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A Search for the Lost Root: Bangladeshi Migration and Communal Disharmony,
Diaspora Identity and Elements of Nostalgia in Taslima Nasreen's *Pherā*

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Abstract

The act of identity formation is especially problematic in the Third World transnationalism where inter-community and intra-community conflicts jostle with each other. These conflicts are manifested in Taslima Nasreen's novel *Pherā* which addresses the issues of migration and diaspora identity at the backdrop of Partition and succeeding communal discord. The novel has an all-encompassing sense of nostalgia for the lost home of the protagonist Kalyani who was

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forcibly sent to India for her safety. But her Calcutta life highlights the difficulties she must survive in to fulfill her account of losses at the commotion of a wicked time. Kalyani returns to her homeland after twenty-six long years only to discover that the bonds of her former relations are severed. Her pathetic recognition of the changed landscape dominated by religious intolerance is evocative of her still-cherished love for her birthplace, which, however, catches her in a complex nexus of sociopolitical upheaval.

Key words: Partition, migration, diaspora, problematic belonging, homeland, nostalgia, religious intolerance

The two pieces of land extend their thirsty hands
at each other, but between the hands is erected
man-made fence, filth of religious intolerance.

—Taslima Nasreen, “Bhanga Bangladesh”

The causes of migration are various, and significance, although most remarkably felt in socio-political domain, is by no means culturally unimportant. Robin Cohen, who marks out four generations of global diaspora, observes that migration is sometimes deliberate and at times forced. But the reality of migration is always painful, not only in matters of economic and coercive repercussion but in the migrants' wistful longing for the lost homeland. The migrants are painfully aware of their uprootedness while a retrogressive horror looms over them. Their

reminiscence of native soil is evocative of the lost home because the new habitat is often not easy to cope up with. They “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements” (Safran 83).

The diaspora literature is characterized by an often overwhelming nostalgia for the adieu land, a search for the ways of belonging because “they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (Safran 83-84). The migrants are in most cases not welcomed at the land they harbour. Their problematic belonging to the new land and never-ending pang of memory for the lost home adjoin to rob the migrants of the ease of living and act as stumbling blocks in the way of enacting group solidarity. However, this yearning for the roots which is always present in them has significant cultural meanings, as Cohen cites:

In both established and embryonic victim diasporas the wrench from home must survive so powerfully in the folk memories of these groups that restoring the homeland or even returning there becomes...the mould in which their popular cultures and political attitudes are formed.

(Cohen 4)

Taslina Nasreen’s *Pherā* is one of her early novels published in 1993 before her banishment from Bangladesh. But it breaths the passionate longing for a lost home which, ironically, was to reflect the émigré condition of its author. The revised Ananda edition of the novel was dedicated to the people cast out of their homeland. The central character in the novel is Kalyani, a Hindu woman, who was sent to Calcutta (later Kolkata) at the aftermath of communal agitation during or just after the Partition. As the oppression on the Hindus increased, many started leaving East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) in order to save their lives and their

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women's prestige. On one such occasion, when her aunt and her family was departing from Bangladesh, Kalyani, then a young girl, asked her elder brother Jyoti why they cried so bitterly. Jyoti replied: "You'll understand when your turn will come to depart for India; those who don't go can't understand why those who go cry" (Nasreen 11). Kalyani realized the heartrendering agony of bidding goodbye to the homeland when she was sent to India—she fled from home and took shelter to her beloved friend Sharifa's home so that no one could find her out, but her childish trick couldn't dismiss her father's plan.

As the very title, *Pherā* (a Bengali word which means "return" or "homecoming"), suggests, the novel is a written artifact built of nostalgic recollection of home and a visit to the abandoned home. The persistence of some diasporas, according to Safran, results from the problematic "homeland myth" because their members do not go "home"—either "there is no homeland to which to return," or, if it exists "is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially" and "it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora" (Safran 91). Kalyani is now apparently well-settled, working in a nursery school and living in Calcutta. Her husband discouraged her several times from paying a visit to Bangladesh. But, after about twenty-six years, Kalyani manages to visit "her" country where she searches for the old places many of which have lost their former glory but such drastic changes do not render the city Mymensingh unfamiliar to her.

