

Crossing Borders in Partition Studies and the Question of the Bangladesh Liberation War

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Global partitions—the division of territory along demarcated borders in order to reduce religious, ethnic, or national conflict—are a popular field of scholarship that is well-suited to comparative study. The social sciences, for instance, have long been interested in comparing conflict resolution strategies and power-sharing policies across post-partition regions such as Ireland, India, Cyprus, Germany, Palestine/Israel, and Korea (e.g. Fraser 1984; Greenberg 2004; Goddard 2009; Harel-Shalev 2010). Comparative frameworks have also been used to examine partitioned lands in the shadow of the British and French Empires (e.g. Lustick 1995; Miles 2014). Other scholars have explored the occupation of Palestine by the State of Israel alongside Apartheid South Africa (e.g. Regan 2008; Pappé 2015). While individual case studies of specific partitions and their legacies obviously contribute to the depth of knowledge around a partition or territorial division, much is to be gained from border-crossing endeavours. Comparative work attends to the worthwhile “learning of lessons” from one case to the next that could be useful on a nation-state level in policy-making. It additionally brings to light patterns in religious, ethnic, and national conflict that can reveal much about humanity, and can expose the everyday realities of living through partition conflict and its aftermath at a local level. Scholarship on the creative arts, however, such as literature and film, has been less prolific than in the social sciences in terms of border-crossing and using a multi-locational lens. Joe Cleary’s book *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (2002) remains the pioneer in the field. Since its publication, not many have taken on the complex task of employing a cross-regional and trans-temporal approach to the wide variety of cultural responses to global partitions (exceptions are Mufti 2007 and Bernard 2010).

Yet, scaling back from the global, there is evidence that crossing the borders established in just one place by a single partition is also not a very common approach because there is a dearth of cross-regional and trans-temporal methods in the context of the 1947 Partition of India, with which this paper is concerned. The Partition is the most significant and violent upheaval in the modern history of South Asia. The creation of West Pakistan and East Pakistan and subsequently Bangladesh has permanently altered South Asian geopolitics and given rise to unresolved border disputes, most notably in the case of Kashmir and the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan, which

continue to linger almost seventy years after the event of Partition. However, the word “Partition” in the context of India is a complicated one. It has come primarily to represent the division of the state of Punjab in 1947, and consequent large-scale communal violence and migration. It also alludes to the creation of the Muslim homeland, Pakistan, within the border we know today, including the de facto LoC. What the term “Partition” less readily signifies in academic scholarship is the experience on the other side, where the 1947 cartographic act severed the state of Bengal to create East Pakistan, which was later to become Bangladesh through the Liberation War in 1971.

While scholars frequently cross disciplinary boundaries in the context of Indian Partition Studies, weaving between literary, historical, political, gender, and sociological studies to name a few, the crossing of geographical boundaries to examine both the Eastern and Western sides of Partition has been less widespread, leading to a gap that has only in recent years begun to be redressed by new scholarly approaches. This paper upholds the act of border-crossing in research on India’s Partition; in particular, it proposes that the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 has sat uneasily at the edge of Partition Studies for many years while instead it should be regarded as a not-unconnected event, especially in the broader memory of what constitutes the long shadow of Partition. Fictional representations from just some of the multiple sites of Partition will be examined to demonstrate the value of traversing boundaries and to reveal the connectedness of Partition experiences from the Punjab border to the Bengal border. Finally, it is evident that by including 1971 in the conversation on Partition and on ethnic and religious conflict, the local impact and aftermath of Partition on the Eastern side can more readily be taken into account, thereby attending to the reality that Partition led to manifold and discrete sites of rupture, and avoiding Punjab becoming synecdochical.

