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# Whispering Reeds: Poetic Voices across the Fence in India and Beyond

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### Abstract

*The saga of reshuffling the geographical territories of a country often leading to a consequent partition as a part of more a political than social and ethnic strategy, the kind of experience to undivided India before 1947 (and more specifically to two particular states Bengal and Punjab), has its parallel in different parameters of world history. But the trauma and paroxysm of fear created by partition in the artistic psyche of poets, writers and musicians of the land[s] concerned have remained more or less the same and received only tonal varieties of expression across the barriers in different periods of time. In India, the partition has led to the creation of a large body of literature which addresses the social, religious, ethnic and linguistic issues pertaining to partition. Though the aftereffect of this signal event in Indian history is found to be felt as more expressive in the genre of Indian English fiction, its poetic treatment dealing with the searing impact of the fence upon the shared culture of people on both sides of the border; upon the poetic fancy which though negotiating divergent claims to consciousness in the present century, once dreamt of a cohesive function of their art in creating a credible literary universe giving truth to the Vedic concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam meaning 'the whole universe is like one single family,'-- is simply unmistakable. This article seeks to analyse the poetics of Tagore, Jibanananda Das and also some other poets across the border along with some of their European counterparts, in order to attempt a re-configuring of the changed Indian map in terms of poetic consciousness.*

**Keywords:** Territories, Partition, Trauma, Fence, Consciousness, Shared culture

In the political history of India, the year 1947 brought the laurel in the form of Independence yet with an inheritance, so to speak, of a Loss. It was the loss, not only of a sizable portion of land, but also of the legacy of a shared culture and habits of two principal communities (along with others); of the tradition of some mutual religious harmony /adjustment characterizing the resilience of Indian sensibility that had displayed a tremendous momentum in fighting against colonial subjugation. Now, the truncation of the subcontinent with its attendant trauma of separation that smothered the joy of freedom overall in the mainland, and also in the sections of people having roots across the barbed wires in particular, do justifiably provide a fillip to indigenous poetic imagination in its expression of fear and despair. But what is also significant is that, such signal events like Partition, necessitated by complex colonial motives on the one hand and a caprine political strategy of the leading parties of the state, motivated by short-sightedness (characteristic of goats) and the principle of an ulterior gain characterizing nationalism often (taking cue from Tagore or Fanon), -- have

received attention from poets and philanthropists from across the barriers. Thus, voices of protest can be heard from the centre and the margin as well.

To begin with, W. H. Auden's poem *Partition*, as the title suggests, deals with the partition of India and though the poem here focuses an outsider's vision of the hasty and mechanical discharge of a 'White man's burden' in the name of partition and an urgency thereof at the prima-facie, the irony at the heart of the plain and bare narration of events in the poem clearly brings out an utter callousness of the political world to human intentions. The thrust here lies in *Auden's focus on the central character -- some Cyril Radcliffe*, a British lawyer who, in spite of being a complete stranger to India, is vested with the serious responsibility for denominating the boundaries between India and Pakistan. The poet's shrewd diagnosis of the grueling tension implicit in the hopeless predicament -- comprising the uncompromising contestants, the non-committal arbitrator commissioned for a implementing a prompt demarcation -- ironically lays bare under the façade of a cool, matter-of-fact narration, the malady of the situation groping in vain for a humanistic remedy.

Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,  
 Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition  
 Between two peoples fanatically at odds,  
 With their different diets and incompatible gods.  
 "Time," they had briefed him in London, "is short. It's too late  
 For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:  
 The only solution now lies in separation. (L.1-7)

The way the blueprint for the partition was chalked out -- the clandestine activities by the officialdom in hurrying up of formalities laying the responsibility finally upon the shoulder of a non-committal lawyer who finds the hot and humid climate of India inhospitable and is further racked by a fear of assassination, - - is reminiscent much of the 'wrongs hushed up' (Line-11) in Owen's poem *The Send-off*. The following excerpt from Auden's masterpiece categorically points to the utter callousness of authorities in solving the problem of religious bigotry and mutual autonomy claimed by two equally adamant factions of the Indian populace.

