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# Reading Women's Journey through the Debris of Indian Partition in the "Charnel Ground of History"

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The previous century, like the present one, had been "one of the Walls. Concrete, beaucocratic, surveillance, security, racist walls" (Berger 88)—of walls that pervaded every sphere. And the more we had talked about razing these walls among races, castes, religions, or disciplines, greater had been the urge to consolidate our frontiers, and to raise walls of prejudice and parochialism that kept us as captives in our small cocoons. Nazim Hikmet, who was a political prisoner in Turkey for thirteen years, while talking about his experiences of incarceration in one of his prison poems had once written,

They have taken us prisoners,  
They've locked us up.  
But that's nothing.  
The worst  
is when people—knowingly or not—  
*carry prison inside themselves.*<sup>1</sup>

And the worst of these prisons that we carry within ourselves and all around us are perhaps those that are built on obdurate religious dogmas, because they point at a dangerous entente among political, religious, and economic interests, ultimately driven by a sectarian aim which sanctions and legitimizes genocidal violence in history. India's blood-stained Partition, which was deemed as an inevitable result of the ethnic clashes between two supposedly antagonistic religious communities—the Hindus and the Muslims—in the subcontinent is an example of such carnage. In fact, Britain's transfer of power to its colonial subjects that coincided with the country's vivisection at the cusp of India's independence in 1947 was fraught with such macabre memories of violence that it propelled the official historiographers of independent India and Pakistan into a forced amnesia about the Partition. Thus in the years following India's independence the nation witnessed a strange dichotomy. On the one hand, the postcolonial Indian nation indulged in a heady quest of rediscovering its "roots" in its attempt to reconnect with India's cultural past as a part of the larger project of decolonization as a whole; on the other,

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as a legacy of the Partition, around fifteen million people on both sides of the borders of Bengal and Punjab<sup>2</sup> were left destitute after being suddenly deracinated from their roots as refugees in exile. This contradiction was coercively suppressed to valorize a neat narrative of India's nationalist movement, and to enshrine 15 August as the auspicious date of our deliverance from the oppressive colonial regime of two-hundred years.<sup>3</sup> The pronouncement of India's freedom at the midnight of 15 August was indeed an exhilarating moment in history when Nehru declared in his speech that India "will awake to life and freedom," but what was realized on 15 August was only a fragment of that magnificent dream of freedom that the Hindus, Muslims, and the Sikhs had all dreamt together: Britain left us a truncated, mutilated India that gave birth to Jinnah's premature, moth-eaten Pakistan, and a sense of inconsolable grief that our leaders too colluded with the British in this betrayal, and were themselves complicit in the crime.

Following the Partition, it was not sufficient for the new nations-states to have a name and a territory. They felt that the name must be inscribed on another's territory—the body of the women in particular—at an anarchic time when the laws of the civil society were ruptured in the crisis that involved the creation of "new borders through what had been an undivided land" (Hayden 33) or a single "colonized landmass" (Bagchi and Dasgupta 5). In such a conjuncture when the pre-existing social and political divisions were in the course of acquiring new contours and the contending communities that previously shared the same geo-political territory were engaged in fortifying their shares, women in society were subjected to abduction and mass rape due to their metaphoric association with the land.<sup>4</sup> As the "intensely 'private sphere' of women's sexuality was deployed in this major re-drawing of the public borders and boundaries" (Bagchi and Dasgupta 5) during Partition, the bodies of women became privileged sites on whose surface the political programs of both states were brutally inscribed. Writing from a relief center in Noakhali after the riots, Muriel Lester thus observed:

Several of them had to watch their husbands being murdered and then be forcibly converted and married to those responsible for their death [sic]. Those women had a deadlock. It was not despair. Nothing so active as that. It was blackness.  
(*Indian Annual Register*, Vol. II [1942] 199)

Also with the sudden deterritorialization of the primary dwellings such as the birthplace, language, family, and culture—the grand narratives that are regarded as the conventional coordinates of human identity in the vortex of an orgiastic massacre many men and women failed to reconcile with the conflicts in their inner and the outer worlds, and thus succumbed to a baffling incomprehension. Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) one of the most significant writers of short stories or

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Urdu *afsanas* on India's Partition, recalled his own predicament after being exiled from his city Bombay following the Partition:

