

Varied Registers Of Remembrance

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REVISITING INDIA'S PARTITION: NEW ESSAYS ON MEMORY, CULTURE AND POLITICS

Edited by Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K. Gupta
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The trauma of India's Partition in 1947 played out differently in diverse regions of the subcontinent. The division of Punjab in the West happened at one go and was sudden, cataclysmic, and violent. On the other hand, the Partition of Bengal was a slower process as the displacement took place in waves through the trauma was no less violent than in Punjab. Similarly in Sindh, Benares, Kashmir and in Hyderabad the impact of 1947 was keenly felt but had different registers of remembrance and enunciations.

The anthology under review lays bare the elliptical ways of how whole communities felt, remembered and tried to resist the cataclysmic division and growth of sectarian hatred over a period of time and their affective impact on cultural practices. It takes stock of the literary, sociological and historical archive of the 1947 Partition across generations and borders that interrogate the absences in our memories and of our national histories in the subcontinent. This anthology has come about, in the editors' own words, 'on the margins of the South Asian Literary Association annual conference' when the editors decided to have a one-day pre-conference to assess 'the negative impact the 1947 Partition continues to have on South Asian populations at home and abroad' (Preface). The editors had also noted 'with a certain kind of sadness and irony how most well-known literary scholarship on the subject had rarely gone beyond a few well-known novels, short stories, poems, or films' (p. ix). The secret aspect of the confabulations that has brought about this volume is a wider interest both to the Partition scholar and to the lay reader in that literary works on 1947 continue to evoke interest and especially those that are 'new' and rarely talked about.

In the Introduction, the span of this anthology is laid bare and one recognizes the impetus and vastness of the project that has been undertaken. Literary and historical insights range from Jammu and Kashmir, Sindh and Pakistan to the North East of India, Bengal and Bangladesh. In that, the contributors have historicized the diverse theatres of the Partition: its vastness and complexity, its narrative that can no longer be seen as Punjab centric and its affective and cultural dimensions. In their range and subject matter, many of the essays are therefore not just looking at 1947 in particular but at affective fallout on the postcolonial societies of South Asia in general to examine 'the hermeneutic lens of the Long Partition (that) constructs a conflicted nationhood in the subcontinent, which continues to affect the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh everyday' (Introduction, p. xix). This wider understanding of the after-effect of the vivisection has brought forth some interesting essays in the volume. Amit Rahul Baishtya's essay on the 'Forgotten Long March of 1942' of Indians leaving a war torn Burma through the optic of a Assamese novel *Jangam* (by Debendranath Acharya) is one such as say that draws our attention to a neglected chapter of our history that can well come under the rubric of Partition studies. Similarly Babryani Yumnani's essay 'Partition and the Production of Marginal Spaces in North East India' makes an important point of looking at the creation of the North East as a frontier during the colonial era and its traumatic legacy of ethnic and linguistic divisions that were

the Partition's legacy. Yumnam is careful to distinguish between the spatial and temporal configurations of the present-day North East as a 'contested space' where 'national and ethnic identities, belongingness and alienation are actively played out' (p. 167). The importance of this statement cannot be belied.

Nandita Bhavnani's essay on the Partition in Sindh describes the historical circumstances of migration and property-related violence in the region and contributes to the overall impact of the anthology. Nalini Iyer's essay, 'Partition's Others: The View From South India' is an interesting contribution that assesses the impact of 1947 on South India by interrogating the common assumption that peninsular India had remained unaffected by the violence and trauma through her study of some literary texts like R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Jeremy A Rinker's article on contemporary Hindu-Muslim violence in the context of the city of Benaras and Nazia Akhtar's reading of ascending Hindutva in the context of Hyderabad are both significant additions where we can see Partition violence playing out in contemporary locales with a new lease of life. However the Introduction needed some careful editing. The editors state that Tarun Saint's essay deals with 'a variety of Partition memoirs like Maulana Azad, Ram Manohar Lohia and others' while Saint's essay is doing exactly the opposite: it carefully locates itself away from the political memoirs (and nationalist historiography) and discusses 'personal memoirs' of some people (like Anis Kidwai) whose involvement in the events of 1947 make them incredibly complex witnesses who set out to capture both trauma and its exorcism through their writings.

The anthology is divided into five sections, each replete with a number of scholarly contributors drawn from the academia in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere in Europe and the USA. The sections are as follows: Approaches to Partition, Nations and Narrations, Borders and Borderlands, From Pakistan to Bangladesh, and Partitions Within. Although the sections have an overtly theoretical division, many issues overlap each other to make us realize that the events of 1947 cannot be studied in watertight compartments. Due to want of space as well as my own critical and literary interests I will discuss a few, not all, of these sections in some detail.

The section 'Nations and Narrations' surprisingly consists of only three essays, two of them on the Bengali cultural experience of 1947 and its aftermath. Debali Mukerjee-Leonard's essay 'Difficult Choices: Work, Family and Displaced Women in Partition Writings' looks at some well traversed Bangla literature dealing with women and displacement. However, Mukerjee-Leonard's essay does not go outside the expected mapping of literatures that deal with the middle class Hindu refugee women's journey through the metropolitan spaces nor does it reflect the complex interplay of gender, labour, and displacement that shapes the empowerment of them in the public sphere of *bhadralok* modernity. In the absence of sustained and long-term governmental rehabilitation, the refugee women had perforce to take up employment to support their families. This economic mobility in an unknown city terrain necessarily brought