Shut up in a lonely mansion, with police night and day  
 Patrolling the gardens to keep the assassins away,  
 He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate  
 Of millions. (L.13-16)

Equipped with maps 'out of date' and 'incorrect census reports', being denied the time to 'check them' or 'inspect contested areas' and further beset with the scorching heat and bouts of illness, the cartographer manages to finalize the report and the ignominious event with its far-reaching impact upon the lives of people who entailed a tradition of peaceful co-existence for generations, is here expressed with astute critical intelligence and a pungent irony:

'But in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,  
 A continent for better or worse divided. (L.21-22)

The poetic insinuation of an inimical eventuality rising out of sheer political compulsion by repudiating the call of humanity and the choice of millions, reigns paramount throughout the poem.

The trauma of this geographical territorialization in the name of partition (which is more psychological than physical), is particularly felt in border-states in India like Punjab, Bengal and Tripura and also in the newly formed country Bangladesh. The widely discussed partition-poems (composed in protest against Carzon's proposed partition of Bengal in 1911) of Rabindranath Tagore, who was almost a Vedic-sage incarnate in the eyes of poetic stalwarts like W.B. Yeats, and duly considered the world over as the *Visva-Kabi* or a poet gifted with cosmic sensibility, focus the socio-political reality of partition in the light of ethical/spiritual values which plead for unity and harmony and disapproves rancor and hatred among men. As such, a forceful enactment of division according to the poet is a sacrilege to the sacrosanct man-to-man relationship as pre-ordained by the almighty.

The poem *Bidhir bandhan katbe Tumi* (*Would You Dare to challenge Divine order?*) is a spirited protest to the atrocity of the colonial ruler perpetrated on the innocent and the weak subjects in the name of divide-and-rule policy. The opening lines invoke, in keeping with the stature of a philosopher-poet like Tagore, the good sense and humanity in the rulers so as not to play with the fate of the nation as, the world of nature ruled by the omnipotent power, never allows dictatorship.

Are You so powerful, as to defy the Divine dictum?  
Are You so?  
You think that you can break and re-make us at your will?  
You think so?  
You can't drag and tread us down for ever....  
God won't allow that, as You have no such power.  
(*Gitabitan*. P.266.L.1-6, Emphases, translation mine)

The ending lines of the lyric are equally rich in cautionary excellence and philosophical wisdom worthy of a poet-seer and humanist that Tagore is:

Rules, however strict, You may impose on us by and large,  
Remember that the Weak too, are not powerless either  
However great You may think of yourself,  
Remember there is God who can foil our power and pelf  
By depriving Us of our might, You too won't be spared ever,  
The wage of Your own Sin shall someday drown your barge.  
(*Gitabitan*, p.266, L. 7-10. Emphases, translation mine.)

Tagore's other two lyrics, culled from his collection of songs titled *Gitabitan*, viz, *Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Bengal, made of gold, p.243) and *Banglar Mati, Banglar jal* (The holy soil and water of My Bengal, p.255) also exalt the awareness of being connected with the umbilical cords of one's native culture which reserves no room for separation or feeling alienated from one's roots. Another famous lyric *O Amar Desher Mati* ....( I salute thee, O the holy soil of my homeland, *Gitabitan*, p.244) is steeped in the spirit of lofty patriotism that views the motherland as the protective spirit that stands by the speaker in weal and woe all through his life by spreading the veil of comfort upon life's strenuous journey; exactly the way a mother wipes out with

the fringes of her *saree* the beads of perspiration upon the face of a child whose limbs are numb with fatigue after the end of the day's play.

Tagore's poetry in the given context, occasioned by such parochial an event like partition (be it of a state within the country) though, offers something perennial such as -- the sense of peace and spiritual understanding with the homeland, an innate assurance of the values of camaraderie with fellow beings and a sense of blessedness -- that constitute the matrix of true patriotism as per the poet cum prophet. A reading by heart of Tagore no doubt offers rich palliatives for the disturbing issues like alienation, the trauma of psychological migration and rootlessness – issues that continue to engage the postcolonial and diasporic writers at a later date.

Some formidable poetic figures of Bengal who emerged with the banner of modern poetry during the later phase of Tagore, also dealt with partition and its searing effect upon the mind of citizens in overt or oblique ways. Foremost of this powerful phalanx of modern poets is Jibanananda Das, who was born in Barishal district of Bangladesh and though he is not a refugee himself, his poetry bears a conspicuous note of nostalgia and a search for home. His poem titled *1946-47* records a grievous loss of the original *métier* of existence for the people affected by the partition and the riots preceding and following the great event. The following lines metaphorically enumerate the extent of Loss -- as if the flicker of life has been engulfed by an abysmal darkness that has dawned upon millions of hamlets in rural Bengal whose breast is now divided by barbed wires spread along the border.

