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Impact of Partition on Bengali Literature

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Abstract

Background: Partition of Bengal in 1947 was not just a territorial division between India and Pakistan. It changed life, language, memory, class relations, gender roles and ideas of home in a culture region that was imagined as a shared past and literary heritage, and populated with speakers of Bengali.

Aim: This paper attempts to examine the effect of Partition on the Bengali literature in the light of theme, narrative space, the people and groups represented in literature, and the representation of memory of history. It is specifically interested in great writers like Jyotirmoyee Devi, Atin Bandyopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Narendranath Mitra, Hasan Azizul Huq and Manoranjan Byapari.

Materials and Methods: This study is a qualitative literary analysis and historical-critical approach. The reading of selected novels, short fiction, and autobiography is accompanied by readings in Bengal Partition, refugee rehabilitation, gender, caste, and cultural memory. The emphasis here is on the repetition of motifs such as displacement, lost homeland, crossing the border, life as a refugee in the city, work of women, breakdown of communal relations, and politics of memory.

Findings: Partition has created a distinct Bengali literary archive in which the political is rendered in terms of the domestic disintegration, the altered topography, the fractured identities, and the extended refugee life. The literature was also shifting from the nationalist discourses of the elites to consider women, lower caste refugees, workers and marginal migrants as people whose experiences belong in history.

Conclusion: The effects of Partition on Bengali literature can be best seen as a sustained cultural legacy, not as a singular literary theme. Partition became a language of Bengali writing, a language in which to think about belonging and loss, citizenship and social inequality, a language in which unfinished results of borders were a subject of reflection.

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INTRODUCTION

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 divided a historically connected land of Bengali-speaking population between the Indian state of West Bengal and East Bengal (East Pakistan, then Bangladesh). The new boundary did not produce a single, simultaneous migration. Population movement in eastern India came in repeated waves over several years, and the conditions under which refugees rebuilt their lives depended on state policies for relief, citizenship, property and rehabilitation. Joya Chatterji's historical study of Bengal after 1947 shows that the consequences of Partition reached well beyond the formal transfer of power, and Debjani Sengupta argues that the literary cultures of West Bengal, Bangladesh and adjoining regions hold these long consequences in unusually rich forms (Chatterji, 2007; Sengupta, 2015). The present paper accordingly reads Partition as a historical rupture that changed the subjects, settings and ethical questions of Bengali writing, and does not treat it only as an event that appears in literature.

Among the most important effects of Partition was that memory became a literary problem. Bengal's experience often reached fiction late, through delayed recollection and fractured family histories, and writers faced the difficulty of representing violence that had settled into ordinary life. Mookerjee-Leonard (2017) treats literature as an archive from which the psychological and cultural traces of Partition can be recovered, particularly where official histories fail to register intimate loss. Dasgupta (2015) reads Jyotirmoyee Devi's fiction as a record of the slow violence of refugee existence, and stresses that homelessness outlasts the moment of migration. Scholarship of this kind helps explain why Bengali Partition literature so often turns from spectacular violence to the long duration of insecurity, memory and social displacement.

Gender is represented differently in this archive as well. Women appear as workers, refugees and political subjects, and as figures through whom the meaning of family and nation is contested, in addition to being victims of communal violence. In her study of the refugee woman in West Bengal, Chakraborty (2018) shows that texts by Jyotirmoyee Devi and Sabitri Roy challenge nationalist metaphors that reduce women to symbols of community honour. Work on caste has questioned a further assumption, that refugee experience can be voiced by a single middle-class narrator: Banerjee (2017) demonstrates that Dalit refugee narratives give accounts of displacement, rehabilitation and identity that differ from those of the dominant bhadralok archive.

Rehabilitation became a major theme in its own right. Camps, squatter colonies, railway stations, government settlements and remote resettlement sites redrew the geography of Bengali fiction. Sengupta (2011) shows how the movement from East Bengal to West Bengal, and later to projects such as Dandakaranya, produced narratives in which the search for a home cannot be separated from state policy and social hierarchy. Literature keeps a second history of Partition in this way: the border was drawn once, but the question of where displaced people could live, and on what terms, was fought over repeatedly.

