Introduction

Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one… Then our coming was expected on earth.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

The 1947 partition of Bengal is significantly different in its aftermath than the sudden cataclysmic division of Punjab because of several historical, social and political reasons. Bangla literature, that is based on the partition's experiences, is therefore also varied and multifarious in its responses to 1947 not simply as an event, but as a metaphor or a trauma or a site of enunciation for thousands of people living through and resisting communal polarization, migration, rehabilitation and resettlement.[1] Taking a cue from the *Annales* historians, one can surmise that the partition in the East is the *longue durée* rather than the short time of political event/s, where the structures and pluralities of social life under its shadow can be unearthed only through a study of the particular and the local.[2] Even after all these years after Independence, the partition of the Eastern part of the subcontinent has been a neglected area, although some recent historiography has drawn our attention to the economic, political and historical issues of decolonization in the region.[3] Unlike the sudden and catastrophic violence that shook Punjab, enunciated through the tropes of madness, rape and murder, the Bengal region has seen a slower, although no less violent, effect of the vivisection with the trauma taking a more elliptical and metaphysical turn.[4] This is evident when we study the enormously rich and varied literature that partition has produced amongst

the Bangla speaking people of West Bengal, the Northeast and Bangladesh – one that has not been studied together in an organic manner. This literature deserves our critical attention because it destabilizes certain assumptions about 1947 just as it demarcates the way geographical areas, not always contiguous, become the theatres of recuperation, mythmaking and sustainability that give rise to different kinds of representations.[5] After 1947, the issues of gender, livelihood and labour have had different momentum in Bangla fiction although the subject of status and independence amongst the refugees may be common to narratives both in the East and in the Punjab. Literary imagination plays a vital role in a process of recovery where Hindus and Muslims attempt to map the contours of the mutilated land in a bid to create a site of belonging, habitation and memory while changing the dynamics of fiction, particularly the form and content of the novel in Bangla that has responded to 1947 in heterogeneous ways. When colonialism and the partition destroyed a sense of belonging to the land, these texts offered a renewed sense of place that contributed to the processes of decolonization and reinstated the 'human subject' at a time when it was most dehumanized. As Lacan (and Freud before him) has reminded people, the event of trauma, by its very ambiguous nature, recedes to the background while fantasies based on it overpower individual and collective psyches.[6] The initial trauma of the partition is now distant but its 'fantasy aspect' has taken over the subcontinent through a legacy of violence and bigotry. The spectacular dance of death that began in the partition years has intensified to those in recent times like the violence that erupted between the Bodos and Muslims (2012) in Assam or the Muzaffarnagar riots (2013) in UP. The nation/state that came out of colonial violence continues to be a site of buried trauma and fear that plays out intermittently. There are numerous studies that have looked at the history of conflicts in India so going back to 1947 may seem pointless but this work contends that not enough has been written about the ways whole communities of people felt, remembered and tried to resist in nonviolent oblique ways the tragic separations and the growth of sectarian hatred over a period of time. Even a cursory glance at Bengal's partition literature lays bare how the vivisection has shaped and moulded the land and its people, spanning generations and several geographical spaces, through the processes of resettlement, migration, border-crossings and rehabilitation that must be understood as sites of meaning making for the region and in the long run, the postcolonial nation. In this study, I take up a wide variety of literary texts that form a series of testimonials or memory texts (Alexander Kluge once remarked that books are the byproducts of history) that deal with the Calcutta and Noakhali riots,the construction of Muslim subjectivities in times of the division of the country, the arrival of the Hindu refugees in West Bengal, the