The novel is written in poetic language which suits its accommodation of thematic nostalgia. After returning to Bangladesh Kalyani searches her lost childhood days in the maze of new Mymensingh, to borrow Rushdie's clause, "a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie 9). She craves for fresh water of Bangladesh to quench her thirst which she has been feeling for years. Water is a metaphor of all-embracing healer which would heal her wound of estrangement from homeland. The thin stretch of water which she finds hard to believe to be Brahmaputra is suggestive of the disappointment resulting from dried out relations. Her return is not received cordially by those once dear to her. Be it the indifference of Anis vai's son to her queries or Sharifa's cold reception, Kalyani starts realizing that the old strings are severed. Instead of her self-said dogma that "the Pakistani-banishing war has proved that this country belongs to the Bengali people, not to the Muslims" and that "language is of greater importance than religion here" (Nasreen 30) she feels the discrimination in every step of her sojourn to Bangladesh. To a certain extent, Calcutta seems to be a safer refuge for Kalyani at present because Bangladesh is no longer a welcoming place for her.

The growing discussions of diaspora literature are not an abrupt incident. The earliest instances of migration can be traced in the Roman civilization, chiefly due to the emperors' missions of conquering lands. However, the formal word "diaspora" is used by scholars like Robin Cohen to describe as early instances as the Jews settlement in Babylon and in early modern Spain. The British colonizers are also part of global diaspora, but their migration and settlement in distant lands are deliberate and motivated by economic causes. In the present

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context, the Partition of India forced many people to leave their homeland and migrate to lands separated by political and religious causes. The separation of Bengal, which was for a long time the centre of political and commercial nexus of the British India, was devised for the first time by Lord Curzon in 1905. But the emergence of the elite culture in Calcutta, which Chatterjee calls “Bengali *bhadralok*,” or the “gentlefolk,” from times as earlier as the later half of eighteenth century, was to take, in long run, a key role in the separation of Bengal. Be it the Permanent Settlement of 1793 or the introduction of the English education in the middle of the nineteenth century, or offering of titles such as “Roybahadur,” the British got the *bhadralok* as their confidant sidekick. But, as Chatterjee observes, the British started to forge alliance with people of other provinces and with the Muslims at the post-1857 period. Although Curzon's decision to divide Bengal province “making its predominantly Muslim eastern districts the core of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam” was protested vehemently all over the Bengal province and was forced to discard the vile attempt, “the province never recovered its previous size or the standing it had once commanded” (Chatterjee 9). And the succeeding years saw the decline of Bengali *bhadralok*'s role in the mainstream politics of India. At the time of India's partition they had almost no role to play or express their opinion in the radical redrawal of India's map. Bengal was bound to bear in its bosom the scars of partition and to witness an unending clash between two once-intimate races—the Hindu and the Muslim.

While the number of Muslims migrated to East Pakistan was small the number of Hindus migrated to West Bengal was relatively much greater. Chatterji cites in this connection:

Large numbers of Hindus, perhaps 2 million in all, fled to West Bengal in the turbulent wake of the Noakhali and Tippera riots in 1946 and the Khulna riots in 1950. Another

million left East Bengal when violence between the communities erupted in 1964 after the theft of holy Muslim relics from the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir.

(Chatterji 111)

Kalyani's family was one of the affluent Hindu families which preferred to send the young ones to India at the turbulent time. As the agitation grew, the poor Hindu families still struck to their native land because they did not have the means to go to India or to settle in Calcutta whereas the wealthy Hindu could afford to migrate to India most of whom has property in Calcutta or its adjacent places. The wealthy Hindus did not feel safe to stay at East Pakistan because they were robbed of their wealth as well as honour, and "being wealthy and of high status was no longer sufficient guarantee that Hindus would be accorded the social deference which they had been accustomed to receiving from Muslims in the past, and for many *bhadralok* Hindus this change was so intolerable that they preferred to get out" (Chatterji 111-112). Kalyani's father was a Magistrate who sent his three children to Calcutta where Kalyani and her younger brother Parimal took shelter at their maternal uncle's home though Jyoti went out of news. However, Kalyani's parents themselves did not leave their native place, or it would be better to say, they could not leave because of their passionate attachment to their native land.

The present age of globalization has marked out another façade of diaspora which is seen as productive in its transnational signification. The boundary-enmeshing of different cultures produces "hybrid" culture which has its claim of positive development, as Bhabha says:

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[T]he importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.

