because of the partition and the consequent migration.*

**Keywords:** *Partition, Home, Displacement, Loss, Identity, etc.*

Borders and boundaries are key issues that belong to the postcolonial theory and literature. After the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947 the Indian map changed greatly - the Indian subcontinent was divided on the basis of religion into two nations - India and Pakistan. In her article *The Nowhere people* the Urvashi Butalia stated that, "For most people who live alongside it, the border between India and Bangladesh is a chimera. Flat, green fields stretch over a wide terrain. Dotted across them you can see men and women bent over in work, a stray goat or cow lazily grazing alongside. It's difficult to tell from their appearance which side of the border the human beings, or indeed the animals, belong to" (Butalia, <http://www.india-seminar.com>, Retrieved on 16/07/2014).

The affect and influence of this Partition in the lives of the people belonging to Bengal (both East and West) is immensely painful and far-reaching. Like the other genres of literature, short stories too have responded to and represented the crisis, conflict and struggle of people in the context of the fateful event of the Partition of India. The post-partition short stories from both the Bengals record the misfortunes of millions of people who have either become homeless or rootless, or have become alien in their own land. As Homi Bhabha says in *Location of Culture*, "For the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political Diaspora, the major displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees" (Bhabha, 06-07). The present paper takes up two stories written from Bangladesh and West Bengal in the context of the partition for critical analysis.

*The Border* by Salam Azad from Bangladesh is a tale of endless suffering caused by the partition. The partition not only divided land and territory, but also people from their near and dear

ones. This caused agony and pain for innumerable people who became outsider in their own land. Same is the case of Pobitra Saha, the protagonist of the story. Pobitra Saha, a teacher by profession lived in the village Damla in Bhagyakul, which fell under East Pakistan after the partition of the country, detached Pobitra Saha and his wife from many of his relatives including his in-laws. They now reside in separate counties. As the story opens one finds Pobitrababu in a melancholic mood as if in tune with the weather which gloomy and sultry that day. Sitting under the *neem* tree in the south of his house he was thinking about his country and the division. The narrator describes:

... Bhagyakul, now in Pakistan, was where Pobitrababu's in-laws once lived. Now there was no one in that house. Not a soul. After the partition of 1947. Pobitrababu's father-in-law had migrated to Karimgunge in India, taking the entire family with him. He had already set up some business there (Fraser, 283).

Thinking about all these when he was going to take his lunch suddenly a telegram came bringing in the news of his ailing father-in-law who is on his death-bed and wished to see his daughter for one last time. He did not initially tell his wife about the content of the telegram, but the news made news made him so much disturbed that he could not even take his lunch properly. Nilima watching her husband in a melancholic mood choose not to disturb him, as he might be upset, instead she did her usual washing and bathing and then came to her husband where she learnt the cause of his sadness. All the while Pobitrababu was thinking about the ways of going to Karimgunge, India, but found out no means possible as Karimgunge fell into the territory of another country. Moreover, the war between India and Pakistan sealed all the hopes of getting visa for India. As the narrator observes:

This telegram was what made Pobitrababu feel sad. His sick father-in-law wanted to see his own daughter. But was it possible! It was not as if it were Damla and Bhagyakul, that one could easily go whenever one wanted to. Damla was a village in Bikrampur. And Bikrampur was a part of Pakistan. But Karimgunge...that was a district in India. One needed a passport and a visa to go there. Since the sixth of September when the war broke out between India and Pakistan, no visas were being issued for India. When they would start issuing visas again was anybody's guess... (Fraser, 284)

Initially, when Nilima learnt from her husband about her father's illness and desire to meet her, she did not show any sign of pain to her husband as it might increase the intensity of his pain. But, deep inside, she felt tormented. She could also realize it that perhaps it is for the final time that he wants to see her. She is reminded of her father and the memories associated with him like how she used to go to the Bhagyakul market near the river Padma with him and eat barfi from the sweet shop of Gobinda's, her childhood friend.