questions around relief and rehabilitation especially among lower caste Namasudra refugees and the partition's afterlife in the Northeast of India (Assam and Tripura), Bangladesh and the enclaves in India's borderlands. Literature that deals with these wide ranging issues, written over a long period of time, try to reconstruct the lives of individuals and communities, marginal or elite, whose memories of trauma and displacement had dissociated them from their own life stories. Bangla partition fiction captures the diffusion, through a great degree of self-consciousness, of the *longue durée* of continuous migrations and counter-migrations that give refugee-hood a different complexity in Bengal. Reading these imaginative renderings of the diverse facets of the partition becomes therefore an act of creating a literary historiography that is alert to the silences of history, and aware of the ways in which individual and collective memories can be brought into play with each other by studying the micro-history of localities and particular communities. This literary history may not have all the facticity of history but the questions of voice, temporality, lack of narrative closure may tell us something about the ways in which the partition is remembered by diverse kinds of people. Rather than making a point about the un-representation of partition violence (and there was a great deal of violence in Bengal) these texts seem to look at the little histories of people in the margins and use strategies of refraction rather than a simple reflection of conventional realism. Many of them foreground minority (in terms of class and religion) subjectivity, and use fragmentation to index the fracturing of narrative representation that the partition brought in its wake. The less visible and delayed effects of displacement and violence are seen in the family and community spaces that these texts foreground. They give an added dimension to a set of micro-events, often unspeakable, within the partition and lay bare the processes of how literature transforms the actual into the apocryphal and the mythical. The starting point of this study then is a literary archive that gives a more nuanced view of history and culture of a people; one may learn something useful about the contours of the partition in the East through these texts that memorialize and actualize a literary culture and history that would otherwise remain inarticulate.

The partition of 1947 meant a redrawn map, new borders and borderlands and massive population migrations across these borders of the independent nation states of India and Pakistan. Millions of people, Hindus and Muslims, crossed the newly defined boundaries; in West Bengal alone an estimated 30 lakh Hindu refugees entered by 1960 while 7 lakh Muslims left for East Pakistan. Over a million people died in various communal encounters that involved Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. For more than 80 thousand women, independence came accompanied with abduction and sexual assault. It is strange that the dominant structures of

public memory of the partition have never commemorated these voices through any memorial. However, in the last decade, some shifts in partition studies can be discerned although as Joya Chatterji warns everyone,there is a 'gaping void at the heart of the subject' because one still does not know 'why people who had lived cheek by jowl for so long fell upon each other in 1947 and its aftermath, with a ferocity that has few parallels in history.'[7] In the late 90s, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin commented on the abundance of political histories of the events equalled by a 'paucity of social histories of it'.[8] They also noted an absence of feminist historiography of the partition. Around the same time, Urvashi Butalia began to retrieve through interviews and oral narratives the stories of the smaller, invisible players of the events: the women and the children and the scheduled castes. Butalia's contention was that one cannot begin to understand what partition is about 'unless we look at how people remember it'.[9] These works, as well as others like Kathinka Sinha Kerkhoff's study of the Momins in Jharkhand, Sarah Ansari's study of the Muslim refugees in Sind, Shail Mayaram's study of the Meos in Rajasthan and Papiya Ghosh's work on the Biharis in Bangladesh, question the homogeneity of nationalist discourses and have marked a significant break from an exclusive concentration on high politics.[10] Other studies that look at the 'unfinished agenda' of nation-building, especially the participation of the Dalits and minorities in the formation of the nation state as well as issues of social mobilization, have opened up the complexities of the partition, for example, the discourse on Pakistan as disseminated among Bengali East Pakistani intellectuals and writers in the decades leading up to 1947.[11] On one hand, these studies have recognized and documented violence to see the importance of personal memory to demonstrate the plurality of how one remembers the partition (or how one forgets it) even within the same community just as they demonstrate that gender, caste and class variegate the memories of a community as the communities in turn undergo a process of self-fashioning at particular moments in their history.[12]