For three months, I could not decide anything.... All mixed up: sometimes in the bazaars of Bombay and its streets, sometimes the small swift moving trams of Karachi, and those slow moving mule-carts and sometimes the noisy humdrum of the restaurants of Lahore, I simply cannot make out where I was. (Manto, "Zahmate-Mihre-Darakhshaan," *Dastavez* 477)

This aphasia, a psychosomatic effect of the Partition trauma adversely affected Manto's writing:

I prepared myself for writing, but when I actually sat down to write, I found myself divided. In spite of trying hard, I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India. The same puzzling question rang in my mind: Will the literature of Pakistan be different? If so how? Who has claims to whatever was written in undivided India? (77-78)

Like his own creation, Toba Tek Singh—the eponymous hero of the story by the same name, Manto was wedged in a limbo. A lunatic in the mental asylum, Manto's Toba Tek Singh was inadvertently trapped in the violent unfolding of history as he died during the exchange on the no-man's land between the two countries being unable to decide whether he belonged to India or Pakistan. Similarly in his exile the author found himself precariously poised in the no-man's land between life and death that eventually culminated in his premature demise at forty-two. Interestingly in Manto's story, the cohabitants of Toba Tek Singh's madhouse were subjected to the most severe form of *othering* in the asylum. Yet ironically, while these men were kept under confinements, little was done to check the rabid fanatics whose deranged political sensibility created a greater turmoil outside. With the lunatics in Singh's asylum, caricaturing the political rift between the leaders—Jinnah and Tara Singh—to wrestle out the ambiguous vivisection of the nation, the hierarchical privileging of the sane over the insane in the dyad was neatly subverted in the narrative, as the sagacity of their so-called rational counterparts outside now itself became a moot question. It is through their confusion that Manto raised some of the most perplexing concerns regarding the Partition:

If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in Hindustan, when they had not moved from the place at all...And who could say with certainty that some day, both Hindustan and Pakistan would not vanish from the face of the earth altogether! (65, 67)

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In “Toba Tek Singh,” one day a lunatic became so disconcerted with the India-Pakistan mêlée that in sheer desperation he mounted a tree, claiming that he preferred neither India nor Pakistan, but the tree. The lunatic on the tree-top became a metaphor for a person without a mooring. He was a denizen of nothingness, representing those who were left without a tangible piece of earth that they could call their own.

Further, Alok Bhalla succinctly posits in *Partition Dialogues* that the division of the Indian subcontinent not only estranged the *unaccommodated* millions in Partition fiction and their real counterparts from their lands, but also alienated them “from those simple words like ‘friendship’, ‘neighbourhood’, ‘peepul tree’ ... which they had carefully nurtured for generations to craft their world” (Bhalla 7). This sudden upturning of the spatio-temporal neighborhood at the lunatic epicenter of violence particularly saturated the minds of the women whose everyday world revolving around the domesticity of the home and the hearth were burned down like fragile papier-mâché in the flames of fratricidal warfare. Here once again we may allude to Manto’s literature of loss that textually signifies the semiotic defunctionalization of all culture signs at the time of a strange darkness when the “worst” were “full of passionate intensity”<sup>5</sup> and locates the multiple ways in which the staggering violence of Partition, both discursive and in its embodied form, shaped women’s existence and even corrupted the very ability to communicate their pain in words. In *Fundanen*, for instance, Manto narrates a macabre tale of an anonymous woman against the backdrop of a harrowing time when men and predatory beasts behaved alike, and “women had to grow two stomachs—one was the normal one and the second was for them to be able to bear the fruits of violence within themselves” (Das 86). The identity of the woman in this story remains largely unintelligible because of the incoherent narration in disjointed sentences that are occasionally scattered with concrete references such as the bus number that transported her from the other side of the border. The woman is found painting bizarre designs on her body by a mirror which she claims, are appropriate for the time. The “distortion of the body” seems to work in tandem with the “distortion of speech” which has “all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meanings” (Das 86).

In chronicles of Partition, while some of the survivors, especially women, made a few failed attempts to narrate their experiences unspeakable horror, like the frantic voice of the ghastly narrator in Manto’s *Fundanen* (“Pompoms”),<sup>6</sup> but only succeeded in mumbling a few garbled words bereft of any logic or sense; many others simply lapsed into a protracted silence before they could bring themselves to relate their personal narratives from the fold of memory that itself had become

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a spasm of the mind. And yet, women's journey from their position of initial powerlessness, to their ultimate affirmation of authority in Partition narratives has been both inspiring and elevating as they attempted to shore from the ruins the fragments of their life, by picking up the jagged ends and broken ties that were suddenly snapped by the religious lines drawn across the map and between people.