(Bhabha 211)

Kalyani and Anirban's son Dipan bears the mixed identity though his mother's diaspora characteristics influence but little because he was born and raised in Calcutta. Nevertheless, when he accompanies his mother to Bangladesh and witnesses her angst-ridden mind he starts realizing his mother's pull towards the native land. Every morning during her stay in Bangladesh Kalyani visits the places in Mymensingh and explains to her son the memories associated with them. On such an occasion she showed Dipan the house where lived the poet Annadashankar Roy whose lines: "You get angry with the child if he breaks a glass-bottle/ And you, all elderly children, break India into pieces/ What's then?" have achieved almost proverbial status. Thus the idea of the homeland, unlike the "received wisdom" gained from history books, appears to the little child as first-hand experience, and he wants to know more of it. When Kalyani decides to return to Calcutta almost suddenly, Dipan asks her in a surprised tone:

Why? Aren't we going to see your house? I've thought about swimming in your pond and climbing the trees to pick mangoes and eat. Won't you show me the the room you used to sleep in? And the playground of your childhood?

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 76)

Notwithstanding the cross-cultural hybridization there is another picture of this cultural amalgamation. The dominant cultures often disprove the elements of migrant cultures on the ground that it is sub-standard, and hence, not worthy of celebration. This is manifested in matters of language, and attitude and customs of people that divided Bengal further divide among themselves. In *Pherā*, this very tension between the so-called “Bāngāl” which refer to the language and culture of now Bangladesh and “Ghoti” which refer to those in West Bengal (especially Calcutta and its surroundings) is clearly visible. The dialectical differences between the two broadly-divided categories of Bengali language have been a matter of constant debate. Nasreen’s novel presents many an instance of such dispute, for example, Kalyani’s being teased for her Mymensingh dialect by her aunt and cousins in Calcutta. Even Dipan finds the language outlandish when he hears in the bus to Mymensingh and asks, “Why do people speak thus?” Kalyani replies, “This is the dialect of Mymensingh, our original language.” Dipan says, “I see, this is *Bāngāl bhāsā*.” Kalyani tries to explain, “What does the nonsense term *Bāngāl* mean? This is *Bānglā bhāsā*. Every language has regional differences in it...American English has certain differences from British English. Is it called Anglash, then?”

While “Bāngāl” Kalyani dwells on her memories of Bangladesh life where she spent her childhood in a large house surrounded by many fruit and flower bearing trees her “Ghoti” husband Anirban is economical, and will not allow any luxury at home. Kalyani often charges him of possessing the heart of a miser: “What if I want to squander some of your money? I am really fed up with the tight-fisted mentality of you Ghotis” (Nasreen, *Pherā* 28).

Whenever Kalyani told Anirban of going to Bangladesh he used to deny by pointing to its uselessness. Anirban belongs to a neighbouring city of Calcutta who is unable to understand the sentiments of Kalyani associated with her native land. Again, the novel attempts to chart out the

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gentleheartedness of the “Bāngāls”—how well Kalyani had been treated by her neighbours, the family of Sharifa, before she was sent to India. But the growing religious intolerance, the riots and the rise of the fundamentalists have destroyed the characteristic goodness of the Bangladeshi people. And what are worse, misunderstanding, hatred and mistrust between the two communities—the Muslim and the Hindu—which are still operated by the inheritance of divide-and-rule policy of the British. The strained relation between the two communities only increased with the passage of time. When Kalyani arrives at Bangladesh she feels the inter-religion antagonism in its stark nakedness.

Cohen is of the opinion that the “tension between an ethnic, a national and a transnational identity is often a creative, enriching one,” and he cites the example of the “diasporic Jews” in Babylon who “were responsible for many advances – in medicine, theology, art, music, philosophy, literature, science, industry and commerce” (Cohen 7). But the transnational overlapping is not always industrious, as exemplified in Nasreen's novel. The Bangladeshi migration was largely fraught with false promise of security. The migrant Hindus took shelter in India in order to save themselves from the Muslim oppression in Bangladesh. But West Bengal did not prove to be a safe refuge for all of them. It is true that a handsome amount of partition literature and theatrical performances contributed to the cultural sphere, but most of the middle and lower class migrated people's social, political and economic conditions were pathetic. In Nasreen's novel, Kalyani's Magistrate father Harinarayan Roy cherished extraordinary dreams

about her daughter's future which never came true. He could not come to Calcutta tearing off the ties with his native soil. Kalyani was bound to live in her maternal uncle's home only to serve like a maidservant. Her cousins Shanti and Suniti made fun of the "Bāngāl" dialect she used to speak in. Unable to befriend the smart and trendy Calcuttan college-girls, Kalyani became a lonely back-bencher. Her parents in Bangladesh were happy with Kalyani's "security" while, in reality, she was frequently haunted by the fear of being raped by her cousin Soumitra at night. Nasreen writes: "What security has Kalyani got, if she has to be raped by her own blood-relatives even after coming to a house beside a stinky lane in a foreign city to save herself from the wicked Muslims" (Nasreen, *Pherā* 15). Her decision to marry Anirban whom she met at a relative's house was a hurried one—largely an attempt to save herself from the incestual lust of her cousin. Kalyani hardly considers her relation with Anirban a lovely one, but a kind of unsigned pact.