Meanwhile, after returning home from the courtyard, Pobitrababu found his wife submerged in grief. He immediately went out to send a telegram to Neelima's brother in Jockeygunge. Then they went to Jockeygunge the next day and started planning with her brother the ways about going to Karimgunge, India. But, failed to find any other means of going to India, they had arranged a peculiar way to make Neelima see her father. They informed in Karimgunge to bring Neelima's father beside the bank of the river Kushiara which acts as the international border between India and Pakistan. On the Pakistani side of the river, Neelima will stand along with her husband wearing a red saree, and this way they will have a look at each other. Finally, when the moment arrived it was complete breakdown of the two (Neelima and her husband) as they could not see clearly the old man standing on the other side of the border, making Pobitrababu utter in pain, "Alas Politics! Alas Religion! Alas Partition! Alas, this Border". The story shows how insignificant human beings are in the hands of destiny and politics.

The division of the country into two separate ones changed the concept of home for innumerable people. Those people, who had never been out of their respected insulated villages for years, were suddenly forced to choose one and migrate to that after leaving their home and belongings behind forever. This also changed the concept of nation for them. It may be because of the partition, nationhood became a conscious fact, when they saw friends turn into foes as they belong to the opposite community or religion, and which compelled them to flee to a 'distant' land.

Set in independent India, Prafulla Roy's (from West Bengal) *Infiltration* is a story of the Urdu speaking Bihari Muslims who had to leave Dhaka after the liberation war of 1971, with the creation of the new nation Bangladesh, based on language, not on religion. Long ago, with the independence and the division of the country into India and Pakistan, millions of Muslims following the riots and violence in Bihar, had to migrate to East Pakistan, a new land formed on the basis of religion. After initial hick-ups when they felt that they are somewhat settled on this land dominated by the Urdu speaking Muslims, they found it difficult with the rise of Bengali consciousness among the natives of the land who felt otherwise suppressed by the Urdu speaking Muslims and West Pakistan. They soon started revolting against their dominance. The result caused in the liberation war, and the creation of Bangladesh, an abode for the Bengalis, where language became the prime concern, not religion. It therefore, made the life of the Urdu speaking Muslims miserable, making them battle hard for survival. Ultimately, most of them are left with no alternative, but to migrate to their former homeland clandestinely, in search of a safe haven.

The very question of identity takes a new turn when literature focuses on return. The refugees, who left their villages, migrated to some other land and helped in the process of identity formations of the nations, however, they themselves had to undergo an identity transformation. Their return to the land left behind after a long time provides a vantage point to see how they have changed in the course of time and how their former land and neighbours have also changed. The problem of identity is therefore, not just a problem of the individuals, but also that of the villages, cities and countries. Writing about postcolonial identity, Edward Said in his famous book *Culture and Imperialism* said, "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (Said, 407).

As the story opens, we find such a group of migrators walking down the highway of North Bihar. They have crossed the border and are walking for a place where they would not be easily traceable. Shaukat, the middle aged uncle of Farid, the protagonist was their guide and kept a close watch on the whole situation. He is the man who guided several families to safety across the border even before Farids'. Farid was born in East Pakistan before the birth of Bangladesh. But he learnt from the elders that his grandfather Mudassar Ali had to migrate to Dhaka from Bihar after the independence and the division of the country, having lost their home and property in mindless violence. Mudassar Ali did not live long after going to Dhaka. After the death of his grandfather, Farid's father Rahamat took the charge of the family. He toiled hard to run his family and finally settled somehow. Things were going well until there began a new agitation among the Bengali Muslims over the suppression of their culture and language by their Urdu counterparts, and soon the liberation war started and a new nation 'Bangladesh' was created. With the creation of Bangladesh, the privileged Urdu-speaking Muslims soon became the second class citizen of the country. It made their life full of struggle as there was violence, disbelief and suspicion everywhere. People like Rahamat were once again on the verge of yet another uprooting. As the narrator described:

One day looking for safety, he had had to come from India to Dhaka. He accepted East Pakistan as his new country with a deep passion. He felt that all dread, fear, uncertainty and worry had been removed. But now, where would he go? (Fraser, 520)

Ultimately, they had to leave Bangladesh in the cover of darkness. But, Rahamat Ali could not. Much before, he died of fever. Though Farids' journey was not the happiest and safest, still Farid felt a delight within after reaching their destination because it was the land of his forefathers. They were born and brought up here. But, a sudden twist of fate and politics has rendered them homeless. Now,

after forty years their grandson Farid has again returned to his native land, the land of his forefathers, nurtured by emotion and care.