Before turning to this larger issue of definition, it is necessary to expand on some issues of terminology. While the word “Partition” in the case of India can indicate, as already mentioned, a range of events across time and space depending on the source and context, I employ it here to refer to the cartographic division of states on *both* sides of India in 1947, as well as the related aftermath of the act of partition, which includes the secession of Bangladesh from West Pakistan in 1971. By “both sides of India,” I mean to signify the disparate geographical regions which the partition lines cut through or, what this paper will call the Western and Eastern sides of Partition. The difficulty of classifying these vast and varied regions is considerable, but the terms “Western side” and “Eastern side” denote here not only the division of states, including Punjab and Bengal, but also the emergence of West Pakistan and East Pakistan in 1947, and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The terminology aims to be succinct but also inclusive and cognizant of the complexities of historical territorial flux across the subcontinent. Thus, referring to the Western side and the Eastern side in the present research allows more rhetorical fluidity, encompassing

experiences that traverse international and regional boundaries while at the same time signifying the two wings that the partitioning lines dissected.

The chaos which broke out as a result of Partition in 1947 included murder, arson, looting, the rape and abduction of women, and mass migration. With approximately 1,000 miles of geographic, demographic, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity between the Western and Eastern sides, it is not surprising that the experience of Partition varied across the two. For example, it is well-documented that the communal violence on the Eastern side was more protracted than the frenetic massacres in the state of Punjab on the Western side, which began as the rumours of division spread before the official announcement of Partition on August 17th 1947. That is to say, communal violence on the Eastern side was more episodic, beginning with the Kolkata and Noakhali riots in 1946, while in comparison, the Western side experienced intense and frantic rioting leading to widespread massacres from 1947 to 1950. Additionally, there were years of prolonged migration and displacement on the Eastern side in contrast to the sudden and urgent migration of columns of people, or *kafilas*, across the Western side, which can be attributed to the more militarized and rigid border on the Western side as against the rather “porous and flexible” dividing line on the Eastern side (Bagchi and Dasgupta 3).¹

In keeping with the unique demographic composition and diverse cultures of the Western and Eastern sides, their specific histories also played an important role in how Partition was received by the respective populations. Notably, the state of Bengal, on the Eastern side, was also partitioned by the British in 1905. This act divided the Bengali Muslim majority population in the west of the state from the Bengali Hindu majority in the east and was orchestrated by the Governor-General Lord Curzon, who claimed administrative grounds. When this partition was revoked in 1911, some sense of unity in the form of a particularly regional Bengali identity was restored to the state despite the various religions and ethnicities living there. This partition, however, can be viewed as a tool of the British Empire to weaken any nationalist stirrings against the imperial presence in this large region, and cause rifts amongst the Muslim and Hindu populations.² Thus, Bengal’s response to the 1947 Partition must be viewed with this previous 1905 partition in mind, since for the Bengalis the second partition might have felt like a familiar division of their state, perhaps one that they thought would not be permanent.

Conversely, the Western side and the state of Punjab were not previously partitioned on religious grounds, but the region has its own distinctive history. For instance, Punjab was the heart of the historical Sikh Empire before it was conquered by the British and when the 1947 Partition cut through this state, it severed the connection of millions of Sikhs with their homes and their land in the newly formed Pakistan, and forced them to migrate, with the Hindus, to East Punjab in India. The presence of the Sikh population is an important contributing factor to the distinct consequences of Partition on the Western side, as is the

geographic proximity to the political circus in Delhi and the immediacy of the embryonic Muslim homeland of West Pakistan.

When East Pakistan became the eastern limb of the newly created West Pakistan in 1947, it was controlled by its western senior in a manner that is largely considered to be unjust and exploitative. Partition divided people on religious grounds, but its aftermath on the Eastern side had as much to do with a Bengali regional and linguistic identity which was being repressed, ultimately leading to war for secession or liberation (Datta 2-8). The results of the civil war in 1971 gave Bangladesh the cultural and political autonomy, and indeed independence, that it did not get in 1947, though the new country was bounded by the same borders that the imperial servant Cyril Radcliffe drew on a map in 1947.