Millions of Bengal villages are now steeped  
In the darkness of despair; with the oil for evening lamps  
spent before sunset. That soothing darkness which used to visit  
the evening and tend her black, mystic locks with care, is gone,,  
The evenings look wistfully for the missing caring hand ,,,,  
Villages that once looked beautiful like coloured designs, and  
Wore the alluring looks of belles drawn on canvas,  
have gone blighted...

(*Selected Poetry*, P. 118.L. 29-35. Translation mine)

Though Jibanananda as a modern poet has convincingly portrayed the trauma, despair and existential dilemma of modern men, his treatment of nature and her healing properties gesture to some emancipatory experience and in his poems on nature in rural Bengal, Das as if sings a paean of life spent amidst the plethora of natural bliss and beauty in undivided Bengal and the range of experience imaginatively spans over centuries, even dating back to the clime of mythic reality and thereby lending an epical or *Tiresian* quality to the experience of the poet. The poem 'Abar Asibo Phire' (I shall come back again...) recounts the future journey of his soul after its possible transmigration into some favourite subhuman creatures or birds like a *Shankhachil* (Kite) or a *Shalik* (Indian Mayna). Interestingly, the preferred habitation of his new *avatar* will cover areas now lying in Bangladesh (like *Dhansiri* river) and West Bengal (like *Jalangi* river) as well. The planned excursion of the soul would screen out every charm of the land, water and the sky as a homogenous space that defies any man-made barrier as per the imagination of the poet.

I shall come again in this Bengal at the bank of river *Dhansiri*  
May be, not as a man, may be, in the guise of a Kite or a Shalik,

May be as a crow, announcing the dawn during *Nabanna* in *Kartik*,  
Shall land, sailing on the wings of fog, in the shade of the jack-fruit tree.  
(*Selected Poetry*, P. 42.L.1-4. Translation mine)

The plenitude of beauty in rural nature brings out the commitment from the poet who has as if enfranchised his soul with the spirit of Bengal

I shall come again, out of Love for Bengal's rivers, meadows and fields,  
Shall come to the green mournful banks lapped by the waves of *Jalangi*.  
(*Selected Poetry*, P. 42.L. 7-8. Translation mine)

The concept of 'home' as the space where the heart sits, is further romanticized in the poem *Tomra Jekhane Sadh chole Jeo* (Go Where You Will) where his favourite environment assures a comforting zone, a haven for the soul of the poet. The opening lines reiterate his love for familiar surroundings.

Go, where your heart desires – I shall stay back in Bengal's shores  
To watch the whirling fall of dry jack fruit leaves in morning breeze,  
To see how the evening dew dons upon the brown wings of shalik  
Its yellow legs sprouting from milk white hairs, dangle once or twice.  
Then of a sudden, the forest's Oak beckons it to nestle to its heart.....  
(L.1-6. Translation mine)

Another poem *Banglar Mukh* (The Face of Bengal) spells out the poet's detection of the cosmic beauty in Bengal, in its flora and fauna, the mystic light and shade in bushes and shrubs at the waking hours of the day. The soothing twitter of the swallow and such a mystic setting reminds the persona of the mythic figures like Chand Saudagar and in particular, his daughter-in-law Behula who, as legend holds, managed to reach Paradise and danced in the court of Indra, the King of Gods, in order to bring her spouse Lakhinder back to life. The poet imagines how nature too, sympathized with the poor bride, and accompanied her at the time of her ordeal.

Bereaved as a wagtail, who had lost her mate, she danced in the court,  
Rivers of Bengal and their lilies rang as string of bells around her feet.  
(*Selected Poetry*, P. 41.L. 13-14. Translation mine)

A strong sense of history marks the poetry of Jibanananda and in his signal piece *Banalata Sen*, Das appears to be a raconteur of history where the imaginative range of the poet's *Tiresian* travails, cover sites of different historical landmarks but his quest finally provides peace in his meeting with one Banalata Sen of Natore, a district in Rajshahi division of Bangladesh.

I have been walking in the orbital path of earth for almost a millennium  
Starting from the sea of Ceylon down to the sea of the far Malayan  
Much have I travelled, .....

.....  
I am a sorely fatigued soul - in the midst of the sea of life and its turbulence,  
Then it was Banalata Sen of Natore who gave me some moments of solace.

(Selected Poetry, P. 46.L.1-6.

