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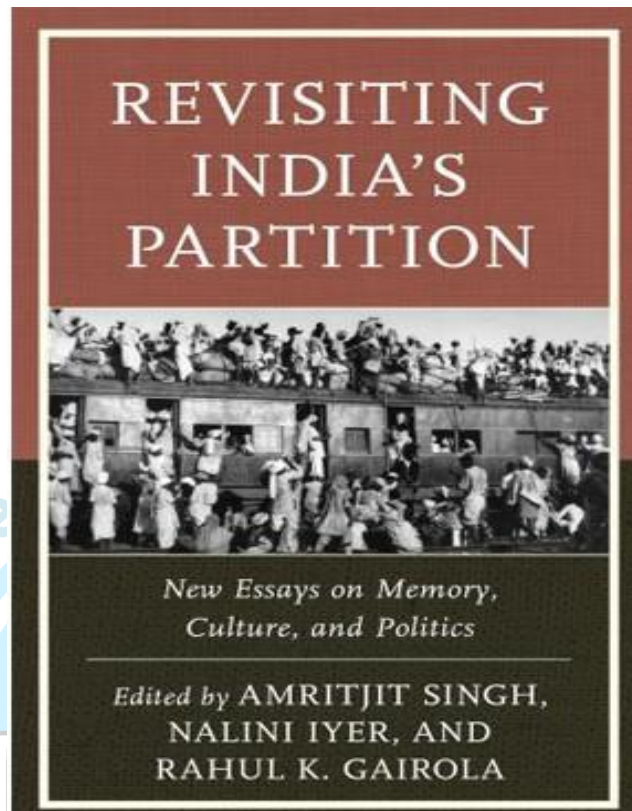
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Revisiting India’s Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics, edited by Amritjit Singh et al.

Reviewed by Stella Chitralkha Biswas



Title: *Revisiting India’s Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*

Edited by Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K. Gairola

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Revisiting India’s Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics comes across as yet another significant contribution to the wealth of documented writings in the realm of partition Studies with respect to the Indian subcontinent. What began as an engaging deliberation over dinner at the South Asian Literary Association annual conference in 2013 at Boston, extended to culminate in the elaborate project of bringing out an edited volume comprising of crucial contributions made by scholars across nations and regions. This compilation promises an extremely novel venture into areas hitherto given less attention or deliberately left out of the existing annals of partition studies. While the historic events surrounding the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan as separate nations have remained a thoroughly explored domain, the spine-chilling massacres, bloody communal riots and rifts in the nationalistic vision beginning even before that or perhaps later in the 1971 division of Pakistan and Bangladesh have received comparatively lesser critical interest on a global scale. Corroborating information from both

factual and archival sources along with other literary as well as artistic sources, this volume adopts a multidisciplinary approach to locate and address the breaches and contentious zones that are inevitably latent within the existing scholarship on the partition. The work begins with an enthusiastic prefatory note on the part of the three editors who express their high hopes and massive effort put into such a “transnational, multiyear project” (Singh et al, 2016, p.1) that would aim to rethink the complex colonial politics behind the subsequent irreconcilable disparities ensuing in inter-communal relationships and vying visions of nationhood. It is an undeniable fact that the unresolved questions of language, identity, culture, citizenship, borders and many more that expose the disillusionments and irresponsible arbitrariness of certain political decisions undertaken in the wake of the traumatic incidents surrounding partition, still resonate in ideas on belonging in the contemporary times.

