

Traumatic Nostalgia: A Study of Intizar Husain's *Basti* and Dibyendu Palit's *Alam's Own House*

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Abstract

The year 1947 was a cataclysmic year in the history of modern India when the sub-continent was divided into two separate states of India and Pakistan. As a catastrophic event partition suddenly changed the course of life of millions of people who were uprooted from their ancestral homes to become refugees in their homeland. The partition in its wake not only brought in genocide, rape, abduction and loss of property but also an acute trauma of 'home' and 'homelessness'. Those who migrated suffered from an acute and tormenting nostalgia of their roots and a prevailing sense of rootlessness. The notion of the lost homeland and the lost home permeates through the literary narratives as a powerful metaphor to present the very meaninglessness of existence in a new-found homeland which is imposed upon them. The only repose of such victims, in the midst of the turmoil, is to dwell in nostalgia, to be caught between illusion and reality.

Keywords : Partition, Alienation, Trauma, Rootlessness, Nostalgia, Homelessness

The partition of India in 1947 is etched as an unforgettable event not only for its political significance in the birth of two new nation-states – India and Pakistan, but also for its lasting impression of horrible violence and emotional distress. In his 'Introduction' to *Stories About Partition*, Alok Bhalla writes: "The partition of the Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history" (3). The storm of partition swept over the Indian subcontinent and rendered a big chunk of the population destitute with the loss of lives and property. As "a metaphor for irreparable loss" (Menon xi), for the survivors, "partition was violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart" (Pandey 7). History, that provides the enormity of the event in statistical data, fails to register the emotional crisis, the pain and trauma of the partition. The grand narrative of history, according to Mushirul Hasan:

...does not reveal how the momentous happenings in August-September 1947 affected millions, uprooted from home and field and driven by sheer fear of death seek safety across a line they had neither drawn nor desired. (270)

But the creative writers across the border, whether poets, short story writers or novelists could not remain aloof from this cataclysmic event but used their creative space to lay bare its

horrid brutality, inhumanity, and savagery. Through their creative works the writers tried to recreate the trauma of loss and pain, barbarity and sinister of the fateful event. Memories of the colossal devastation always haunted their minds to remember about the gross savagery and irrationality on the part of humanity. In the hands of the creative writers, literature becomes a medium of quest to evoke the essential sense of trauma of the people who became the direct victims of the devastation and its horrific aftermath. Such 'literary inquiry' in the hands of numerous creative writers, in its various forms, "have been able to render the trauma of individual victims and perpetrators in all its complexity" (Prakash 01). Partition was not only a political division of ideologies or a geographical division of a landscape but a psychological division, creation of an emotional segregation, when the heart was divided, a heart full of the memories of the lost land and full of illusions and anxieties of a new found mother-land. In this regard MushirulHasan writes:

There were memories on both sides of the fence, memories of livingside by side for generations with a shared heritage, memories of friendsand of long-standing associations. (30)

Intizar Husain, who along with his family, migrated to Pakistan during the Partition days made himself quite prominent in the Pakistani literary world with his versatile genius. The Partition of India had an enormous impact on the author and had always remained a problematic issue with him as he found no rationale behind either Hindu-Muslim antagonism or in the partition. He believed that the efforts of "reactionary" elements on both sided ended in "ushering in those tragic events which have afflicted us ever since." It was with this pained consciousness that Husain approached the experience of Partition and his famous novel *Basti* is a product of this pained consciousness. Originally written in Urdu, the novel is translated into English by Frances W. Pritchett.

Basti is about the disjunction and disruption created by the partition in the tradition of a long and communally shared social and cultural life, the disintegration of composite community life and its imaginative reintegration through memory and dreams. The novel enacts quite poignantly the crisis of Muslim identity in pre-partition India and even in post-partition Pakistan. Alongside this central theme runs parallel the themes of an irreparable sense of loss and an earnest longing for the lost land. But the story collapses the distinction between the notions of 'exile' and 'home' rendering their meanings interchangeable. What was home before is no longer so and has become an alien land in terms of geographical space. And the geographical location where the protagonist lives now is no home. When MumtazShahnawaz's protagonist and mouth-piece Sughra optimistically rejoices with the prospects of her dream-nation Pakistan in *The Heart Divided*, Intizar Husain's protagonist Zakir in *Basti* is frustrated with its essential degeneration. Like Intizar Husain, Zakir never recovers from the sense of loss. As a victim of partition Zakir had to leave his native town, the idyllic Rupnagar, in search of a new identity and new nationality. But his past has a thorough bearing upon him. Set in a city of Pakistan, possibly Lahore, taking into account the last few months of 1971, the novel enacts Zakir's entire cultural personality through a millennium and a half of Muslim history. The mythopoeic imagination of the protagonist is evoked through flash-backs and the deft handling of the magic-realism by the novelist.