Translation mine)

In a way, in the poetry of Jibanananda Das, the feelings of nostalgia and wistfulness induced by partition (expressed whether in an apparent or dormant form), seems to have been counterbalanced by a more serene and profound gift -- the evocation of a mood of some transcendental blessedness among the beautiful and bucolic setting of Bengal.

A somewhat acquired poise of poetic and emotional stance regarding the partition, by overcoming the trauma with a synthetic vision of a shared culture, is detected in some poems of noted Bengali poet Subhas Mukherjee. In the poem *Parapar* (Transit through Border) for example, the speaker feels inter-assured of an inner unity between two Bengals – East Bengal (Bangladesh) and West Bengal, conjoined in terms of language, culture, habits and belief-systems.

We are as if the two eye balls of an undivided Bengal.  
The separating cordon as if stands in between as the nose  
The passage is locked. Hence I open the sesame and see  
That Bangladesh lies on the other side, and  
This side too, here is Bengal again!  
(Selected Poetry. P.44. L.1-9. Translation mine)

Now, if Tagore plumbs the depth of moral and spiritual values enshrined in the *Upanishadas* and their efficacy to counter contemporary experience and Jibanananda seeks to negotiate the trauma and depression of modern day experiences with the armour of romantic love, love for other living forms and over all, for nature as a sustaining, homogenous entity defying man-made barriers; some other poets of Bengal and Punjab tackle the issue in more direct and categorical terms in keeping with, as it were, the brutal realities at the ground level triggered by the cataclysmic event.

A famous nursery-rhyme (but with a serious, caustic content) titled *Teler Shishi Bhangle Pore* (In case a vial of oil is broken...) written by Annada Shankar Roy, a noted poet and essayist of Bengal for example, offers a scathing criticism of narrow politics that by pampering the culture of hatred, have shrewdly engineered the vicious policies leading to partition. What the speaker here contends is that compared to the lapses committed by minors (which are after all natural, in view of their age and inexperience), the blunders committed by adults as in the case of partition are rather criminal offences beyond excuse, and shamefully worse than childish ignorance or casualness.

Feeling angry with the child who has broken the vial?  
But when You, Men- children, break the nation into two  
halves and distribute among yourselves! What about that?  
(L.1-3. Translation mine)

The post-partition violence, anarchy and rampant disorder, aided and abetted by sinister indifference from administrative machineries; receive a vociferous treatment in some poems of Samsur Rahaman. The poem *Tumi Bolechile* (You Told Me) articulates the trauma of a suicidal violence and arson perpetrated by belligerent forces that under the spree of an indiscriminate communal hatred consigns to flame not only

physical items, but also the assets of culture, values and the charts and deeds that demarcate several landmarks of history.

Yonder, Nayabazaar is set in high flame, the leveller  
Shops, piles of wood, scraps of iron, temple, mosque  
All burn -- as on an even pyre, there at Nayabazaar  
House loudly charred around, the fire  
Swallows the parrot's cage, the works of Rabindranath,  
Sweet shops and even maps and deeds out of date.

XXXXXX

Sounds of bullet nearby, the road is  
patrolled by some militant's jeep amidst shrieks of fear...  
(Selected Poetry L.1-7, 15-16. Translation mine)

Being caught amidst such a towering Inferno, even the appeal of the lady- love for protection fails to evoke the urge for action (in the speaker) which is smothered in fear and a helpless feeling of uncertainty:

Smouldering Nayabazaar seals us with a ring of fire  
That falls on us like a hail of bullets  
You let out a piteous cry- 'Save me from this savage flame!'  
Poor me! who couldn't even utter That, What a Shame!

(Selected Poetry L.25-30.Emphases added. *Translation mine*)

The gruesome reality of Partition in the form of plunder, carnage, rape and religious bigotry in border lying states, the visceral level of the sufferers' experience, has received due poetic attention from another foreigner like Auden and also from some other of their Indian counterparts living in these states, as has been stated earlier. The poem *Partition 1947*, written by Kansas author [Duane L Herrmann](#), is the English rendition of the memoir of Daljit Singh Jawa, a Punjabi writer, that recaptures a horrifying picture of Partition in the persona of a minor of ten whose aunt and cousin somehow managed to return in rags from Pakistan and who cannot but feel shocked at the inhuman nature of exchange between Hindustan and Pakistan in the form of Partition.