With a total of nineteen essays, this volume has been divided into five parts which categorically deal with certain key areas of Partition. The first part titled ‘Approaches to Partition’ comprises of four essays which engage in a dialogic interaction with various innovative theoretical approaches towards the understanding of the ‘Long Partition’. The first article ‘Specters of Democracy/The Gender of Specters: Cultural Memory and the Indian Partition’ by Radhika Mohanram uses the abstract and poststructuralist tools of hauntology to read partition trauma, specifically focusing upon the issue of gender within the larger conceptualizations of violence, memory, loss and nationalistic visions. What emerges out of this discursive engagement is a very pertinent analysis of the ruptures present in an otherwise uniform understanding of the history of nationalism that acknowledges and assesses the significance of ‘the ghosts’ who have been consciously accorded a liminal place in such a history. Jasbir Jain’s article ‘Lost Homes, Shifting Borders, and the Search for Belonging’ raises crucial questions on the ideas of migration, belonging, homelessness and cultural memories through a negotiatory discussion of personal and political spaces. Drawing upon a range of Muslim Partition writers like Manto, Tahira Iqbal, Intizar Hussain, Sara Suleri, Sorayya Khan, Attia Hosain, Munawwar Rana and Asghar Wajahat, Jain critically examines the fragmentary nature of partition migrations and the associated psychological implications of dislocation and displacement. Parvinder Mehta’s article ‘A Will to Say or Unsay: Female Silences and Discursive Interventions in Partition Narratives’ develops an interesting take upon the understanding of female experiences within the purview of partition narratives. Drawing upon important textual sources namely, Rajinder Singh Bedi’s “Lajwanti”, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* and Sabiha Sumar’s *Silent Waters (Khamosh Pani)*, Mehta’s article corroborates useful theoretical standpoints to explore the coerced silences and denied agencies of women who have been victimized through the patriarchal and totalitarian assumptions of violence, trauma, honour and shame that surround the partition. ‘Migrations in Absentia: Multinational Digital Advertising and Manipulation of Partition Trauma’ by Rahul K. Gairola broaches the issue of rethinking the Partition through the critical lens of Postcolonial Digital Humanities. Within the dynamics of such conceptualizations, the notions of colonialism, imperialism, migration, transnational capitalism and technocultural agency have been crucially explored within the analytic framework of two advertisements by Coca-Cola and Google in which Gairola discovers traces of the ‘Long Partition’.

The second section titled ‘Nations and Narrations’ comprises of three essays which collectively deal with a considerable number of literary narratives on the partition and thus, this section opens up novel avenues of exploring the issue of partition and subsequent trauma. Tarun K. Saint’s article ‘Exorcizing the Ghosts of Times Past: Partition Memoirs as Testimony’ delves into the realm of partition memoirs to uncover the complex and unaccounted discursive zones which have been consciously relegated a marginal place in the historical experience of the

partition documented in official archives. Through a thorough discussion of a few such personal memoirs, namely Anis Kidwai's *In Freedom's Shade*, Kamlaben Patel's *Torn from the Roots*, Prakash Tandon's *Punjabi Century*, Fikr Taunsvi's 'The Sixth River: A Diary of 1947' and Abdul Rahman Siddiqi's *Smoke without Fire: Portraits of Pre-Partition Delhi*, Saint not only investigates the crucial testimonial function of these life writings, the subjective pain, trauma and experiences of partition embedded within them but also metaphorically exorcises the undiscovered spectral and unconventional voices that challenge the hegemonic glory of the mainstream nationalist discourse. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard's article 'Difficult Choices: Work, Family and Displaced Women in Partition Writings' expounds upon select Bengali fiction from the mid-twentieth century to investigate the radical changes brought about in the lives of displaced middle-class Bengali women as a result of the Partition. Looking at works namely, Narendranath Mitra's *Abataranika (The Staircase)* and *Durabhashini (Lady Telephone Operator)*, Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga (The River Churning)*, Samaresh Basu's *Pasharini* ("Peddler-Woman") and Dibyendu Palit's *Maachh* ("Fish"), Mookerjea-Leonard unearths the deeper nuanced experiences of these resilient women whose self-sacrificing courage, psychological turmoil and endurance of overburdening familial responsibilities as well financial exigencies are recognized against the backdrop of the partition. 'Refugees as *Homo Sacers*: Partition and the National Imaginary in *The Hungry Tide*' by Amrita Ghosh primarily focuses on Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Hungry Tide* to explore the dynamics of mass-displacement of migrant Dalit refugees in the course of the Morichjhapi siege of 1979. By taking into consideration Foucault's notion of the 'heterotopia' and Giorgio Agamben's notion of the '*homo sacer*', Ghosh analyzes the presence of the subaltern refugees in the borderland spaces of the Sunderbans as a challenge to the hegemony of the nationalist construct in a post-partition era and unravels the silenced histories of such displaced people.