Zakir, the protagonist of the novel, is a young professor of History who originally hails from a small idyllic town, Rupnagar, in Uttar Pradesh. After the partition of the country in 1947 he migrates to Pakistan with his family. Partition fills his mind with a great sense of loss, a vacuum from which he never recovers. Zakir never understands the rationale behind the Hindu-Muslim antagonism nor the bloody violence that follows partition. Standing on the

threshold of 1971 when Pakistan is disintegrated with the creation of Bangladesh, he re-experiences the history going back to the turmoil of 1857, the tumultuous and bloody partition in 1947, the Indo-Pak war of 1965. All these outward events take place during Zakir's adult life in Lahore but most significantly the inward events take place in his memory and imagination negating his temporality as he himself says: "Nothing is happening outside. Everything is happening inside me. Everything that has already happened" (Ch II, 2)

The gruesome days of partition with its accompanying violence has been evoked subtly by the novelist with frequent recessions to the past. Nothing has been narrated in this novel but everything is evoked by reference through present conversation and past memory. In the course of the protagonist's present enigmatic existence, partition in the form of a traumatic memory flows every now and then into the stream of his consciousness. The very violence of partition is always hinted to create an atmosphere of pathos and loss. The horror of partition has been summed up in Zakir's words thus:

People have left their houses. The way they'd flee from their houses during an earthquake. The virtuous were oppressed. Women as pure as Savitri had their saris torn to shreds. Happy wives were turned into wadows. Laps that had held babies were emptied. Children were at the point of death with drooping heads and eyes rolled back. (Ch X, 8)

With partition all hell was let loose on the sub-continent when man lost his humanity and reason to indulge in mindless violence. There was large scale genocide, abduction and rape, even the children and the old were not spared. People were turned refugees in their own lands and there was large scale exodus across the border with many sordid tales of attack and killing: "The refugees told whole long epics about how much suffering they had endured on the journey, and how many difficulties they had overcome in order to reach the city" (Ch-IV, 2). Tormented with an acute loss of identity and fear of violence Zakir's family had also to move to the Pakistan side of the border as refugees leaving their ancestral home and history far behind in Rupnagar. Such ruptures in the continuum of history is well expressed by Zakir's mother when she explains to her husband the cause of mass migration: "when people feel oppressed in a land, they rise up and leave it. They don't stop to ask where they're going." (Ch IX, 23)

It is in search of "good life", on the other side of the border that Zakir along with his family moves to Pakistan and more particularly to Lahore as an abode of peace, as a relief from the trauma of crisis. But the abode of peace turns to be a place of torment for Zakir as he is caught in the trauma of exile from his idyllic native. The more the world around him crumbles into chaos, the more he withdraws into himself, internalizes his suffering and searches for a very private kind of salvation. He finds himself exiled in an alien land far away from home where nothing belongs to him and he belongs to nothing. So he aspires for home which he had long lost in Rupnagar: "I found myself constantly remembering the room I'd left behind" (Ch IV, 5). As a release from the present anomie he now lives by reverie when "memories surged along like waves, and I swam among them" (Ch IV, 5). The sense of "houselessness and homelessness" keeps Zakir tormented so intensely that he cannot accept at heart his new home in Pakistan and remains mostly out of his new house to free himself from the eating loneliness. Describing about the heavy weight of the ancestral homes on the mind of the refugees, the author himself narrates:

They had left their cities, but they carried their cities with them, as a trust, on their shoulders. That's how it usually is. Even when cities are left behind, they don't stay behind. They seize on you even more. When the earth slips out from under your feet, that is when it really surrounds you. The grasp of the earth is no doubt strong... (Ch V, 5)