To save their honour thousands of minority women left their homes overnight with the *meremost minimum* that they were allowed to carry with them. In 1946, contemporary newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* recorded the arduous journey of these women across borders. Streams of women clutching their babies on one arm and their small belongings on the other were seen walking down the rail tracks. Many died on the way. Figures show that in the interim period between August 1946 and December 1947, many millions of Hindus poured in prolific numbers in Eastern India alone into the states of West Bengal, Assam and Tripura, altering the lives of the people and socio-economic profile of these states forever.

For the refugees<sup>7</sup> who were ousted from their *bhité* [ancestral home] and expatriated to a different land following the exchange of population after the Partition indeed faced a "grave misfortune" (Chakrabarty 121) in their new country as they realized that the natural surroundings, social customs and the daily rituals of the people were sometimes starkly different from their own. Sometimes even their dialect and intonations of speech became an object of ridicule, often mimicked to evoke slapstick humour. For instance, the arrival of the Hindu migrants from the villages of East Pakistan to a big city like Kolkata gave birth to several jokes, which are mostly variations of the clichéd encounter between a country bumpkin and a sophisticated urbanite, or a village simpleton's discomfiture with chic lifestyle of the city. However, beside the comic capers on a serious note, the mutual incompatibility between the two communities actually reflected how a sudden and prolific inflow of refugees after the Partition, especially in Eastern India where compared to Delhi and other cities of the north the provisions were inadequate, created severe problems of adjustment for both the resident population and the new immigrants who were trying to discover new ways rooting/routing their identity under the inhospitable sky. The economist Ashok Mitra espoused in an article published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (Nov. 3, 1993) that initially in West Bengal "the widely publicised make-belief was that it was all a temporary upheaval and the refugees would soon return home. A life of alternating insecurity and hope prompted a large section of the refugees to shuttle back and forth between East and West Bengal, wanting to make the best of both worlds but ending up with the worst of both" (2443). To add to their woes, the lack of hindsight in Central Government policies further denied the East Bengali refugees any humanitarian

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program for their rehabilitation. The displaced population was treated as an *interim problem*, which could be addressed by providing meager relief, followed by what in today's terminology would be called "deportation" (Fraser 28). Consequently, for a sizable number of refugees who were never called back to their homes and were actually to stay for the rest of their lives in exile, the dynamics of displacement demanded all kinds of adjustments that eventually altered the gendered existence of their *everyday* within the complex web of the patriarchal organization itself. Of course, first among other adjustments within the contours of their new life in colonies were largely those related to *space*. Having once lived in the midst of open spaces, exclaims Gargi Chakravartty in *Refugee Women of Bengal*, the migrants were first hurdled together like bovine herds in government transit camps provisionally built on either sides of the border. Here fatality took its toll in various shapes: there were deaths galore in the rehabilitation camps as the refugees died of cholera, typhoid, malaria, malnutrition, and even starvation. Bangladeshi author, Hasan Ajjul Haq's short story, *Māri* ["The Death"] in 1991, paints a bleak picture of such a refugee settlement in East Pakistan. How within a small enclosure of a village school, nearly four hundred men and women were together in unlivable conditions without proper sanitation or food is described by one of the characters in the tale who stood at a distance observing the school building:

In the twilight, the dark outlines of human profiles moving against the horizon.  
The sky was clouded with dark smoke. An intolerable stench wafted in the breeze,  
followed by the sounds of men vomiting ceaselessly. (Haq 61)

The predicament of the exiles in the hellhole of these transit rehabilitation camps almost reminds us of the abysmal "life-in-death" situation of the concentration camps in Europe. Yet these people were better off than those who were thrown in the shelter of a railway platform, as Manik Bandopadhyay depicts in his story *The Final Solution*. In the story, the protagonist, Mallika and her family were given a place in the station, measuring "the length of one spread mattress [and] Everything, everyone was squeezed there—Mallika, her husband Bhusan, their two and half-year old son Khokon and a widowed sister-in-law Asha, tin suitcases, beddings and bundles, pots and pans" (Bandopadhyay 23). The English Daily, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, described one of Kolkata's entrance points—the Sealdah Station swarming with thousands of refugees as the "Gateway to Hell," perhaps bringing to our mind the inscription on the gate of Dante's *Inferno* warning its entrants:

