

## Book Review

Debjani Sengupta. *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*. Cambridge, Delhi: Cambridge University Press. 2016.

*Tista Das*<sup>1</sup>

Debjani Sengupta explores exhaustively the vast body of literature that the event of the Partition of India in 1947 has produced. To say this is to understand that the Partition occurs in the book as the focal point around which the work revolves. But this is not a history of the Partition, per se. It is a study of Bengali literature which evokes the theme of the Partition in myriad ways. It is important to talk about how the Partition is perceived in this work. Sengupta makes it clear, at the very outset that she looks at the Partition in the East as the *longue duree* of political events. The dearth, if not a complete absence, of a comprehensive study on the literature on the Partition in the Bengali language in West Bengal, the Northeast and Bangladesh is filled up by this book. It organically studies this body of fiction, whose form and content had been altered in response to the events that they depicted. Sengupta terms these works as memory texts and she reads them as a group of texts which look at the Partition in terms of the fissures along the lines of class, caste or gender, to question the hegemony of the nation-state.

The book is divided into six chapters. There is a chronological progression beginning with the riots of 1946 of Noakhali and Calcutta and moving on to Dandakaranya and Marichjhapi. However, there is also thematic organisation of the book which cannot be overlooked. One entire chapter is dedicated to the tracing of literature from the northeast of India and from Bangladesh. Sengupta's intervention is important in this regard. What is also significant is the way this work deals with the topography of the region under review. The landscape is not perceived as the stage on which the great Partition drama is enacted. Spatial representations become the means of expressing the experiences and memories of the Partition. It is as if the Partition has left its imprint on the landscapes and have transformed them. These transformations can be understood in the long term. Therefore, the *longue duree* perspective is the only means of tracing the socio-cultural impact of the political event and literary representations become the means to gauge these changes.

While reading literary texts as the testimonies of the Partition, Sengupta is aware of the impossibility of translating texts. That dialects remain hooked on to different registers and mark their distinction from other registers, is a point that is not forgotten. Characters in fictional narratives are made to use certain dialects which situate them/accommodate them within the body politic of the nation. To translate them would be to loosen these ties and dislocate them. Sengupta, therefore, attempts to translate only bits and pieces from the texts simply to give a

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bankura University

sense of their meanings. She restricts herself to and concerns herself with reading the texts rather than translating them. As a result very little is lost in the process of reading. In her understanding, many of these texts become, and she uses Michel de Certeau's words here, 'travel stories', which map a geography of exile and dislocation. If landscapes are studied in terms of the borders that have shaped them, one might say that the sense of time that pervades these texts is a kind of meeting point between the past and the present. In fact, the past and the present constitute each other. As the memory of the Partition persists and as it is narrated even in the present context and in a contemporary language, the act of retelling involves coming to terms with the collective memory of the event. Sengupta, therefore, treads the difficult terrain of time being both synchronic and diachronic<sup>2</sup> in many of these texts. The question remains whether to consider the speech act as a moment devoid of history or whether to see it as a moment rooted in the past. One is bound to recall Homi Bhabha's formulation of how culture, in our times, is located in the beyond.

The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.<sup>3</sup>

The moment of transit creates a liminal space between the past and the present, between the here and now. The texts that Sengupta reads dwell on such liminalities, of being here and there, of characters inhabiting borders of various kinds. Victims becoming perpetrators, expansive living spaces shrinking into constricted spaces, characters living in a state of exile which the author considers to be a condition of their postcolonial lives. In the end, it becomes imperative for the reader to recognise these works of literature which memorialise the dislocation that the Partition brought in its wake as a distinct body of work. Ashapura Devi, Manik Bandyopadhyay, Santoshkumar Ghosh, Narendranath Mitra, Samaresh Basu, Ateen Bandyopadhyay, Budhhadev Bose, Sabitri Ray, Shaktipada Rajguru, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Samar Sen, Sankho Ghosh, Narayan Sanyal, Sunanda Bhattacharya, Swapna Bhattacharya, Sunanda Shikdar and a host of other writers and poets, writing through the decades, have worked around nostalgia rather than violence and madness to grapple with ideas of change and homelessness. Landscapes and geographies are impinged with history and memory. Sengupta sums up with a reference to Giorgio Agamben's conception of homo sacer or bare life to understand life lived at the borders. She writes –

Partition's direct effect was to create borders where none existed and to give rise to two categories of 'bare life': the 'refugee' and the 'minority'.<sup>4</sup>

As borders were created, so were the refugees born. One is reminded of A.R. Zolberg's contention that the formation of new states is a refugee generating process.<sup>5</sup> Debjani Sengupta reads texts that bring out varied narratives of the lives lived in the borders of the state.

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<sup>2</sup>Sengupta, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup>Homi Bhabha., *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge), 1994, p.4.

<sup>4</sup>Sengupta, p.221.

<sup>5</sup>A.R.Zolberg, 'The formation of new states as a refugee-generating process', *Annals*, 467, May, 1983.