Recent scholarship has enlarged the archive further. Chakraborty and Banerjee (2024) examine how caste, gender,

migration and rehabilitation combine in Bengali Dalit women's writing, and Banerjee (2025) reconstructs the political critiques that Bengali refugees developed in the early postcolonial years. Read alongside one another, these studies place labour, class formation, political organization and the unequal right to settle inside the meaning of Partition, next to communal conflict.

Bengali literary responses to the division of 1947 are still being revisited. Hassan (2025) surveys how Bengal's political history, migration and literary representation relate to one another. Munshi (2026) rereads Jyotirmoyee Devi through the idea of an internal war, linking violence, gender and memory, and Saha (2026) stresses how many Bengali novels and short stories deal with homelessness, refugee struggle and communal tension. These are the twelve studies which provide the critical frame for the paper which has the following central argument: Partition affected Bengali literature in five interrelated ways. It turned displacement and the lost homeland into key structures in the narrative. Borders and cities became psychologically charged spaces. The domestic and economic roles of women was reconfigured, a long refugee and rehabilitation literature was established, and literary memory gradually became more open to the marginalized voices of caste, class, etc.

METHODOLOGY

The approach used in the method is qualitative and historical-literary with no empirical or statistical design of the paper. Close readings of representative Bengali texts are set beside secondary scholarship on the 1947 Partition, refugee migration, gender, caste and rehabilitation. The selection of authors is not meant to be comprehensive. They were chosen for their writing that illuminates a different aspect or social context of the Partition experience: immediate impoverishment of the refugees in Narendranath Mitra; the trauma and memory of Partition in a gendered context in Jyotirmoyee Devi; the lost rural world and the rupture of the border in Atin Bandyopadhyay; the long history of two Bengalis in Sunil Gangopadhyay; Muslim and cross-border experience in Hasan Azizul Huq; and Dalit refugee testimony in Manoranjan Byapari.

The analysis follows four questions. How does Partition affect the ways in which home, land and belonging are represented in literature? What happens to gender and family relations when there is displacement? How does the refugee rehabilitation and urban survival shape the social world of Bengali fiction? How do later texts challenge the earlier middle-class narratives and introduce the themes of caste and marginality? Poems, dramas and films are recognised only when relevant to the broader field of literary genres – prose fiction and life writing have been the primary focus.

Findings and Literary Analysis

Partition and the literary meaning of home

Partition turned "home" from a stable setting into a problem, and this is the most persistent change it brought. In previous narrative traditions, village, river, district and ancestral house were social worlds that were largely accepted as continuous. From 1947 on, the same locations continued to exist in a parallel world. They were real but for refugees, they were

remembered places stretched across an international border. Bengali literature thus acquired a unique grammar of absence: a pond, a field, a courtyard, a dialect, a food habit or a seasonal landscape could act as a lost country.

The major works influenced by this changed geography include Atin Bandyopadhyay's 1971 *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje* (Bandyopadhyay, 1971). The novel is set in the world of rural East Bengal before and around the time of Partition, and political division does not come as a singular climax to the novel. Relationships within the community, family life and the bond to the land are slowly tested. A search by name (as in the title) becomes a metaphor for a world that is disappearing. It is a type of writing that captures the change of a familiar landscape to an inaccessible homeland, and remembering a place is only part of that.

In Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purbo-Paschim* (East-West), this is extended over a much longer period. It follows Bengali lives on both sides of the border and uses the separation of Hindu and Muslim friends and families to link 1947 with the later political development of East Pakistan and Bangladesh (Gangopadhyay, 2000). The novel will not let the border yield two unrelated literary histories: "East" and "West" define each other. The scale of narration of Bengali history is influenced by the changes described in Bengali literature with the Partition.

Gender, violence and the restructuring of the family

Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (The River Churning) in English is central to any account of Partition's impact on Bengali literature as it places gendered social exclusion as the core of historical violence (Devi, 1995). Its concern isn't limited to the moment of communal attack, but rather the social implications that follow after physical survival, especially because patriarchal ideas about sexual violence can destroy a woman's place in the family and community. Dasgupta (2015) describes this as slow violence and social death. Chakraborty (2018) argues that such writing challenges nationalist attempts to use women as metaphors of community purity.

So did the economic make-up of the refugee family. In 1949, Narendranath Mitra wrote *Avataranika*, later linked to the film narrative of *Mahanagar*, which depicts a household of East Bengali refugees in Calcutta where the loss of property and income disrupts traditional gender roles. As Banerjee (2025) suggests it is an important early fictionalization of refugee impoverishment, and marks women's wage work as simultaneously a means of survival and a cause of patriarchal anxiety. This refugee woman is a worker, she is a person of suffering and through her entry into public employment, we see what the Partition cost an entire family economically.

