

An-Other Space: diasporic responses to Partition in Bengal

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There are by now numerous important critical and creative responses to the Partition of India thanks to excellent works from the likes of Gyanendra Pandey and Urvashi Butalia on the one hand and Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa on the other. However, the majority of literature dealing with Partition in India is set in Punjab, as one can see in the key 'Partition novels', where the authors also come from this 'western' side of Partition. Rarely do writers from 'the other side' of Partition, from Bengal or Bangladesh, hold such a privileged position. For all the dialogue on giving voice to peripheral and forgotten narratives, some reputed critical thinkers have perpetuated that which they claim to interrogate through their lack of engagement with Bengal. The writing of Muhammed Umar Memon, Alok Bhalla, Ritu Menon and many more, though of great importance and merit, can be somewhat asymmetrical in its outlook because of a geographical single-mindedness. It is not that they ought to fastidiously refer to Bengal in order to keep some kind of balance, rather the point is that in most critical writing on Partition the experience in Punjab is automatically under discussion, either alone or with limited reference to Bengal.¹ What is noteworthy is that the literature and film from and about Bengal has been intrinsically and dynamically influenced by the 1971 War of Independence. It cannot be viewed as a separate entity when it is essentially knotted with and was an outcome of the two partitions of Bengal, that in 1905 and 1947. To try and disengage the fight for secession from its origins is not only extremely problematic but also misguided, and so it is for this reason that I include here creative responses to the 1971 War.

So who are the writers of fiction about Partition in Bengal? There has been some engagement with it in Bengali novels such as Sunil Gangopadhyay's *East-West [Purbo-Paschim]* or Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition novel*, but it is the short story that emerges as the preferred genre, but again in Bengali. For instance, Bushabi Fraser has

¹ Aside from, of course, *The Trauma and the Triumph* by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, the work of Joya Chatterji, and Ranabir Samaddar's *Reflections on the Partition in the East* to name the leading of critical thinkers on Partition in Bengal.

recently produced a wonderful anthology of stories in *Bengal Partition Stories: An unclosed chapter* yet almost all of them are in translation. The responses in English are scarce though their scarcity does not demean their existence, does not relegate them to the small and unimportant pile, instead they stand out as some of the finest, most remarkable responses to Partition. Their authors however are not easily categorised; Amitav Ghosh, author of *The Shadow Lines*, is a member of the Indian-American diaspora, while Tahmima Anam, author of *A Golden Age*, is part of an international diaspora, since she was born in Dhaka but grew up and was educated in many places. Both of these writers start from a point very different to Devi for example who was a pioneering female social activist in early twentieth century Bengal or Gangopadhyay, a Bengali poet born in the thirties.

The diasporic space from which these and other authors write invariably impacts the nature of their work. Geographical history and trajectory have an inevitable influence on identity insofar as place fundamentally impacts our selves. Many of the responses to Partition have come from the diaspora, particularly the more contemporary responses, from people who did not live through the period and in some cases who have spent little of their lives in South Asia. This raises questions on the choice of subject matter and subject location as well as how they are portrayed. How does the diasporic writer or filmmaker address Partition in Bengal? In order to answer these queries this paper will closely examine Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*, and Tareque Masud's film *The Clay Bird [Matir Moina]*. It will show how the subject matter and the space from which the author or director come go hand in hand. What becomes apparent is the natural and understandable relationship between the silent and silenced Bengal Partition and what has been called the marginal space of the diaspora. The responses from this space occupy neither the space of the born and bred South Asian, writing in the vernacular, nor that of the complete foreigner with an outside view of the event; the diaspora find themselves in an-Other space.

It is Edward Soja, a postmodern political geographer, who develops this notion of an-Other space from the theories of the prolific French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Soja suggests that space and social spatiality is most interesting in light of the existence of a Thirdspace. He builds on Lefebvre's desire to avoid dualisms, which he regarded as 'the deadening of dialectical reasoning' (Soja 1996 : 30), and argues that there is

always an-Other term. In this way he aims to bridge a gap between extreme modernisms and postmodernisms and to enter a 'space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives' (ibid : 5). This multiplicity of perspectives is founded on the belief that two terms are never enough and that the existence of a third term needs to be recognized. Recognition comes in the form of Lefebvre's tenet *Il y a toujours l'Autre*/There is always the Other.