The third section titled 'Borders and Borderlands' comprises of four essays that elaborate multiple perspectives upon the arbitrariness and tenuousness of borders and boundaries that were created in the wake of the 'Long Partition'. The first article, 'Property, Violence, and Displacement: Partition in Sindh' of this section by Nandita Bhavnani chooses to focus upon the partition experience in Sindh, a facet of the nationalist history that she deems is yet to be substantially explored by critics and scholars worldwide. Through a critical exploration of the very different dynamics of communal relationships in Sindh during the years of bloody violence across North India, Bhavnani seeks to understand the role of landed property within the playout of violence against and displacement of minority communities. 'The Long Shadow of 1947: Partition, Violence, and Displacement in Jammu & Kashmir' by Ilyas Chattha draws upon the historical experience of intercommunal conflicts in Jammu that led to hostile situations of ethnic cleansing through perpetual violence that forced hordes of Muslims towards exile, displacement and migration. Chattha attempts to examine not only the Jammu & Kashmir crisis in the nation-building projects of India and Pakistan but also focuses on the lingering legacies left behind in the aftermath of the creation of a bulk of refugee populations that implicate communal and transnational tensions even today. 'From Frontiers to Borders: Partition and the Production of Marginal Spaces in North East India' by Babyrani Yumnam chooses to locate the processes and impacts of nineteenth-century state-sanctioned territorial demarcation and nation-building upon the historiography of the NER in the post-partition years. Yumnam makes a discursive study of the multiple histories of the North East to arrive at an alternative understanding of marginal spaces within the social histories and colonial encounters of this region. Amit R. Baishya's article 'Looking East: Melodramatic Narrative, Ecotheater, and the "Forgotten Long March" in *Jangam*' reads the 1982 Sahitya Akademi award-winning Assamese novel *Jangam* by Debendranath Acharya. Here Baishya projects alternative narrative paradigms alongside other

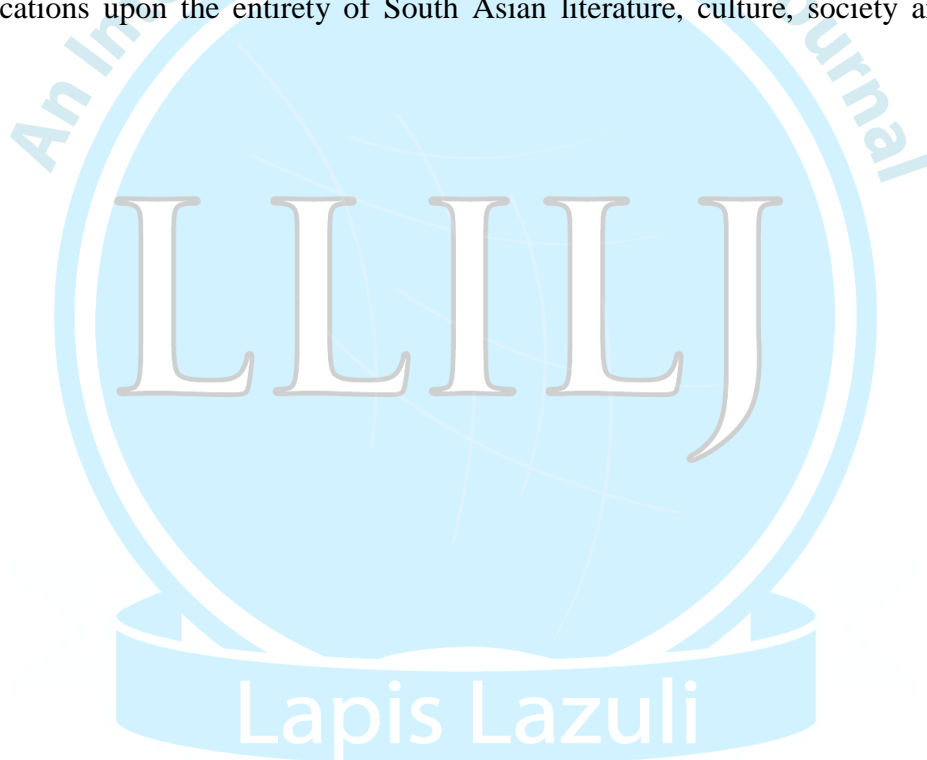
mainstream partition narratives, and that in turn creates allegories of a universal human condition. Baishya goes on to extend his analysis by bringing into traditional studies of partition a much-needed shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.