Chakraborty (2018) takes the point further in his discussion of Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi*, a discussion that illustrates the collective power of women and their ability to act politically to contest the older nationalism of femininity. In all of these writings the house is transformed into an arena of politics. The loss of land, of livelihood, changes who earns, who walks the streets of the city, who speaks for the family, who bears the responsibility to uphold honour, and literature records these

changes with an intimacy that demographic accounts cannot offer.

Refugee city, rehabilitation and long-term displacement.

Partition has changed the face of Calcutta and its suburbs. Stations, pavements, rented rooms, refugee colonies, and the marginal settlements became the sites of improvisation and conflict for fiction. Refugeehood had ceased to be merely a condition of crossing a border, but rather had emerged as a chronic social condition. In fact, Sengupta (2011) proposes that even rehabilitation became a narrative principle in Bengali literature as state strategies of resettling refugees triggered new round of displacement.

Writing on Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi reveals the story of Partition continuing decades since 1947. In such narratives, the historical event never is completed, partly because settlement remains a contested site, a characteristic of Bengal's literary response. The border crossing may be over, but insecurity still lives on in the confusing nature of bureaucracy, through forced displacement, in precarious jobs, and in land disputes. The Partition in Bengali literature, however, is not merely a historical event, but an extended social process.

Caste and the conflict over a single refugee memory

Later Bengali writing has challenged the educated upper-caste refugee as the representative Partition subject. In Manoranjan Byapari's *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, a *Namashudra* refugee stands at the centre of autobiographical narration. It passes through refugee camps, poverty, Dandakaranya, labour, political violence and a long struggle for literacy and dignity (Byapari, 2018). This is a literary intervention, as well as one of a social kind, because it changes who is allowed to remember Partition and what can count as a Partition story.

According to Banerjee (2017) Dalit refugee narratives create identity formations other than the canonical *bhadralok* ones. Chakraborty and Banerjee (2024) show how caste and gender combine to shape later refugee writing. The old canon is still valid, but the difference is that the boundaries of the old canon become apparent. When various social groups tell the story of the same rupture from unequal places, the Bengali Partition archive becomes more complicated.

The Eastern view and the continuity of Bengali language.

Partition also produced literature that belongs to separate national histories while sharing a common language. Agunpakhi, a key case by Hasan Azizul Huq, is one such case. Written in Bangladesh, set primarily in the *Rarh* region within the newly established state of West Bengal, it narrates family life under communal division and national separation through the first-person voice of a rural woman (Huq, 2006). Its geographical position makes it difficult to categorize Bengali literature produced after the Partition into Indian and Bangladeshi traditions.

The writers from the two Bengals reveal the continuity of Bangla over political boundaries as Huq, Gangopadhyay, etc., do. But the common language does not eliminate difference, either. The migrations to the West took place on the part of the Hindus; the Muslim families made the negotiations to the new

national formations; minorities remained on both sides; and later generations came with memories of migration. Thus Bengali literature after Partition appears to be divided and relational to each other: the divide establishes new institutions and new canons, while literary memory crosses back over the divide.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that it is more than just a theme, it's structural. Plots of riot, migration and separation exist but the more pivotal change is how characters know place, family and identity. In this respect, Sengupta's (2015) account on 'fragile borders and new identities' proves handy as literary form is linked to the map's fragility after 1947. Emotionally, the remembered village can be present, and politically, it can be out of reach; and a refugee colony can be materially insecure while at the same time providing the foundation of a new collective identity. Such paradoxes are made into narratives in literature. The gendered archive is gendered in a similar way. The violence of Partition goes on in Jyotirmoyee Devi as social judgement after the immediate hazard is over. Mitra and Roy demonstrate how women's employment and political engagement are changing due to economic displacement. Chakraborty (2018) thus takes the refugee woman to be a character with the power to destabilize the nationalist categories she has inherited. The changes in domestic labour, marriage, respectability and survival that these narratives record cannot be explained by any history focusing solely on leaders and borders.