This is not to say that the creation of Bangladesh was predestined once Partition occurred; for instance, as Srinath Raghavan (2013) has argued, many diverse factors, particularly the influence of international heavyweights such as the US and the Soviet Union, were pivotal in the events leading to secession. However, it is the case that this region of South Asia struggled, from 1905 in particular, to wrestle free from oppressive rule, first by Britain, followed by West Pakistan. Just as Raghavan claims that “[t]he Line of Control in Kashmir, the nuclearization of India and Pakistan, the conflicts on the Siachen Glacier and in Kargil, the insurgency in Kashmir ... can be traced back to nine intense months in 1971” (4), so too can these events, and the War of 1971, be traced back to 1947; such is the syndetic nature of history. Indeed, many social and political histories of Bangladesh address the role of 1947 in the country’s creation.³

In terms of women’s experience of sexual violence, an important aspect of Partition Studies, Yasmin Saikia (2011) speaks to the ties between the atrocities committed in 1947 and 1971, while Paulomi Chakraborty has highlighted the ‘reciprocity’ between them (50). Moreover, given how tightly bound people’s memories of 1947 on the Eastern side are to the movement for an independent Bangladesh, as will be discussed in due course, it is clear that there is also an important relationship between the two events on the local or personal level of memory. Before turning to the uneasy position of the 1971 Liberation War in Partition Studies, it is useful to briefly trace the evolution of the field.

Important revisionist research was carried out through the 1990s and the early 2000s on Partition historiography (notably Pandey 2001), including work on women’s experience of sexual violence (e.g. Menon and Bhasin 1998; Butalia 1998), which insisted on the need to voice the forgotten stories which lay under the shadow of the Grand Narratives—the dominant, often state-sponsored, patriarchal and sanitised version of the events. In 2009, however, Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh noted how research on Partition was “overwhelmingly Indian Punjab-centric” (5). For example, some of the well-known scholars of Partition who made major contributions to literary, historical, political and sociological research focused entirely on the Western side, with perhaps no more than a passing reference to

the Eastern side, including Alok Bhalla, Muhammed Umar Memon, Ritu Menon, and Sukrita Paul Kumar. Their focus is perhaps explained by where these scholars are from, the languages they speak or their research interests, but what is manifest in the literature is how the term 'Partition' came to signify the experience of violence, migration, loss and trauma on the Western side *automatically*, while the Eastern side did not enjoy guaranteed inclusion or such regular attention. Gargi Chakravarty, in her 2005 work on women refugees in Bengal, reveals that "Bengal ... remained something of a footnote to the main text of Partition, merely indicating departure or difference from the Punjab model" (vii). More recently, the prolific historian Willem van Schendel highlighted the need to look "beyond Punjab" in *Partition Studies* (28), while in *Partitioned Lives: migrants, refugees, citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-65* Haimanti Roy states that the "Bengal Partition should be central to the understanding of South Asian Partitions, rather than be seen as a regional alternative to the standard Punjab Partition narrative" (3).

At this juncture, it is essential to note there are also scholars, though smaller in number, who have dealt primarily with Partition on the Eastern side, with little reference to the wider impact of Partition, such as Partha Chatterjee, Joya Chatterji, Soumitra De, and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay. But scholars of the Eastern side often account for their geographical bias. For example, in gender studies, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta's *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (2003) is prefaced with an acknowledgement of the 'gap' it is filling, and a justification for their dedicated focus on the Eastern side in light of its absence in the vast majority of extant research; they claim they are thus attempting to restore the balance.