The fourth section titled 'From Pakistan to Bangladesh' comprises of five essays that offer multiple readings on the politics involved in the formation of Pakistan and Bangladesh in the postcolonial and partition years. 'The Never-Ending Partition: Pakistan's Self-Identification Dilemma' by Amber Fatima Riaz explores works by Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, Ayesha Jalal, Ashutosh Varshney and Yasmin Khan among others to examine the disparate political ideologies that had been implemented in the formation and evolution of Pakistan, ultimately resulting in a fragmented national identity. Riaz raises pertinent questions related to identity, cultural roots, regional and religious differences to address the contentious national identity of Pakistanis even after seventy years of independence. Kaiser Haq's article 'Partition and the Bangladeshi Literary Response' dwells specifically upon select Bangladeshi Partition literature through the lens of literary criticism with an in-depth understanding of the conflicts that had produced such literature. Corroborating important discursive lines of thought with a recounting of his personal experiences, Haq dexterously sketches a portrait of the socio-economic, political and demographic changes brought about by the partition in Bangladesh. Masood A. Raja in his article titled 'Cosmopolitan Aesthetics in Shakeel Adil Zada's *Baazigar*' not only discusses the epic Pakistani novel *Baazigar* to understand the notion of cosmopolitanism and nationalism but also arrives at a more nuanced and inclusive narrative of national identity for Pakistan. In the course of his analysis, Raja strives to understand the essential differences in the Indian visions of cosmopolitanism and the contending nationalistic visions of Pakistan as major catalysts in the Partition. 'The Nexus of Class, Identity, and Politics in the Representational Economy of Partition: The Case of Hasan Azizul Huq' by Md. Rezaul Haque calls forth attention to a hitherto less noticed area in partition studies– the writings produced by Bengali Muslim authors who are mostly middle-class, educated in Western systems of knowledge and urban-based. Focusing primarily upon Hasan Azizul Huq and some of his early short stories, Haque attempts to locate the tensions, splits and contradictory ideologies embedded within the memory, nostalgia, self-articulation and response of this writer towards the traumatic incidents surrounding the partition. Tasneem Shahnaaz and Amritjit Singh in their article 'Partition and Beyond: Intizar Husain's Quest for Meaning and Vision' pivots around the "double perspective" (Singh et al, 2016, p.262) of Intizar Husain as a writer that lends him the capability to skillfully straddle the past and the present, the personal and the impersonal, the similar with the dissimilar and many more such binaries. Shahnaaz and Singh adeptly show how Husain's literary works deal with the trauma of partition while also suggesting possibilities of hope, redemption and renewal beyond the realities of violence and fragmentation.

The fifth and final section titled 'Partitions Within' comprises of three essays which touch upon locales like Banaras, Hyderabad and South India to gauge the impact of the Partition upon these regional histories. Jeremy A. Rinker's article 'Buckle in the Hindu Belt: Contemporary Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Legacy of Partition in Banaras' seeks to establish important linkages between the historical experience of the partition along with the modern-day conflicts and complexities in the identity-politics of Banaras. Rinker talks about the contending metanarratives of Banaras as both communal bigotry and peaceful, secular coexistence, the violence of partition and the lessons that failed to learn throughout its historical experience. 'Hyderabad, Partition, and Hindutva: Strategic Revisitings in Neelkanth's "Durga" (2005)' by Nazia Akhtar focuses on one particular extract titled "Durga" from Kishorilal Vyas Neelkanth's 2005 novel *Razakar* in order to explore the problematic nature of sexual violence against

women from Muslim minority communities as a means of justifying the historical atrocities of the Muslim Razakars against Hindu women in the 1940s. Akhtar categorically discusses the insidious ideologies of Hindutva Right-Wing advocates in manipulating ideas on communal identity, nationhood, belonging, etc. as well as exposes the divisive nature of present-day Hindutva groups in their pernicious agendas against Muslims. Nalini Iyer’s ‘Partition’s Others: The View from South India’ focuses particularly on select writers from South India, namely R.K. Narayanan, Lalithambika Antherjanam and Balachandra Rajan who engage in expressing their observations on the violence of partition in Bengal and Punjab from their individual and regional perspectives. Throughout her discussion, Iyer shows how these South Indian writers who have not been directly affected by the horrors of the Partition, nevertheless depict their sensitive and sympathetic understanding of its magnitude in other parts of the Indian subcontinent, while also offering unbiased insights into notions of identity, language and caste issues, and minority rights to formulate crucial secular ideals on nationhood.

This book makes a valuable contribution towards expanding the scope of partition studies to look beyond dominant ideologies and mainstream discourses, and rather delves deep into those areas which have the potential for fresh interpretation and research. While orbiting around one momentous historical event of the 1947 Partition, the contributors have branched out into different modalities of engagement and analysis, utilizing different kinds of literary, archival and oral sources to propose their insightful observations on the idea of the ‘Long Partition’ and its implications upon the entirety of South Asian literature, culture, society and history in general.



BIO-NOTE

Stella Chitrlekha Biswas is currently registered as a Doctoral candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies at the Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, India. Her research interests include postcolonial studies, cultural studies, sexuality and gender studies, juvenile literature, pedagogy, speculative fiction, etc.

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