The introduction of an-Other term, or thirding-as-Othering as Soja calls it, is an effort to transform "the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also..." (ibid : 60). This gives rise to Soja's concept of Thirdspace, which, in his words is:

The space where all places are, capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; [...], a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood [...] *Everything* comes together in Thirdspace. (Soja 1996 : 56)

Thirdspace, then, is at once 'in-between' and at the same time 'beyond'. Openness and otherness reign insofar as there is a continuous expansion and development of the spatial imagination that extends beyond established binaries or totalizing closures. The use of the numerical 'third' does not signify a 'holy trinity' but rather allows for further building upon and expansion. Moreover, Thirdspace is what Soja calls a meta-space in terms of its ability to transgress, to lead somewhere else, somewhere which does not have to fit into or be marginalized by already available categories; it is a space of radical openness, a phrase Soja borrows from bell hooks.

For hooks it is the margin that is a space of radical openness, not a safe place necessarily but a site of resistance, one offering possibility and power. It is also what she describes as "a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (hooks 1989 : 23) where one, she claims, has the privileged and profound ability to observe the distinct separation between centre and margin, while at the same time retaining an awareness of being a vital part of that whole. The knowledge of this place comes from 'lived experience', something that can be said to come from the lived experience of diaspora. hooks herself does not make this comparison but her description of how the margins are generally construed supports the analogy:

I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression we know better the margins as site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. (hooks 1989 : 21)

Often the margin or the diasporic experience come with innately negative connotations but it is important that it also be considered as an enabling and creative space rather than one which constantly limits and inhibits. This is supported by the writer and filmmaker T. Minh-ha Trinh, who suggests that the in-between space which 'the hyphenated people of the Diaspora' inhabit is in essence a location of creativity (Trinh 1991 : 14). The space in which they dwell can be a site of danger but it is also one of affirmation, where categories are ruptured and the model of a fixed culture is transcended, calling to mind Homi Bhabha in his discussion on the ability of diaspora to challenge 'received notions of place...like nation and culture' (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996 : 14).

Thus a relationship emerges between writing from the diaspora and the Partition of Bengal where the marginal subject gives voice to the marginal subject. Perhaps it is from the interstices of diaspora that liminal subject matter such as the unspoken events of Partition can be addressed, something that is evident in Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Rather than chronicle the events directly, Ghosh talks about Partition mostly with regard to its aftermath in Bengal through a narrator who did not live through it. Moreover, the novel is set in London as well as India, where 1947 is more of a backdrop to his grandmother's story and Tridib's death in the 1964 riots in Dhaka. This choice, to culminate the story with the relatively unknown events of 1964, is one that immediately puts *The Shadow Lines* in a different space. There is no doubt that this is about the 'other side' of Partition, one where the rioting on both sides of the Bengal border takes centre stage. In the novel, the narrator must search through library archives to prove that these riots actually happened, realising the transitoriness of news and the selectiveness of memory. However, he admits, "Every word I write about those events of 1964 is the product of a struggle with silence [...] this silence must win, must inevitably defeat me, because it is not a presence at all; it is simply a gap, a hole, an emptiness in which there are no words" (Ghosh 1989 : 218-9). Firstly, this could be applied in general to literature about Partition in Bengal, which can be better considered in terms of absence rather than presence, but secondly, despite the difficulty that the narrator or Ghosh has with finding the words to talk about 1964, he has done so. He has

written from a space of great silence and made visible something that had faded from public memory. The big histories have no use for these memories; what the narrator calls “the collective imagination of ‘responsible opinion’” (ibid : 231) allows such historical upsets to fade into an abyss of silence.