The problem raised by the lacunae in studies on Partition is the omission of stories and the partial nature of the academic discourse, which is familiar ground in light of the revisionist turn around women in Partition as previously mentioned. The consequence of geographical bias is that stories and memories go unheard or unpublished for too long, something that has been most evident in literary studies for instance. The lack of attention to the Eastern side in celebrated scholarship meant that its literature rarely featured alongside the canonical Partition texts from the Western side so often written about or taught in university courses, such as *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa (1988), *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh (1956) or the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto. Apart from Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1989) perhaps, literature from the Eastern side of Partition has largely been unstudied, like *The River Churning* by Jyotirmoyee Devi (1968) or the short stories of Prafulla Roy for example. Recent years have shown signs of change, however, since there have been a number of publications that deal with Partition as a cross-border and trans-temporal event; they do not prioritise one site over another, and often incorporate Kashmir and the north-east of India in their remit, alongside other 'peripheral' voices (e.g. Roy and Bhatia 2008; Sengupta 2012; Kabir 2013; Mehta and Mookerjee-Leonard

2014; Butalia 2015). This kind of progressive practice has not been the norm, but it suggests that a methodological shift is on the horizon.⁴

Through the evolution of Partition Studies, the Bangladesh Liberation War has maintained a faint, if problematic, presence; particularly with reference to the recovery of women's voices. There is evidence that some scholars tried to include the Eastern side of Partition in their work but could not overcome the 'obstacle' of 1971. A revealing example is Ritu Menon's seminal book with Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998). This book is considered to be a groundbreaking study in feminist history in India, placing, as it does, first-hand accounts of women's gendered experiences of Partition and the sexual violence they suffered alongside official narratives and governmental accounts of the events. In the essay "The Dynamics of Division" (2003), however, Menon confronts the lack of engagement with the Eastern side in the book and explains how she and her colleagues initially came up with the idea for a "collaborative oral history of women in Partition *from a combined perspective*" (120) with two researchers in Pakistan, two in India, and one in Bangladesh. In this way, they sought to decentre the nationalist histories of Partition and provide an inclusive trans-border account of women who had become marginalised in the dominant historiography.

This objective disintegrated when they began to conduct research in Bengal. Menon's explanation for the collapse of the research in Bengal leads to the complete omission of the Eastern side from their study. She states:

We were forced to accept – regretfully, as far as our project was concerned that for Bangladesh the defining moment was 1971: birth of a nation, freedom from Pakistan. If there was any history that needed to be recovered it was that of the movement for Sonar Bangla; 1947 almost didn't exist, except perhaps as the genesis of the struggles of 1971. ... Partition did not seem to be a research priority at the time. We could hardly insist that it become one. ... all we could do was to hope that at some later date, someone else would be more successful. (123)

While the effort to cross borders was clearly made here, the scholars concluded that in Bangladesh, first-hand accounts of 1947 were intrinsically linked to, or perhaps displaced by, the struggles leading to 1971. This is an important finding that speaks volumes about the thrice partitioned Bengal and its traumatic memory, as well as the complexities of regional and national identity on the Eastern side. In a similar vein, Meghna Guhathakurta addresses the particular reticence of Bengali Muslims, many of whom migrated from West Bengal to the newly created East Pakistan after 1947 to speak about the trauma they suffered through Partition. This she suggests is because,

Memories of 1947, or Partition, have often been superseded by memories of 1971 (or the movements leading up to 1971), because in the quest for a Bengali identity many Bengali Muslims have had to rethink their positions. As memories of the Partition are revived, they are often either blocked or coloured by memories of 1971. (98)

This incisive explanation elucidates a possible reason why the Liberation War is often foremost for many Bengali Muslims and why

it can affect their memories of Partition. Guhathakurta stresses how the 1947 Partition repressed the spirit of a (regional, cultural, linguistic) Bengali identity by imposing on it a Pakistani cultural identity. Partition and the departure of the British brought the East Bengalis under a new political regime in the form of East Pakistan, which was ruled by their Western wing, West Pakistan, the hard-won Muslim homeland of the post-Partition era. Within a year of Partition, the new West Pakistani regime made Urdu the national language of East Pakistan, where the majority of people spoke Bengali, and in 1958 introduced martial law under Ayub Khan. It became apparent that “[i]n the unfolding drama of Pakistani politics, the Bengal delta would play the role of the disenfranchised sibling clamouring consistently and unsuccessfully for rights withheld” (van Schendel 109). Therefore it is unsurprising that the memory of Partition on the Eastern side centres on the new era of cultural, political and linguistic repression rather than independence from Britain. This also clarifies why it is possible for the event to become overshadowed in minds and in personal accounts. Partition on the Eastern side does not signify freedom from an oppressive ruler, nor does it celebrate the achievement of a homeland for Muslims, as in West Pakistan, because true liberation for the Bengali Muslims was yet to be achieved.