Historian Mushirul Hasan sees this shift in focus as being animated by the intellectual resources made available to people by creative writers as 'they expose the inadequacy of numerous narratives on independence and partition, and compel us to explore fresh themes and adopt new approaches.'[13] This has meant that partition studies have undergone a new and critical sensitivity that now take literary representations more seriously than before. A call for new resources for remembering and representing the partition means that social relations, locality as well as memory that makes up subjectivity, come under the historian's scrutiny. Although any search for genealogy can be intensely messy, it is also imperative that one reconstructs the partition as a historical representation in the framework

'of the self-referentiality of the historical text', and by accepting 'the propositional nature of historical writing.'[14] As anthropologist Clifford Geertz puts it succinctly:

> The capacity of language to construct, if not reality "as such" (whatever that is) at least reality as everyone engages it in actual practice - named, pictured, catalogued, measured - makes of the question of who describes whom, and in what terms, a far from indifferent business…depiction is power.[15]

Historical representations are contingent and disputable tools, like language in general, that help people understand how community and culture are constructed in certain ways than others. Both are interconnected. Poststructuralist and postmodernist theorists have demonstrated history's own constructed narratives about the past and the textuality of all past evidences. This textuality is in some ways similar to the textuality of a cultural product of a novel or a short story, in that they both 'read.'[16] This understanding of a dialectical relationship between literary representation and history carries within it enormous possibilities because one begins to look at literary texts as a kind of 'source', analogous to other sources that may be found in the archives, to ask specific questions related to the 'experience' of the partition: of living as a refugee in a camp or the experience of an eye witness to a riot. Yet because these narrative texts use specific modes of emplotment, it weakens the direct connection between representation and reality. In the 1990s, the debates carried out in the pages of *History and Theory* questioned the traditional understanding of the relationship between 'fact', 'representation' and 'reality.' This study takes cognizance of the inter-textual resonance between a 'fictive history' and a 'textualized history' because it throws a long shadow over the literary discourse in Bengal, on both sides of the border. Thus, we need to investigate how both the ideological force of the present/past relationship as well as the tension with which the author, reader and text are held together as historical variables have produced the partition literature in the region. In the subcontinent, the after-effects of the partition have created the semiotics that has fed into the multifarious discourses and strategies of narrative prose. This study is just a small endeavour to see how the partition of 1947 has darkened the post-national realities in the Eastern border and borderlands.

The question that comes up is this: what is so special about Bengali partition texts? After all, some would say enough has been written about 1947 and its traumatic memories couched in nostalgia and terror! This study infers that we can never have 'enough' because the brutalization that partition has bequeathed to us

darkens our lives of daily dehumanization in the subcontinent. We have 'banished the memories of partition and with that…had banished the genocidal fury and exterminatory fantasies that had devastated large part of British India.' Silence or may be an inaudible murmur became the only ways we have ever looked back at our past; as it happens this shield of 'anti-memories' have not sufficed to shield us. 'The disowned part of the self regularly returns to haunt us as fantasies of orgiastic violence that would exorcise old enemies once and for all.'[17] Therefore, we need to go back to our violent past to expiate our silences and our guilt, to articulate the wrongs and to explore the multiple markers of our identities. Literature has an important function especially in societies that have faced unendurable violence and where reconciliation and truth telling are not advocated because victims and perpetrators are often the same people. In the absence of public testimonials, literature compels us to take stock, through which we come face to face with the 'Other/Self' so that ideas of justice and freedom that are contained in the discourse of law and political theory are given shape through stories of lives far removed from our own. Modern fiction in Bengal, both the novel and the short story, has been the most amenable to this task. As Walter Benjamin says,

> The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.[18]

Partition's fictions, from Punjab or Bengal, 'contain all that is locally contingent and truthfully remembered, capricious and anecdotal, contradictory and mythically given' and therefore constitute an important means of our self-making.[19] It also becomes a way in which social amnesia about the partition can be negotiated and a foundation of trust can be built between communities that had fallen apart. Reading partition's literature is not just an archival retrieval but a way in which the past can be understood to make it signify in the present.