The narrator’s grandmother unwittingly echoes this sentiment as she struggles to deal with her memories of Dhaka, we are told that she dislikes nostalgia, as she maintains “it is everyone’s duty to forget the past and look ahead and get on with building the future” (ibid : 209). But it is through this woman that Ghosh portrays to some extent his own situation. Before her trip from Calcutta to Dhaka, the grandmother is concerned about the presence of the India-Bangladesh border and what it means for her, since when she was born Dhaka was in India. We are told that she is not able to understand “how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality” (ibid : 155). Such a statement is clearly symptomatic of the diasporic condition, which involves a negotiation of identity on geographical grounds, but it also brings to mind the spatial conundrum that is *Toba Tek Singh*.

Perhaps the most famous short story of Partition, ‘Toba Tek Singh’ depicts exactly that which troubles the grandmother in *The Shadow Lines*; the loss of locational certainty. Manto renders a complete loss of place, a loss of fixity, where the town of Toba Tek Singh geographically disappears and is transformed into a non-place, a stretch of land in-between the wire-fence borders of India and Pakistan. It is in this undefined space that Manto places his anti-hero in 1955, unwittingly pre-empting border theory such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s in 1987, where the Mexican-American writer calls for a new ‘*mestiza* consciousness’ (Anzaldúa 1987 : 102) in light of her own borderland experience in Texas. In her discussion of transgressing borders and opening up new spaces, she appeals for “[A] massive uprooting of dualistic thinking” which, despite the contextual difference, is exactly what Manto and Ghosh move towards in their consideration of South Asian borderlands.

Moving away from the borderland to the heart of Dhaka city, Tahmima Anam’s novel *A Golden Age*, is set during the War of 1971. As previously mentioned, this war is inherently tied to the act of Partition, yet there has been a noticeable lack of engagement with it in fictional and critical discussion. In the introduction to the book *Contemporary Bengali writing*, it is stated that, “The liberation war of ‘71 has not yet produced any great

literary work" (Murshid and Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. 1996 : xiii). Although this was written some twenty years ago, not much had changed, perhaps until 2008 with the publication of Anam's novel about the War from the viewpoint of a widowed mother of two. What is immediately significant about this novel is this gendered perspective which gives a voice to the plight of women in this war. Just as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-candy Man* broke new ground for the discussion of women in Punjab in 1947, *A Golden Age* exposes both the trauma and the triumph – to borrow a familiar phrase – of women in the 1971 War.

Anam, writing from the thirdspace of diaspora, also positions her protagonist in another space, that of a widow in Dhaka with a past full of secrets and a personal mission to protect her children. She must learn to fight the oppressive patriarchal society as well as the tyrannical control of the Pakistani government. Initially however she finds herself in a difficult position, since "[S]he spoke, with fluency, the Urdu of the enemy" (Anam 2007 : 47). But when the fighting starts and her children become involved in it, Rehana changes her stance and allows the house she built in her garden to be used by the guerrilla fighters. Her peripheral and private space suddenly becomes home to the resistance, as the very people who furtively attempt to bring down the controlling powers by slipping between shadows, hiding in jungles and appearing out of the interstices take refuge in Rehana's back garden. Moreover the thirdspaces of 1971 are revealed in the side storylines of Sharmeen's abduction and death, the torture of Sabeer and the Sengupta's terrible fate. This novel is written from a different space, one that is able to confront these real events of the War. Although there is a limit to the narration of these stories since each one is clothed in silence. For instance, we know few details of Sharmeen's abduction and are made aware of her death much later in the text; what happened to her at the cantonment can only be imagined. In the case of Sabeer, the captured *mukti*, his rescue is detailed and the horrors of the torture he endured are revealed. However Sabeer himself cannot speak of his pain, and, unable to continue living, he dies a broken shadow of a man. Finally, through the Hindu Sengupta family who flee Dhaka in the hope of survival, we are made aware of the sad fate of the people who ended up on the wrong side of the border. When Rehana visits a refugee camp in Calcutta, she finds Mrs Sengupta, who, like Sabeer, is unable to articulate her tragedy, remaining in the camp which is "littered with the detritus of people who had hastily abandoned their homes" (ibid : 218).