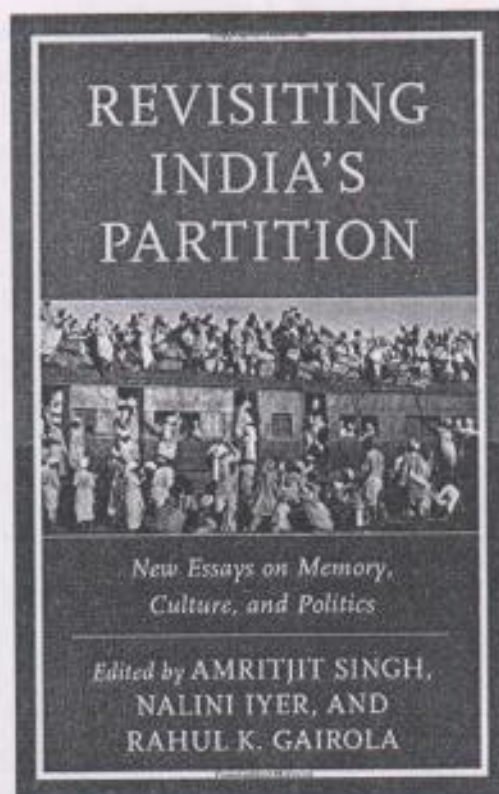
in its wake gender mobility, a refashioning of what it meant to be a 'modern' woman who had to earn her own livelihood, often competing with men for jobs in factories, mills and offices. These complex issues of labour, displacement and belonging can be seen in many collections of women survivors' interviews (for example Chitrita Bandopadhyay's *Shomoyer Upokoron: Meyeder Smritikatha* comes to mind) as well as in numerous other novels in Bangla that are outside the ambit of being 'well-known.' Amrita Ghosh's 'Refugees as Homo Sacer: Partition and the National Imaginary in *The Hungry Tide*' is another disappointment. The essay deals with the infamous Marichjhapi massacre of Namasudra refugees by analysing Amitav Ghosh's novel, yet the author does not mention nor take stock of any Bangla historical accounts of Marichjhapi like Madhumoy Pal's investigative and historically rich *Marichjhapi: Chinno Desh, Chinno Itihas* that has brought out many hidden facets of the massacre. This lack of awareness of other modes of representations around

Marichjhapi makes the essay a tired reiteration of a kind that is best avoided in writings about the contentious spaces that occupies Partition's historiography. At one point of her essay, the author states that the word 'Sunderbans' means 'beautiful forests' but the name originates from the *sundari* mangrove trees that is a unique ecological feature of the region.

Two sections titled 'Borders and Borderland' and 'From Pakistan to Bangladesh' contain a number of essays that are historical accounts of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan's and Sindh's experience of displacement and Partition related violence. Ilyas Chatha's 'The Long Shadow of 1947: Partition, Violence and Displacement in Jammu and Kashmir' is a timely reminder of the complex historical forces that have kept the region aflame while Amber Fatima Riaz's essay on Pakistan looks at the country's self-identity through ambiguous cultural practices and religious tropes. Three other essays belonging to this section, namely by Bhavnani, Baishya and Yumnam, have already been mentioned above.

Some of the essays in the volume lack a historical or literary contextualization of

the issues that make this anthology a mixed bag of rich interventions and missed opportunities. For example, Parvinder Mehta's essay on female silences in Partition literature and films and Tarun Saint's essay that discusses Partition memoirs as testimony come to mind. Both these essays deal with certain kinds of silencing or enunciation that have followed Partition's trauma. Saint analyses some texts including Fikr Taunsvi's incredibly ironic *The Sixth River* and sets out the characteristics of a number of Partition memoirs while Mehta looks at the 'female silence and opacity' that suggests a 'closeted, totalizing notion of history' in them. In both the essays, what any reader would have liked to know is the connection of such works to the larger public literary spheres of Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu languages and their contemporary resonances and receptions. Both the essays are otherwise interesting investigations into narratives that interrogate and subvert dominant nationalist discourses to present a personal, intimate history of the self that lie in the interstices of memory, speech and trauma.



Similarly Kaiser Haq's 'Partition and Bangladeshi Literary Response' focuses our attention on some talented writers in Bangladesh who have looked at 1947 but his analysis of Akhteruzzaman Elias's *Khowabnama*, arguably the best novel in Bengali about the 1947 and in its background the Tebhaga Andolan, is hard to fathom in its careless brevity. In contrast, Md. Rezaul Haque's study of Hasan Azizul Huq's long and short fiction contains some valuable insights into one of contemporary Bangladesh's most political authors. The best essay in this section is Tasneem Shahnaaz and Amritjit Singh's piece on Intizar Husain. It is a scholarly yet well written piece on one of the most important storytellers of the subcontinent. The article looks at Husain's oeuvre with an analysis of his 'double vision' of an exile and an intellectual storyteller and traces the tropes of this vision through Husain's use of the Persian traditions of *qissa* and the Urdu tradition of *astana* with the archetypes and folk forms derived from the *Jataka* tales, the Buddhist traditions and other branches of Hindu philosophical forms. Husain's act of writing can then be understood as an act of cultural and civilizational recuperation and goes a long way to create an ambience where trauma and violence are redeemed and negated through the very act of writing. Shahnaaz and Singh's essay is a significant contribution because they contextualize and analyse Husain's works and underlines the tropes that make him one of the best loved storytellers of our times, beloved equally in Pakistan and in India. Their essay reiterates the sublime and political power of a Husain story without distancing the reader or creating a morass of theorization without perceptive textual analysis.

This anthology is a notable effort to bring new responses to 1947 through the works of established and new scholars and that is laudable. However, the project of memorialization (that I think may be one of the originary ideas for this volume) is deeply invested with multifarious issues of contexts and continuities. An anthology of this kind is a timely reminder that the 1947 Partition cannot be stripped of its historical significance nor can it be dissociated from the orgiastic violence in the subcontinent that is one of its legacies.

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