As Kalyani finally makes an arrangement to visit Bangladesh at her own resources, the memories of her youthful days come back to her in full surge. The house which she was born and raised in does not exist any more; her parents died long ago; her neighbours and friends were misplaced. She collects a handful of soil from the ground of her former house as something very sacred. The memory of her college lover Badal, which never left her, now returns to her vehemently. For years, she had suffered for the promise of return that she made to Badal but failed to fulfill. By secretly marrying Anirban, Kalyani felt that she did not deceive anyone else, but herself:

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When she used to wander with Badal in rickshaw, boat or sit on grass in idle moments, her face blushed in coyness and delight; it seemed that the shower of happiness is falling on her bosom. The same feeling never came to her even when she sat very close to Anirban's body.

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 19)

When Kalyani met Swapan, her former neighbour, and heard that the latter too read in Anandamohun College, she asked him whether he knew Badal. A glimmer of hope shone on her as Swapan told that he knew someone called Badal who fought during the liberation of Bangladesh from the Pakistani rule and lost one foot. Kalyani freezed in cold terror, and then felt immense self-hatred for remaining engrossed with Anirban with all these long years while probably "her" Badal suffered intolerably from negligence and poverty. Kalyani, in a frenzied tone, went on inquiring about Badal and even wanted to visit him but Swapan discouraged her. The surge of memory returned to her in its most powerful form and attempted to drown her:

A birthmark was there on Badal's neck. Whenever Kalyani touched it Badal would say a person with a birthmark on the neck would die of enemy's bullets. She felt sad to hear it. She would say, "No, you'll never die. I'll never let it happen." Kalyani told these with such force! But her voice had lost all its strength years ago; the hundred stars in her dream-sky had extinguished, she did not know when.

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 71)

In her attempt to enact the old bonds of friendship, Kalyani is only deluded to find that the past days have slipped away from the pedestal of memory. She can not join to her beloved friend Sharifa who does not show any sign of exuberance at the sight of Kalyani who has knocked at

her door after about three decades. Sharifa can not even identify Kalyani at the first sight which is a rude shock to the latter. The more she perceives Sharifa's aloofness the further she pines for the past golden days they spent in an intimate bond of friendship. This gulf between Sharifa and herself which now seems unbridgeable to Kalyani is not simply created by time's mallet but religious tensions between the two communities. The Hindu and the Muslim cherished and manifested mutual brotherhood for each other, and they fought for India's freedom hand in hand. But after the Partition what remained in them were only hatred and disbelief culminating to never-ending animosity.

Sharifa's husband Atahar is a Muslim fundamentalist who does not allow any freedom to Sharifa and stands on the way of re-union between two friends whose intimacy once defied all religious identities. Sharifa's conformity to the rules of an orthodox Muslim household that Kalyani observes is another instance of the radical change that took place in the mindset of Bangladesh. Kalyani is unnerved by Atahar's opinion of the Hindus in Bangladesh which is full of disdain:

The Hindus in this country don't spare the chance to move to India. They don't invest money here. Whatever they earn they send to India. They don't buy land nor build a house in this country. They are always in search of excuses to move to India.

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 73-74).

Atahar asks Kalyani about the Babri mosque demise and consequent "slaughter" of the Muslims in India. Kalyani remains silent in cold perspiration. Her bitter experience about the change of her former homeland is saturated as she encounters the receding march of Bangladesh towards darkness. She does not find any means of prolonging her stay there and decides to return in a broken heart.

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Despite the unexpectedly cold reception that Kalyani receives at the house of Sharifa, a soothing touch to Kalyani's bereaved soul was Swapan who could identify her even after years of separation. Kalyani, moved by Swapan's behaviour, unlocks her heart's secret longings to him. She tells him of her impossible dream of the union between West Bengal and Bangladesh where there will be nothing of passport-visa and no boundary at all. The concern of Kalyani for the wellbeing of homeland is genuine which reflects the belief of the diaspora people that "they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity" (Safran 84). She cites the example of the union of Germany which Swapan refutes by saying that the case of Germany and that of Bangladesh are not similar. Swapan tells her about the dangerous connotation of fundamentalist empowerment in Bangladesh which is the chief hindrance at the way of union and the greatest threat to the country's development:

Only the Rajakars (supporters of Islamic Pakistan) are happy in this dismal country. The men who fought for our independence dye here of starvation. ... The fundamentalists are raising their voices now, although they remained hidden in underground all through the period of struggle for independence. Increasingly, encouraged by the Government, they have not only made their presence visible but became so powerful as to sit in the Parliament. The BNP party won the election by joining hands with the fundamentalists.