Through me the way into the suffering city ...  
... Abandon every hope who enter here ...  
(Dante 21)

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Kolkata indeed became a *suffering city* for the refugees who were afflicted with countless ordeals in their new life. For instance, many of these refugee families from the station and the camps were later cramped into shanties (which became their new home) within extremely limited space in already overcrowded cities and their adjoining hinterlands where “services were already stretched to their limits” (Chakrabarti 116). Consequent to this shrinking of space in the slums the severity of several orthodox rituals, particularly those stringent customs relating to purity and cleanliness, now gradually waned out of existence. Sometimes these new amendments that forced their way into the socio-religious spheres altered personal outlooks and led to a broadening of the mental horizon of women. In the thickly populated colonies, and one-room apartments women could not afford to have separate “private” quarters for themselves as they had earlier in Hindu and Muslim homes alike, prior to the Partition. Due to the utter lack of space they had to share “their space with men, sleeping in the same room as their in-laws and brothers-in-law” (Weber 71). However, with the dissolution of the strict demarcations between the “private” and the “public,” refugee women’s “exposure to the world of men [not only] brought them into contact with new ideas, with the business and political issues the men discussed” (Weber 71) It also enhanced their bonds with the other women in the community and soon they provided succor to each other in their diurnal struggle for existence. This new spirit of commensality in turn “brought about a growing awareness of the communal problems faced by the refugees living in the colonies” (Weber 71). Generally, the gendered readings of Partition evoked grotesque images of rape, violence, or the trauma of separation, but this quiet transformation of women’s lives often remained unnoticed in history:

In spite of utter uncertainty, deep pain, irreparable wounds, psychological and emotional strains and losses, these women did learn to survive, adjust to new conditions in the new nation. Most of them had never before moved out to work and when they did, their journey was tough. And yet, the new survival strategies, which these women carved out for sustenance, brought about significant socio-economic changes in their lives. (Bhardwaj 86)

In the “post-Partition turmoil,” Gargi Chakravartty alludes to a new phenomenon: “daughters started to be gradually looked upon as sons.... Heena Chowdhury recalls the days when their family left the village. Her father told her teenage elder sister, ‘You are my eldest son’” (Chakravartty). Indeed, managing different avenues of earning with steadfast hands, the women not only uplifted “that impossible crowd” (Biswas 36) in the railway station to organize themselves “into a cultural and political entity, not merely a population to be brought under governance” (Biswas 36) but also contributed in some ways towards bolstering a collapsing

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economy anew. Deeply concerned about their family's survival—an anxiety that was doubly heightened by their traditional association with mothers and caregivers—many displaced women, like Bithi Chakraborti from Dhanata (now in Bangladesh) for instance, were forced to take up jobs in small schools in West Bengal along with numerous private tuitions to refurbish the deplorable state of their family.<sup>8</sup> The emergence of a new class of working woman in schools and offices to small-scale industries such as pickle/jam making, tailoring or weaving was a new phenomenon altogether, as women were seen for the first time taking on the entire financial weight of the family on their shoulders, and even actively participating in Labor Movements, demanding their rights. For instance, Sukumari Chaudhuri, a victim of the Noakhali Riots in 1946, later immigrated to West Bengal in 1950 and worked in the Bengal Lamp Factory spearheaded the labour movement there. In an interview by the team from the School of Women Studies, Jadavpur University she recalls that

Our salary was very poor. In 1955, our agitation for the payment of bonus sharpened. Matching shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, refugee women participated whole-heartedly in the agitation. This was a great morale booster for their male colleagues. (Chaudhuri 145)

Jasodhara Bagchi and Subharanjan Dasgupta in the book *Trauma and the Triumph* have shown how the refugee women have gone gradually beyond the stereotype of “victims” and emerged triumphant in their ability to combine determination and grit as a survival strategy to transcend their encumbrances. So while the foray of the women into the professional world in decades of 1950s and '60s highlighted their exploitation, at the same time their fortitude served as an inspiration for the confident “New Woman” of the succeeding generation like the female protagonist, Madhabilata in Samaresh Majumdar's much acclaimed novel, *Kalbela* [“Dark Times”]. Madhabilata, in a sense a spiritual progeny of these women of the '50s not only anchored her lover's life with steadfast support when he took a plunge into the uncertainties of Leftist-Naxalite Movement spanning through the politically turbulent '60s and '70s, but was herself revolutionary in her decision to embrace single motherhood (her love child with Animesh) without the sanction of marriage, notwithstanding the stigma in a conservative Bengali society. She taught in a school, and raised her child, Arko alone without any support from her family or friends for eight long years while Animesh, her lover suffered the brutality of police torture in jail for his political activism and was maimed for the rest of his life. In course of the novel, while Animesh who had set out to change the world lost his way in the eddy of self-destructive political violence, she changed it silently by tenaciously battling her way through the hardships with dignity and courage.