Returning, thus, to Menon’s explanation raises the question: if the oral testimonies she and her colleagues collected in Bangladesh could not be included in their project because they were too focused on 1971, why were such shared accounts or memories deemed unacceptable for inclusion in a project that sought to recover silenced voices in the aftermath of Partition? Or why is the mention of 1971 in the context of abuse and violence against women disconnected from Partition? Unfortunately the authors provide no details of the oral accounts they gathered about the Bangladesh Liberation Movement, but it would be most surprising if these testimonies did not exhibit strikingly similar themes and concerns to those first-hand accounts of 1947 that were collected on the Western side. For instance, in line with the themes covered in *Borders and Boundaries*, it is quite possible that the women’s accounts of the 1971 Liberation Movement also speak of communal and ethnic violence, of rape and abduction, of lost homes and forced migration. They might also at their heart reveal the marginalisation and abuse of women in South Asia during times of societal upheaval and ethnic tension. Further, these narratives could bear witness to the events of 1947 and 1971 on the Eastern side in ways that stand in stark contrast to the received national and male-dominated histories that summarily relegated, ventriloquised, or omitted women. In spite of the shared experiences of pain and suffering, it emerges that there is, under the dictate of some research methodologies, a privileging of one date or specific historical period—1947—over another—1971—at the expense of shedding light on human experience.⁵

In response to the perceived limits of working across borders of time and place in South Asia, literature that represents the events and experiences of 1947 and 1971 reveals much about what is to be gained

from a cross-border or comparative methodology. In two short stories, “Virangana” by Helena Khan, which is set in Bangladesh after the Liberation War⁶, and “Lajwanti” by Rajinder Singh Bedi, set in Punjab after Partition in 1947⁷, parallel issues around women’s bodies, the nation, rape and shame emerge in spite of the different locales and timeframes. “Virangana” relates the story of Rehana who is a woman trapped in her identity of *birangona* or ‘war-heroine’. This term was coined by the first prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1972, and represents the national effort by Bangladesh to eulogize the thousands of women who were raped during the war. However, it is a term that simultaneously appropriates women’s bodies for the greater good of the nation-building project and negates the autonomy of women. The short story portrays the irony of the *birangona* who is treated as special in an effort to ‘protect’ her, while in fact it isolates and destroys her. The injustice of the label lies in the way others behave towards Rehana once she is returned home; as *birangona* she is almost too precious to touch, but her embodied shame is never far: “Rehana had heard that a pearl-studded seat of honour had been prepared for her. But how many had the courage to sit on that seat? The glaring black copper of shame and distress would tarnish the glittering gold of honour” (118). When she moves town and meets a young man there is some hope that she will achieve happiness but this is destroyed as word reaches him that she was ‘kept in the cantonment for two days’, referring to the site of her violation—a Pakistani military cantonment. This shows to what extent her past is now etched onto her body; it is invisible but also inescapable because she carries it with her permanently. The descriptions of nature becoming sullied by her presence reveal her true pariah state: “The wounds of her body had healed. But the swollen wound within her heart still bled ... She alone was a misfit, a weed that needed to be uprooted” (117). Her body will always betray her past shame, and she is caught in the *birangona*’s gilded cage of being at once revered and cast out.