Trains arrived  
all passengers dead  
didn't make the news  
too many dead to care (L.4-7)

The division of the country on pure communal grounds and a comparative loss of ours in the bargain owing to the breach of trust from the other side, not only betrays the heinous reality seen through the eyes of a boy, but also evokes in us a feeling of Wordsworthian loss - 'What man has made of man!'(Wordsworth, 2001, p.302.L.24)

Muslim neighbors gone,  
they moved in.  
Just ten, I

didn't understand  
tragic circumstance  
as our nation split  
with too many dead.(L.12-18)

The tone of utter disillusionment and despair about the partition is also heard with an unmistakable clarity in the lyrics of Punjabi poets such as *Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, Shiv Kumar Batalvi and Amrita Pritam.

In the rhyme titled *Subh-e-Azadi* (The First Morning of Freedom), poet Faiz Ahmed wails – ‘This stained, spotted morn is far from what we longed for....’ Shiv Kumar Batalvi in the poem *Dudh –Da-Qatl* (Murdering Mother’s Milk), gives a heart-rending account of the perpetuated cult of violence and cruelty of contestant siblings of the same land who as if divide their mother (land).

I feel numb at the thought that since we lost our mother  
half of her corpse lies within y  
our share. (L.5-6. Translation mine)

In her poems Amrita Pritam has ruthlessly exposed the grim reality of bloodshed and hatred let loose by the socio-political menace and her poems like *An Ode to Waris Shah* and *Hamara Rakt* leave a shuddering effect upon the readers’ mind. In the former, she invokes the spirit of a Punjabi saint for a resurrection so as to stop the deluge of blood flooding his favourite green valley in the name of the political insanity known as partition.

Wake up, O darling of the distressed ! See your Punjab once more,  
See that your favourite Chenab has now turned red with gore!  
(L.5-6.Translation mine)

For some Bengali poets of Tripura such as Aparajita Roy, Amulya Sarkar, Kalyanbrata Chakraborti et.al., the ennui and boredom induced by urbanization are strongly interfused with the change in the mindscape bred by the trauma of partition among other things. The following extract from the poem *Gone are lamp-lit Nights* by Aparajita Roy conjures up the pallid cover of drudgery spread over the familiar evening and a resultant hazy feeling of nostalgia coupled with a vague fear of an uncertain future and angst for the unwelcome changes in the familiar landscape:

Gone are the lamp-lit eves for long  
Only the stifling load-shedding reigns  
I grope for the door in vain,  
To lock-out an old prisoner of darkness. (L.1-4)

.....  
.....

Who would turn again the pages read out!  
When some new pages wait to be written?

.....  
Whom does the arrow aim at  
Declaring war



The title of the poem *In a Strange Darkness*, written by Kalyanbrata Chakraborti, is reminiscent of Jibanananda's famous clench 'A strange darkness has don upon the earth today' (*Adbhut andhar ek eseche prithivi te*). Whereas the latter brutally unmasks the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy masquerading the polity and culture in the civilized society, Chakraborti's open verse poem is strictly parochial in targeting the national diplomacy in negotiating cross-border tactics. It encapsulates the partition—trauma and the after-effect of the transference of disputed 'Three Bighas' land upon people of the Indo-Bangla border. In a most laconic way, the persona spells the trauma of being a refugee, of being weaned from the roots that only lead one to seamy experiences such as bereavement or deprivation among others.

My grandmother died several days after the land.....was seized in the name of setting an orphanage.  
After paying my loans and dues I have moved to this hut in the colony.

.....  
.....

..... it is simply propaganda that the imperialists have  
Left our country for good. (Chakraborty 2003, p. . L.3-10)

Thus, it is the loss of the familiar ambience, of a sense of belonging, a forced spiritual withdrawal from involvement with things and persons concerned, coupled with a paradoxically sharpening memory of togetherness, of the shared nature of joy or sorrow, an overall experience of a psychological migration—all such facets of experience virtually turn the partition literature into a rhetoric of ambivalence that seeks to recognize and negotiate both the trauma and trial offered by history at different critical junctures.

In a sense, the reflections embedded in the epigraph from Shakespeare (taken literally off course, apart from their implications as regards the story), no doubt gesture to the emotions of kindred souls who having lived together for long, like to remain connected intrinsically at heart even in the face of inevitable crisis or separation and the acute urge for expressing camaraderie, no doubt forms the essential feature of partition literature in different age or clime.

One simply wonders to think sweet and sour if Hermia or Helena, like their creator, could ever imagine the multiform and fearfully complex nature that 'Partition' in their naïve understanding, would someday acquire in future, as it is experienced in the world today!

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