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Though Animesh dreamt of a social revolution in *Kalbela*, it was Madhabilata who lived through it to make it a reality.

Hers is a situated radicalism that does not bear the name ‘radical’. But this is how the ordinary person—as opposed to the ‘heroic’ vanguard—is radical: contextually and complicitously, that is to say, often without drawing a permanent line of impermeability in relation to power. (Nigam)

Thus Animesh says at the end of *Kalbela*: “You’ve done it.... We imagined something immense.... [But] Despite a few wrong steps we did start a journey. The ones who’ll follow will tread with caution.... But you’ve made it.”

From the belief that “You are not made for this. You should not have been brought into this” [cruel way of the revolutionaries] (Chattapadhyayay, *The Call of the Road* 117) in the early discourse of the freedom struggle we have a slow, yet definite metamorphosis of women who traversed an unimaginable distance to become the other name of revolution (*Kalbela*), while negotiating between the two polarities of *home* and the *world*. India’s Partition narratives thus chart a course where from beneath the grand narrative of pain and loss, there gradually surfaces a palimpsest, a counter narrative of transcendence by those *warrior women*, whose journey may be aptly summed up in the words of African-American poet, Maya Angelou in *Still I Rise*:

Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain  
I rise.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear  
I rise....  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

In the *evil hour* of India’s Partition, while their male counterparts took recourse to superhuman inhumanities and splintered the country by fanning the sentiments of rabid sectarianism in the name of faith, women often stood against the tide by acknowledging human kinship above the fuzzy logic of religious parochialism. Thus within the macro-narrative of violence in an atmosphere charged with religious hatred, we have some rare human moments, or counter-narratives of love which kept people’s faith alive in humanity through those traumatic times. For instance, in Bhisam Sahni’s *Tamas* when an elderly Sikh couple, Harnam Singh and Banto were

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forced to leave their ancestral village, soon after which their house was burnt and shop looted, they had nowhere to go. Exhausted with “fatigue, nervous agitation and suppressed emotions” (Sahni 255) they were compelled to seek shelter in a Muslim household in the outskirts of their locality. In the next few pages the reader comes to know that coincidentally Harnam and Banto have sought refuge at the house of those who were a part of the marauding mob that had raided their home. While the men folk in the family were looting the house of the *Kafirs* (infidels), the mistress of the household, an elderly woman called *Rajo*, welcomed the homeless Sikh couple in her courtyard, in spite of being aware that she too might incur the wrath of her own community for her hospitality towards the supposed enemy. Yet, after an initial dilemma, Rajo stood firm in her decision. When her daughter-in-law pleaded:

‘Let them go, Ma. We have not even asked our men folk. They may not like it.’

(Rajo replied): ‘I shall answer them myself. Shall I push out a person who has come seeking shelter? Everyone has to go into God’s presence one day.’ (Sahni 258)

During the Partition, while the men who were engaged in communal carnage and the women who stood against it, both justified their respective stances of destruction and preservation as an act of defending their faith, the two often looked at religion from entirely different ends of the spectrum. It is perhaps for this reason poet and essayist, Annada Shankar Roy (1904-2002) who was a scathing critique of the Partition chose to speak in the voice of Khuku (*a girl child*) to register his protest against the absurdity of the country’s bifurcation. In one of his oft quoted rhymes (Chad) which became particularly famous, Khuku asks:

You scold the little lass  
When she drops the glass  
What about you,  
adult brats  
When you shatter India  
Into little parts.  
(trans. Sisir Kumar Das 378)

Here the simplicity and the blunt directness of Khuku’s protest make it all the more incisive. However, these voices of resistance, along with the voices that were suffused in pain were choked into silence. Memories of a ghastly past were forcibly swept aside. Thus tracing the trajectory of women in narratives of Partition is in a way a quest for those voices lost in the mires of time—not only the voices of the hapless victims who succumbed to the colossal tragedy of human folly, but also the voices of those who survived to fight and to shore the fragments of their ruin, as if asserting themselves against their predicament—“I can’t go on. I will go on.”<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From Nazim Hikmet's *9-10pm. Poems*. Trans. Randy Blaing and Muten Konuk. Persea Books, 1994 (qtd. in John Berger's *Hold Everything Dear*).