This story is reminiscent of numerous accounts of 1947 and the shame borne by the many women who were abducted, abused and raped. In “Lajwanti” the title character is a woman who was abducted but ‘recovered’ through the national rehabilitation efforts in the aftermath of Partition, and returned to her husband Sunderlal. While he accepts her back, he treats her as if she were a fragile flower or a goddess to be worshipped rather than a human woman, which stands in stark contrast to the beatings he used to give her before her abduction. Moreover, he never allows Lajwanti the opportunity to speak of her experience or pain. Her joy at being welcomed back by him is tainted by this realisation; when the moment for honesty arises Sunderlal says, “Let us forget the past! You didn’t do anything sinful, did you?” and it follows that “Lajwanti’s sorrow remained locked up in her breast. Helplessly, she gazed at her body and realized that, since the Partition, it was no longer hers, but the body of a goddess.” (31). Just as the moniker *birangona* takes possession of Rehana’s body for the benefit of the broader society by elevating it to a divine status, the veneration of Lajwanti’s body by her husband equally controls her suffering and

ability to mourn her experience or heal from it. Indeed, the final lines of “Lajwanti” are pertinent to both stories and contexts: “She had returned home, but she had lost everything” (32). This sentiment resonates not only within one region of South Asia or within fixed temporal parameters, but across various spaces and times, in this case in the Indian Punjab shortly after Partition in August 1947, as well as in Bangladesh in 1972 when the war was over. Looking at the continuity of the maltreatment of women in ethnic and religious conflict in these two short stories (and there are many others), there is evidence that the discourse around chastity, dishonour, and shame does not differ. The endemic refusal to hear the voices—the sorrows, anger, pain—of violated women is not bound by a historical moment or geographical region.

However, a single-minded lens—on Punjab, on 1947—has been the dominant frame for studies of literature. Another line of reasoning for this is that the aftermath of Partition on the Eastern side was protracted and prolonged as opposed to the ‘one fell swoop’ consequences on the Western side. The logic followed that the human experience of violence and migration along the two partitioning lines was discrete and better studied in isolation. For example, in “Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of Bengal in the Story of Partition”, Shelley Feldman maintains that “Partition experiences in Bangladesh do not carry the scars and struggle that characterize those in West Punjab” (175). Echoing Menon, she argues that it is the Liberation War of 1971 that commands traumatic memory on the Eastern side and not 1947, which suggests an effort to disconnect occasions of ethnic and religious violence in lengthy conflicts over land, identity and sovereignty, and a problematic imposition of temporal borders around memories of the past. Attempts to compare and contrast the pain or the trauma of communal violence in order to infer which event is ‘worse’ are unconstructive, not to mention serve to devalue the experience of Partition on the Eastern side in the years following 1947. As an antidote to this way of thinking, Meghna Guhathakurta proposes that Partition violence must be understood as manifold to avoid the comparison of ‘more violent’ and ‘less violent’ across the various sites; she states: “Violence is not always to be measured by outward acts of murder, looting, or abduction. ... Violence typifies a state where a sense of fear is generated and perpetrated in such a way as to make it systemic, pervasive, and inevitable” (97). In other words, violence comes in many forms and the perception of violence is often as powerful as the reality.

While the Eastern side saw less widespread massacres around the time of August 1947 than the Western side, it is also true that “it was the fear of being persecuted, dispossessed, not belonging, rather than actual incidents of violence, that caused many to flee” in Bengal (Guhathakurta 97). The idea that people living on the Eastern side suffered or struggled less after 1947, does not allow for variations in the conceptualization of violence across different places. With the particular regional histories in mind, it makes sense that the memories of Partition violence would not be uniform.

Fiction, once more, respects these nuances—focused, as it often is, on the personal and the local—and through comparative analysis the merit of traversing the well-established boundaries in Partition Studies is evident. A preoccupation of literature from the Western to the Eastern side and from the events of 1947 to 1971 is the loss of home through the act of migration and a mourning for family and ancestral roots. *A Life Long Ago* by Sunanda Sikdar (translated from Bengali) is a semi-fictional memoir of life in an East Pakistani village called Dighpait in the 1950s; “A Letter from India” by Intizar Husain is a short story originally written in Urdu that spans the years from Partition to the Liberation War and beyond in its remembrance of a family scattered and destroyed by these events; and “Roots” by Syeda Farida Rahman (translated from Bengali) focuses on the impact of the Bengal border on the lives of two old friends. The striking thread that weaves through these three diverse texts is the overwhelming sorrow at the loss of home, including all that was familiar—a house, a village or town, family members, friends and daily life.