Caste complicates matters further. Refugee memory is not socially homogenous as Banerjee (2017) and Chakraborty and Banerjee (2024) demonstrate, and Byapari's autobiography foregrounds hunger, camp life, caste stigma and forced rehabilitation as the focus of Partition memory. Not all refugees experienced loss in the same way, and writing like Byapari's challenges the idea that they did. The canon also evolves, for testimony and autobiography do not take a back seat to the novel and the short story—they become equally large modes of historical representation.

The Bengali scenario also demonstrates the need to go beyond the Punjab-centric vision of an exchange and focused violence. Migration in Bengal was repeated, migration was delayed, minorities continued to suffer from insecurity and rehabilitation was difficult and prolonged (Chatterji, 2007). The literary outcome is one that Dasgupta (2015) refers to by the term 'slow violence': trauma is likely to be repeated, to wait, to dwell on, to be precariously lived, to be inherited and rarely to be experienced in one climactic moment. These concerns continue to reappear in the scholarship of 2024, 2025 and 2026 thus indicating that Partition is not a closed historical subject, but rather an open interpretative one for Bengali literature.

Recent Studies

How Partition and Bengali literary form relate to each other is being continually rethought by the research of 2026. In the context of an internal war, Munshi (2026) reads Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, and the study suggests that Partition violence is not only formal battle, but can be

understood through militarized everyday spaces, damaged intimacies, gendered vulnerability and unresolved memory. That reading is congruent with the present paper's argument that the Bangla literature makes geopolitical division into experience in the home and in the flesh. An additional study by Saha (2026) looks Bengali novels and short stories about the division of 1947 and also offers weight to homelessness, refugee fight, communal tension, and reconstruction of everyday life. The survey unveils the vastness and diversity of the Bengali Partition archive.

Hassan (2025) gives a direct overview of the Partition of Bengal through history, migration and literary reflection. The article connects political changes with refugee movements, and with the texts written in relation to the division, thus strengthening the argument for reading texts in addition to the processes of displacement. The cross-border aspect is most important for this piece: Partition literature is born out of a shared, but politically divided Bengali cultural sphere.

A selected 2024 study shifts the focus from the traditional refugee representation to caste and gender. Chakraborty and Banerjee (2024) analyze Kalyani Thakur Charal's autobiographical and fictional writing to show how Bengali Dalit women experience migration and rehabilitation under the combined pressures of caste and gender. The study is a clear example of this revision of the Partition archive, which is questioning whose memory became 'canonical' and what memory remained 'marginal'. Major writers' earlier readings are extended rather than replaced, as social boundaries in the canon come into view.

CONCLUSION

Partition of Bengal altered the topic and the 'imaginative geography' of Bengali literature. The new border created tales of lost villages, fractured families, refugee colonies, precarious employment, changing roles for women, and of trying to belong to a nation without a home. Memory, gender, class, communal relation and cross-border history combine differently in the work of Jyotirmoyee Devi, Atin Bandyopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Narendranath Mitra and Hasan Azizul Huq. Manoranjan Byapari's later autobiographical writing shows further how caste and rehabilitation complicate any single narrative of refugee experience.

What Partition has left behind is something that is most enduringly present in literature—an archive of unfinished questions, but not a single genre. What is home if a border renders return impossible? What happens to family authority when older economic orders are undermined by displacement, who is a legitimate refugee, citizen, worker or witness, and how does a common language (Bengali) remain a shared language across different nation-states. These are some of the questions the literature seeks to answer. It doesn't give any single solution to any of these. Its significance is to maintain the contradiction. Partition is an ongoing memory in the writing of Bengali and it's not a closed background event. The literature of the two Bengals bears the traces of their territorial division, and also contains evidence of cultural links that transcend the political boundaries. Division and continuity remain in tension, and this

tension is one of the defining legacies of Partition in modern Bengali literature.

Limitations

- The paper focuses primarily on prose fiction and life writing, while Bengali poetry, drama and cinema have not been studied in a similar fashion.
- The authors chosen are not a complete list of the wide range of writing that has come out of West Bengal, East Pakistan, Bangladesh and Bengali-speaking areas of the Northeast India, but are representative of significant and contrasting voices within the Partition archive.
- The study is based on published texts and secondary scholarship, instead of oral-history interviews and archival fieldwork.
- English translations are used for some texts, so aspects of dialect, idiom, and stylistic nuance in the Bengali originals may not be fully recoverable.

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