After arriving India, Farid asked Shaukat about the distance of the village Manpanthhal, the village which was the ancestral land of Farid's family and from which after more than two hundred years of living, his grandfather along with his family had migrated to Dhaka, after the division of the country. He felt excited to learn that it is not more than three miles, but Shaukat warns him by telling not to visit anywhere as it might harm all of them. They are in a state of exile, it is better to hide them from the outside world, if not forever, at least temporarily. But Farid could not resist his temptation of going there when one day along with Rasheda paid a visit to the village of Manpanthhal and felt a strange attachment to this place he had been never before earlier. The narrator expressed this in beautiful terms:

Farid had been born in East Pakistan. He had not come here before. In Dhaka he had heard a lot about Manpanthhal from Abba and Dadi, but it hadn't aroused any sense of belonging in him. His heart had not turned at the thought of a section of a section of the world in an unknown, ordinary village in far off North Bihar. Then his fatherland was to him just something spoken about, a hazy idea only. But once he has stepped on to this earth, he knew, that thought he wasn't born here and hadn't seen the place, his existence was rooted in Manpanthhal. He was surprised by one thought, that after the Partition in forty seven, his grandfather and Rasheda's grandfather had lost everything when they had to go to Dhaka. Now, exactly forty years later, their grandson and granddaughter had come back here looking for a refuge, or maybe, an identity (Fraser, 530).

On their way to Manpanthhal, Farid and Rasheda witnessed two different rallies of two political leaders Ajeblal Singh and Rambanbas Chaubey respectively, and understood that election in this country was drawing near. A few days after, Shaukat told Farid in one fine morning to go with him, that they will meet a big political leader. Ongoing there, when they entered the house of Rambanbas Chaubey, he at first cried at them saying them illegal infiltrators. But, later on when his anger came down, he listened to their plea, thought something for a while and told them to come again after four days. But they didn't have to wait for that long. After two days, two men came to their place and told them that Chaubey has asked them (Shaukat and Farid) to meet him immediately. After going there, they found that, that day Chaubeyji was not alone. He was sitting and discussing something with his three or four close associates. Rambanbas was a seasoned electorate campaigner. He was so shrewd to understand that, this time Ajeblal Singh, the leader of his rival party will give him a close fight. So, to ensure his victory in the coming elections, he needed some sure votes. When he learnt from Shaukat that around six to seven hundred people will come to this side of the border from Dhaka, he asked them to ensure all the votes for him. Only this can ensure their permanent stay in this country. He also tells them that, if they agree he will arrange the other necessary things. Shaukat and Farid, readily agrees to this proposal by thanking him. After a few days, the uncertainty of the refugees ends when Chaubey issues for them ration cards and voter's card, making them citizen of the country. Though the people of Ajeblal Singh shouted at this, they could do nothing because they have become legal citizens of the country. The writer ends the story on a realistic note with the narrator narrating,

A few hours later, while he walked back through the stone-strewn way to their vagabond living with Shaukat, there was this one thought recurring in Farid's mind. At the time of the British they were Indians, the Pakistani, after that Bangladeshi. Because of election, forty years later they found a new identity. Now, they are again Indians (Fraser, 538).

Thus, we can see that in both the stories humanity suffers in the hand of the man-made borders and boundaries. In the first story, a daughter gets detached from her father due to the partition and boundaries and cannot even see him in his final days. The second story is about how identity changes due to the shaping and reshaping of the boundaries. Whereas, Farid's family was at first Indian, after the partition when they are forced to migrate they becomes Pakistanis, then Bangladeshi after the liberation war and the creation of Bangladesh and finally once again becomes Indian due to politics as they had to migrate to India. The borders and boundaries which are drawn by men on this earth, therefore, not only divide land but also the mind and create a perpetual crisis of identity.

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