Husain’s narrator, “Kurban Ali” articulates how his family has been uprooted through Partition and the Liberation War. He recalls the past “when [the land] nurtured our family at its bosom” (54), but that now “the graves of our family—a family which had lived in one place and whose dead had been buried under the same soil—are now scattered across three different lands” (51), meaning across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. In Syeda Farida Rahman’s story, Manosh visits his ancestral home in Bangladesh after the Liberation War and twelve years after his family migrated to India. Although some people recognize him, the visit is tinged with sadness at the realization of what has been lost. Shyama, his close friend, reveals this when she says, “it feels as if we are totally alien here” (152) and employs the metaphor of the uprooted banyan tree to symbolize that which once belonged and was deeply rooted to the earth of this place but no longer thrives there. Such imagery of nature, earth and rootedness is prevalent in the literature of refugees and migration, and Sunanda Sikdar’s account of how she came to leave Dighpait in East Pakistan some years after Partition is no different. In one vignette of her village, she recounts the story of Rahima Bibi who had to flee the communal riots with her two sons and daughter-in-law after her husband was killed. On departing from her homeland “she carried some pots and pans for cooking, a bundle of clothes and three fistfuls of soil” (53); one fistful of soil came from the prayer house, one from her husband’s grave, and the last from the place where her younger son was born. The soil represents the place she was forced to leave and her family’s ties to that land; by taking three fistfuls of it with her she hopes to preserve something of her place of origin. The significance of homeland and refugees’ dreams of rootedness saturate these three literary examples embodying just one more thread of experience that is not bound by dates or places, but that reveals the connectedness of past tragedies in South Asia and how Partition’s lines can be, must be, boldly navigated if marginalized voices are to be heard.

The comparative method—working outside and beyond the borders of nation, language or genre for example—can induce wariness. On an international scale, a comparative approach should be broached with Pheng Cheah’s caution in mind; that comparison across a global landscape risks succumbing to ethnocentrism, the privileging of one culture over another, mainly with regards to dominant Western cultures and imperial powers. In a study of the partitions of Ireland, India and Palestine for instance, their connections to the British Empire cannot be ignored, nor can Ireland’s complex position in colonial history, but this need not displace a mission to gain a common understanding of what it means to live through ethnic, religious and national conflict in the wake of a partition. The perspectives in cultural production coming from within these places often express the collective anxieties or traumas of a partitioned landscape; the impact of a land divided, the displacement of people, the violence innate in sectarian conflict, and the daily cocktail of paranoia and fear. Therefore, comparison is not an attempt to generalize or to pit one place or representation of that place against another, but rather it can enable original or creative boundary-crossing exercises that enhance analysis and broaden scholarly horizons. By engaging with the global and the local and by thinking across, and indeed around and beyond, the map, we can seek to defamiliarize and to identify patterns. In the words of Susan Stanford Friedman, through comparative approaches we can perform “cultural collage” and aim to “dismantle the false universalism of Western forms” (756-758).

There could be a further concern that comparison serves to decontextualize events or cultural production about them, or that it seeks to simply compose a list of similarities and differences between the objects of study. However, such pitfalls can be avoided if “the local and geohistorical specificity” (Stanford Friedman 754) remains central to the analysis and no one case or object is made to become standard or to conform to the context of another. Rather, it would appear that the local specificity of experience is what can be uncovered in Indian Partition Studies when what is less popular garners some attention, as with the literary examples examined above. This paper has revealed how the historical moment of the 1947 Partition has frequently been regarded as distinct from its aftermath in the East, particularly the movement for an independent Bangladesh. Yet the personal experience of loss, gendered and communal violence, torture, forced or voluntary migration, fear and trauma, and the impact of class divisions are just some of the shared ground that South Asian history over the last seventy years presents. Rather than narrowing the parameters of study temporally, perhaps such topics or collective experiences provide a more resonant and inclusive framework. Cultural production is a valuable focus of study and offers countless novel subjects or topics; for instance an approach in the discipline of literary studies that considers the Bangladeshi writer Selina Hossain, who addresses the years spanning 1947 to 1971 and beyond in her literature, alongside the work of the well-known Indian Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam could reveal important insights into feminist writing across regions and