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 69)

Swapan goes on telling that wealth is in the possession of a small number of uncultured, orthodox people while common people are starving; there is no education, no development in the country, but marble-furnished mosques are seen erected here and there.

On the way of her return from from Swapan's home a number of poor slum children shouted at Kalyani and Dipan: "Hindu Hindu *tulsi* leaves,/Cow's head Hindu eats" (Nasreen, *Pherā* 72). The liberal Muslim Swapan who was accompanying them felt ashamed of such nuisance. The implication of this small incident is vast—it gave validity to Swapan's summative view of the possible dangers Bangladesh is approaching towards which Kalyani perceives with intimidation. Another small but terrifying incident is what Dipan witnessed to his great surprise: the "ant-game" Sharifa's sons were playing. The children selected only red ants on a wall to kill and spared the black ants. When asked by Dipan, they replied that the black ants are Muslim while the red ones are Hindu who should be killed. Kalyani saw in one fine morning that Sharifa's children were taught Arabi by a man in cap and *panjābi*, and who asks Sharifa in low, suspicious tone whether Kalyani is a Hindu woman. The seeds of fundamentalism, being sown in the minds of the children, would inevitably bring doom to the country which true patriots like Swapan and Kalyani can only mourn over. And here they nail East and West Bengal together with their shared concern for the land, and obscure the geopolitical division.

The geographical location does not make a comprehensible sense of home because "'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" and "in this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (Brah,

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qtd in Cohen 10). Kalyani returns to “her home” but finds it missing, home being not the concrete house but her wistful desire for nostalgic abode. As Kalyani gazes at the new buildings raised on their ground, the past memories of her old house, where she spent her childhood and teenage days, return to her and tears roll down from her cheeks. Muslim people gather around her and start murmuring, mostly in contempt:

Another person asked, “Why has the Hindu whore come here to weep?”

“She has come from India. Apparently, her house was here in this place,” Someone mumbled.

“Here? When had she a house here? During the British period?”

...

“So what? Many people have had properties here. Is that a reason to cry? Didn't the Muslim people come away from India, leaving behind all their belongings? Do they go back to India to lay their claims on those properties now?”

...

“Perhaps she weeps because of her nostalgic attachment with this place. She is elderly, and recalls her dead parents,” said a young man in a checked lungi, leaning against a tree.

A harsh-voiced man, putting an end to all the muddled conversations, spoke out, “Stop that nonsense! They (the Hindus) want to stay on in India and hold on to this country as well.”

(Nasreen, *Pherā* 63)

Some people felt that Kalyani came to Bangladesh in order to demand her property back. Sharifa's husband Atahar too suspected the similar objective of Kalyani because he was baffled

as to why she came to Bangladesh without a house or any relative existing there. Atahar's situation is similar to that of Anirban both of whom are unable to share Kalyani's feelings and sentiments associated with the lost homeland. It is only Kalyani who feels the pull from both sides of the divided Bengal.

The "double perspective" that Rushdie holds while talking about Indian writers who stay abroad and perceive the sway of two cultures are "at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society" (19) can also be applied to Taslima Nasreen. Her own life at present and her novels, *Pherā* and *Farāshi Premik* [French Lover] brood over the questions of migration or immigration, and resultant cultural plurality that is an important feature of diaspora. "But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be," says Rushdie, "it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is part of the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angels" (Rushdie 15). Diaspora rudiments provide literature the space to forge affinity with the unfamiliar, or to create a fascinating "inbetweenness" in the reading of hybrid literature and culture. The critic has to be cautious as not to overlook the remnants of peripheral diaspora elements, or the "official" version of history which diaspora literature seeks to subvert. Cohen adds a note of caution to the practitioners of diaspora criticism who "must tread carefully in order to avoid the charge that we are either imitating discredited nationalist rhetoric about the link between land, people, and culture, or that we remain naive about the global spaces that have opened up in the past several decades" (Cohen 10).

NOTE: The quotations from Nasreen's novel *Pherā* and poem "Bhanga Bangadesh" are translated from Bengali by the writer of this article. An English translation of the novel (*Homecoming*) is freely available from Nasreen's official website: <http://taslimanasrin.com>

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