<sup>2</sup> After India's Partition, a new state for the Muslims was created by dissecting the provinces of Punjab in North-Western frontier and Bengal in the Eastern border of India, which were subsequently named West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The part of Bengal that remained with India was now called West Bengal. Later the Eastern wing of Pakistan (i.e., the Eastern Bengal) broke away from the governance of West Pakistan to form the independent state of Bangladesh in 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty who used the terms in his essay, "Remembering 1857: An Introductory Note"—"memorializing," "memorizing," and "remembering/forgetting" to distinguish between "three kinds of practices involved in the work of memory," would probably classify this as an act of "memorialization": i.e., preserving an event through a collective ceremony of remembrance to "produce metaphors for public life."

<sup>4</sup> In order to comprehend the fuller significance of the statement, says Veena Das in her writings on the Partition, one must look at the ideologies of gender in a phallogocentric society which she embeds into the Nietzschean paradigm of the legal subject as propagated in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*. According to this theory, a debtor loses the claim over his property, including his body when he fails in some promise or causes an injury to the creditor. Here, the relationship between an individual and the society almost appears to be analogous to the terms of contract between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio's failure to pay the debt on time led to Shylock's demand for a pound of flesh from his body, i.e., to fail to one's creditor in Nietzschean terms, is to submit one's body to "every kind of indignity and torture" (Das 183). Living under patriliney, women are deemed as possessions of men, and are thus forced to succumb to the position of becoming a debtor whenever the normal order of the society is disrupted in the fracas over the possession of a certain territory. In times of such crisis, notes Das, each group frames the *other* as the debtor in the sense in which Nietzsche used the term. During the Partition violence, just as the Hindus were regarded as those who tainted and defiled the purity of Islam, which the new state (*Pak* means pure) sought to embody, in the same fashion Muslims were seen as having injected pernicious substance into the body politic of the time-revered ancient land of Bharata. Hence, each sought to punish the *other* by inflicting pain, more specifically, on the women of the *other* group, who were deemed as the epitome of honor of the community.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *The Second Coming*.

<sup>6</sup> The story has been titled as *A Strange Tale* in Khalid Hasan's translation of Manto's short stories.

<sup>7</sup> The term *refugee*, which gained a new currency after the Partition is synonymous with Bengali words—*Saranarathi* (one who seeks shelter) and *Udvastu* (uprooted), both roughly meaning *homeless*. However, *utvastu* has a special connotation in Bengali language which Dipesh Chakrabarty critically examines in his essay, *Memories of Displacement*:

The word *vastu* (home) is, a Sanskrit word of Vedic vintage. Monier Williams defines *vastu* as meaning, among other things, "the site or foundation of a house". In Bengali, the word is often combined with *Bhita* (or *Bhite*), which is connected with the Sanskrit word *bhitti*,

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meaning “foundation”. The idea of foundation is tied to the idea of “male ancestry”...One’s permanent home is where one’s “foundation” is...An *utvastu*, then—the prefix *ut*-signifying “of” or “outside” or “raised” (evicted)—is someone who has been physically removed from his foundations. And since this is not a desirable state, it can only come through some grave misfortune. (Chakrabarty 120-121)

<sup>8</sup> Like many other self-effacing daughters, Bithi Chakraborti—the sole breadwinner in her indigent refugee family that was suddenly reduced to poverty owing to the Partition, narrates in a tête-à-tête with Gargi Chakravarti that “period of terrible hardship”:

I never discussed my problems with anybody. The day I used to get the salary I would straightaway visit our landlord to pay the rent...There were days when we all starved. My younger brother Bablu (born after Partition) five or six years old, would as ‘Didi, have you brought some muri [puffed rice]?’ I did bring muri for him and for my sick father. My school headmistress called me on Sundays on the plea of some official work. Later I realized that she wanted to give me a proper meal. (153-154)

<sup>9</sup> A line taken from Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*.

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