These people are portrayed from and as an-Other space, one that does not often receive attention but rather is forgotten just as the people who had no choice but to live there were forgotten.¹ The depiction of refugees living in 'discarded cement pipes, stacked three or four high' (AGA : 219) emphasizes the liminality of those who live beneath the surface and in the cracks of society; those whose plight fades into history with time, whose stories are not remembered and whose courage and strength go unrecorded. Yet, in occupying this space, when their stories are committed to public memory, in this case immortalized on the pages of a popular novel, these thirdspace occupants go against the essentialising national narrative to offer an alternative.

Somebody else who offers an alternative is the Bangladeshi film director Tareque Masud in his excellent 2002 film *The Clay Bird*. This autobiographical film depicts the life of a young boy who is sent away to a *madrasah*² in the late 1960s and against the backdrop of the approaching 1971 War. Location was crucial to the director as he developed the idea for this film with his American wife; he says:

It just so happened that being in New York, where I was from 1989 to 1995, gave me more perspective on the idea. When you are away from home, you have more perspective in general, and especially so in as multicultural, multiethnic city as New York [*sic*]. It was then that Catherine and I really started talking about it, about going back to Bangladesh to start preparing ourselves to make a film on my experience in the *madrasah*.³

Diasporic life has been an important influence in Masud's work. He has spoken of how he never felt like an outsider in New York but at times has felt like one in his own country; while, at the same time, being abroad has made him appreciate his homeland.⁴ His latest film, *Ontorjatra* (translated by the director as 'Inner Journey') was released in 2006 and focuses on this difficult question of belonging and home in the diaspora.

¹ Evidence of this forgotten space was in the naming of refugee camps as 'Permanent Liability' (PL) camps in West Bengal. This was the label given to the thousands of destitute, uprooted people who were left in camps in the wake of Partition. In particular the PLs were home to thousands of orphaned children, as well as returned abducted women, whose numbers are not officially documented, nor their fate. Banyopadhyay, Sandip. "Partition and the Forgotten People". *Frontier: a weekly magazine on social and political issues*. August 2, 1997: 5-8.

² A school, in this case a strictly Islamic one.

³ Shaikh, Nermeen. (2004). *The Clay Bird: an interview with Tareque Masud*. <http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/masud.cfm> [accessed 13 February 2009]

⁴(2002). *Interview with Tareque Masud*. < <http://ctmasud.web.aplus.net/filmmakers/interview.htm>> [accessed 25 April 2009]

For Masud, one place to which he had some difficulty belonging but which has remained an important experience in his life is the *madrasah*. This kind of Islamic school has received much bad press in recent years, certainly post-9/11, as a breeding ground for radical Islam, but such hasty judgment by people who are 'outsiders' is something that Masud wished to address by choosing to set his film in this little-depicted location. Moreover it is not only Westerners who Masud wants to enlighten but also middle-class Muslims in South Asia who imagine the evils of a *madrasah* without having any real knowledge of it.¹ However the existence of this place is portrayed in a somewhat sinister manner in the film because of its menacing stature (clothed in dense fog in many scenes) and the abundance of rules which must be strictly adhered to. It is also the home of the marginalized Rokon, the new friend of our protagonist Anu. Due to his isolation and 'difference', Rokon dwells in other places within this restricted home, one is his remarkable secret hideaway and the other is his more complex internal world. The hideaway is enclosed amongst the old walls behind the *madrasah* and houses a collection of curios, such as a mirror, bicycle handlebars, pictures he drew and various ornaments. When this secret haven is invaded by the other boys who throw stones and smash his mirror, a ringing or buzzing in his ears begins and in the shards of glass Rokon's image is distorted, signalling the fractured self which will later wake him up in the middle of the night and cause him to have a fit. This scene then makes him a problem for the head teacher who, in his fervent religiosity, believes that 'his head is overheated' and locks him in the storeroom to 'recuperate' before later deciding that Rokon is possessed by evil spirits which he must purge by dunking himself in the pond at the bottom of the *ghat*² 101 times. The most disturbing scene in the film follows, as this barbaric treatment of a young and mentally unstable boy raises questions about the *madrasah*, religion and also the nature of sanity.