Not only does Zakir suffer from an intense sense of alienation and loss in Pakistan but at the same time he is struck by the deterioration of Pakistan as a moral ideal. The joy and exuberance of Zakir's first days in Pakistan, the hope that something positive will come out of this new state gradually frustrates him with its sliding moral order. The more he gets frustrated, the more he recoils into himself, frantically seeking some inner source of strength. Along with his quivering identity crisis, he questions the very identity of Pakistan: "yar, was it good that Pakistan was created?" (ChV, 6). Zakir is thoroughly disturbed by the present condition of Pakistan and disapproves of everything around him. He finds the mass of people around him equally frustrated and disturbed:

Those who have heads, and have brains in their heads, are in trouble today. Those who have brains in their heads and tongues in their mouths 'I swear by Time, man is surely in loss' (Ch XI, 7)

With its moral fiber weaning out thin Zakir experiences the increasing violence in Pakistan and the loss of Dhaka as the final blow. In such a morally corrupt world he finds his own identity at stake and is over-taken by a tragic gloom which is further compounded with his father's death. It is because of this crisis of identity in the face of a corrupt world that he keeps his love for Sabirah at bay deliberately. Zakir does not expect love to blossom in a morally imperfect world. He comes to realize that the grief of alienation and exile experienced in all its intensity helps the personality rise to sublimity. It is even more intense when one is caught in a tragic world. With this philosophy in view Zakir tries to reinvent his lost identity. Muhammad Umar Memon comments:

The novel is not about political resistance and activism. It is about how a personality survives his identity in a morally corrupt universe by drawing on its own inner resources. (404)

Dibyendu Palit is a Bengali novelist, poet and short story writer of great prominence who has to his credit 42 novels, 26 collection of short stories, 10 volumes of poems and 4 volumes of essays dealing with various aspects of history and contemporaneity.

The story *Alam's Own House*, a translation of his Bengali short story *Alamer Nijer Bari* recounts the gruesome days of India's Partition, displacement, rootlessness and the problematic role of nostalgia in the lives of the victims of Partition. The Partition suddenly changed the course of lives of millions of people who are uprooted from their ancestral homes to become refugees in their homeland. As the victims of partition, Alarm's family had to move to Dhaka, leaving their ancestral Calcutta home to one Anantasekar, a Hindu refugee from Dhaka. The plot is established after several years of partition, when the narrator - protagonist is on his way from Dhaka to Calcutta, heading to a city which was once his home, to a home in which he was raised and educated. The partition uprooted millions of people from their homeland to turn to refugees in an alien land which was forced upon them as their motherland. They became rootless, being uprooted from their land of birth to be tormented

with the nostalgia of the past, the memory of the missing origins. Alam too gets tormented with the nostalgia of his home in Calcutta and finds it painful to re-root himself in Dhaka.

The narrative of the story, which moves from past to present, history to contemporaneity, memory to reality, appears to tie together emotions and knowledge of separated spaces occupied by characters. While in Dhaka, he had frequent exchange of letters with Raka, his beloved in Calcutta, which is symbolic of his connectedness with his past. Thus, on his revisit to Calcutta after three years to attend a seminar, he had his wish to revisit his own home which still belongs to him in his emotional plane and wishes to meet his beloved Raka. But ironically enough, he is to remain as a guest in his own home which now belongs to others. In this context Homi Bhabha writes:

The borders between home and world become confused and uncannily, the private and the public become parts of each other, forcing upon us a vision, that is, as divided as it is disorienting. (114)

The journey back home is flooded with memories - Calcutta, with its familiar localities and his home with his peculiar familiarity. But to his utter frustration Alam does not find Raka in the house. Subsequently a letter from Raka informed him of 'a resistance' in her that prevents her from following her heart and has made her run away to Delhi to avoid him. The letter is a final blow to Alam's sense of belongingness to his roots, his past. With utter cynicism he feels – "certain lands are meant for certain roots only". The separation between Alam and Raka is symbolic of the separation of hearts that has completely deconstructed the notion of a shared home, shared memory and the sense of belongingness. He realizes that partition is not only a division of lands, but a division of hearts where to search for the roots is but a journey through memory to experience pleasure and pain.

Alam, like Zakir in Intizar Husain's *Basti* never recovered from the sense of loss. Like Zakir, Alam too gets tormented from a sense of homelessness in Dhaka. Alam too, like Zakir feels:

They had left their cities, but they carried their cities with them as a trust on their shoulders. That's how it usually is. Even when cities are left behind, they do not stay behind. They seize on you even more. When the earth slips out from under your feet, that is when it really surrounds you. The grasp of the earth is no doubt strong. (Ch.V, 5)

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