partition lines in South Asia. Such a methodology could bridge what might appear to be distant historical events by finding connections across boundaries by other means.

By paying close attention to the rationale of some key feminist researchers in their omission of the Eastern side, it has been shown that 1971 has occupied a complex position in Partition Studies. Together with the long-held justification that Partition had a very different impact on the Eastern and Western sides, enough to segregate the study of them, the events of 1971 became a common, if convenient, grounds for the Eastern side of Partition to be overlooked. But the Liberation War of 1971, and the events leading from 1947 to it, reveals Partition to be an uncontained and interconnected event that simultaneously occurred in more than one location with varied consequences. Ranabir Samaddar, in an essay that investigates how the history of the Liberation War can be written, says that 1971 is not “a containable text” (226), reasoning that there is no single history of 1971, and that a comprehensive account of it is necessarily fragmented due to the presence of multiple experiences and voices often working in opposition to each other. His logic, I would argue, should also be applied to the whole history of Partition. Its fragmentariness and the discontinuities between official narratives and personal and oral histories have long been accepted in academia, so while the geographic, political and socio-cultural distinctions of the Eastern side and the Western side are clear, these locations studied together urge us to recognise the broader impact of Partition.

The bigger picture also includes places I have not addressed in this paper, such as Assam, Bihar, Hyderabad, Sindh and Rajasthan amongst others. These and other regions of South Asia have been largely invisible in much Partition research. They are regularly subordinate to Punjab and Bengal, and while individual states are not my focus here, my examination of how the Eastern side of South Asia was, until very recently, neglected, exposes the need for scholars to direct attention to many other sites and stories too. The geopolitical partitioning of land in any country is a mobile and plastic experience for the people affected by it, and while the living memories of Partition and its aftermath justifiably vary across space and time, their circulation is incongruent with preclusive insularity.

Notes

1. For further details of the myriad differences in the aftermath of Partition, see Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta’s introduction to *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India* (2003) and Joya Chatterji, “Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50” in Kaul (2001: 74-110), particularly with reference to the Eastern side. With reference to the experience on the Western side, see Mohammad Waseem, “Partition, Migration and Assimilation: A Comparative Study of Pakistani Punjab” in Talbot and Singh (1999: 203-227) and

Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition: the Making of India and Pakistan* (2007).

2. While unity was temporarily restored to the state after 1911, this partition succeeded in creating some societal fissures and latent resentment between the two religious communities. For a full analysis of this, see Sukharanjan Sengupta (2006).

3. See, for example, Chakravarty and Narain (1986); Zaheer (1994); van Schendel (2009); Mohaiemen (2012); and Guhathakurta and van Schendel (2013).

4. With that said, there are a plethora of examples from the last decade which take 'Partition' to signify the Western side only, including Didur (2006); Zamindar (2007); Saint (2010); Chawla (2014); Misri (2014).

5. Later, however, Menon expresses regret at the oversight and recognises it as a 'major loss' to their project. She goes so far as to label it as "a failure of alliance" and deliberates on whether "personal differences or national differences" are responsible, though she does not come to a conclusion on this (125).

6. "Virangana" was originally anthologised in Helena Khan's *Ekattarer Kahini* (Dhaka: Runa Prakashani, 1990) and translated from Bengali by Arjumand Ara.

7. This story was originally published in Naorang, in Karachi, in 1951 (Didur 2006: 170) and later translated from the Urdu by Alok Bhalla.

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