The *madrasah* is one locale of the film, rural village life is the other and it is here that the imminent arrival of the Pakistan Army is felt. Their approach and presence in what was

¹ Masud states that very few middle-class children are sent to *madrasahs*. He asserts that there is a paradox in people's perceptions and argues that rather than *madrasah*-educated people becoming religious fanatics, it is those that are more Western-educated who are becoming militant Islamists.

<http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/masud.cfm.> [accessed 13 February 2009]

² In South Asia a *ghat* refers to a broad flight of steps leading down to a body of water, as would be common in the holy city of Varanasi leading to the Ganges for example. The water is used for daily cleaning activities as well as for religious rituals.

at the time East Pakistan lies in the background until they finally attack the village. Although, even then, the audience never once see the soldiers or the killing, it is simply implied in the gunshots and screaming that can be heard while the surviving villagers hide in the dense jungle. The impact of military rule is undoubtedly felt, as are the stirrings of resistance to it, yet they take a secondary role to the story of the boy Anu and his relationships in the *madrasah* and within his family; even when his beloved uncle dies fighting the Army the audience hears about it from a neighbour in the last few minutes of the film. The lack of direct engagement with the War is defended by Masud as a conscious decision to avoid scenes of violence and bloodshed and to promote a more peaceful message. He criticizes the frequent practice in cinema of graphically showing violence and believes that more is achieved through subtlety and through rendering the affects rather than the acts of violence.¹

This balance between proximity and distance in relation to violence is a difficult one, but one that Masud skillfully manoeuvres to produce a very poignant and effective picture of the War, particularly as it happened in rural Bangladesh and to those people who were certain that it would never reach so deep into the countryside. The director's own negotiation of diasporic life in America and his 'return' to a homeland to make this film naturally inform that which it successfully represents. The characters are not easily definable; they refuse to sit quietly in categories, whether it is the liminality of the protagonist Anu, the unhinged Rokon, or the conflicted figure of the father. Their shifting identities can be explained in Masud's own journey:

As with my going abroad I did not plan to come back, I never thought I was coming back, but it was a whole series of events that allowed me to and I discovered myself in New York as I discovered myself in Dhaka. After more than ten years I eventually came back and through this process I eventually felt at home. So it was not a black and white way of going abroad and returning in a very narrow world. I think when we return, just a little bit of us returns. Eventually we are here and also there.²

¹ Ibid.

² Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU). (2009). *Tareque Masud and multicultural transformations*. < <http://www.rmmru.net/casestudy/Tareque%20Masud.htm>.> [accessed 13 February 2009]

Masud's closing line is obviously symbolic of the wider diasporic condition. It is in this ability to be "here and also there" that a thirdspace is created. Trinh's image of an 'elsewhere' is fitting in this regard;

Third is not merely derivative of First and Second. It is a space of its own. Third is thus formed by the process of hybridization which, rather than simply adding a here to a there, gives rise to an elsewhere-within-here/-there that appears both too recognizable and impossible to contain. (Trinh 1994 : 18-19)

All of the creative responses to Partition in Bengal which have been examined in this paper can be said to come from and speak of an elsewhere. Ghosh wrote *The Shadow Lines* in Delhi in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 when terrible riots swept the country. On the other hand Anam travelled to her birthplace of Bangladesh to conduct extensive research on the War for her doctorate in anthropology at Harvard, which was no doubt crucial to her writing of a liberation struggle that she did not live through. Equally Tareque Masud's return to his homeland to make his film, as has been shown, was a complicated and carefully considered process. Yet regardless of the differences in age, gender or geography all three of these people have opened up new spaces from which to consider Partition just as Manto did at another time. Their work will continue, as his does, to ensure that in creative fields at least Partition does not vanish into history. In particular these creators have crucially contributed to the thirdspace of Partition in Bengal and have conceived of an elsewhere from which to deal with both the marginal and the central, the in-between and beyond, and thereby have made real the lesser known and unexplored Other spaces of Partition.

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