How does literary imagination cope with the violence and genocide to reconstitute human subjectivity, 'enabled by the land'? How do narrations create us and our communities? How do they help us recognize a decolonized people's search for justice, neither retributive nor restorative, but an exemplary one that allows them lives of fulfillment and mutuality through territories divided by political caprice and contingency? How can imaginative fiction or a memoir possibly articulate the gigantic social churning and bodily hurt that partition brought to so many women, children and the aged? Is there then not one partition but many

smaller ones, each with its own variegated texture of pain, guilt and violence faced by different people flecked by caste, gender and religion? If 1947 brought about a distinct sense of communal identity, what does literature tell us about the lives of people, belonging to different religions and class,who have lived in the same region for centuries without killing each other? Can literary aesthetics throw some light (through a different optic) when we seek answers to some of these questions? Living in a globalized world, where dissemination of information with its 'prompt verifiability' (to use Benjamin's phrase) claims our attention to a greater extent, can we turn to the storyteller's art to gather once again the strands that ties our past to our present? Through questions like this and many more, this book tries to see how memory and history interact to represent our past (certainly not dead and buried) whose throbbing afterlife colours our discourses and our imaginations even after so many decades of the country's vivisection. Many of these texts under discussion create a symbiotic relationship between individual/collective memory and the playing out of history. As Ranabir Samaddar states,

> In fact similar to the structure of historical explanation, memory too shows a structure to it – leading to explanation, more importantly amenable to being a part of history. Just as earlier memories fed into history, similarly these memories born of the event will feed into the subsequent history this event will create. This is precisely what critical studies on partition are showing.[20]

How then should one study the years before and after 1947? That originary division, so far removed in time, has left scars in our politics and our memories; they can now only be studied through the 'tropes' where a 'space' is created by the displacement of a word from its original meaning and in which 'all forms of rhetoric come to life.'[21] The materiality of literature on the partition encapsulates these rhetorical gestures towards the past, a looking back to make sense of the present, and in a study of their forms and themes we may understand aspects of our postcolonial modernities and our postcolonial forms of exploitation, gender violence and subject formations especially the creation of 'minorities' in India.

The partition of India in 1947 has generated extensive literatures ranging from scholarly works, historical monographs, memoirs, novels and bestsellers that look at the complex political mosaic of a pluralistic society, the growth and acceleration of the nationalist struggle, the changes in Hindu-Muslim relations, popular protests, and British imperial policies. Certainly, a more nuanced view of the events leading to the partition is now possible with access to new material available in *The Transfer of Power* (1942–47) series edited by Nicholas Mansergh

and Penderel Moon and the Muslim League documents (1906–47) compiled by Syed Shafiruddin Pirzada while the *Towards Freedom* volumes are invaluable for archival materials from India.[22] The diaries of British Governor-Generals like Lord Archibald Wavell and the accounts of British historians, describing the last 20 years of the British rule in India, are also available. On the Indian side, the multi-volume *Collected Works of M.K. Gandhi*, *Selected Works* of Nehru, and correspondences and private papers of public figures like Sardar Patel, S.P. Mookerjee, Meghnad Saha, Renuka Ray, and Ashoka Gupta are valuable source materials. The writings by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Saroj Mukhopadhyay, Abani Lahiri, Hiranmay Bandopadhyay, Manikuntala Sen, Soofia Kemal and Renu Chakravartty provide rich details, particularly about Bengal. Institutional papers like the government reports and the assembly proceedings also contribute to our understanding of the partition not only as a division on the map but a division on the ground – the uprooting and the looting, the rape and recovery operations, the riots and their fallouts that mark these moments of uncertainty in the political and social life of the people in the subcontinent. Recent anthropological and sociological studies of partition's violence have enumerated the complex ways gendered subjectivities have remembered and have been constituted by communal violence that resulted in changed kinship ties.[23] In the last few decades we have seen a fresh awareness in historiography as historians turn to newer reading practices, and like literary critics, have begun to pay great attention to rhetorical strategies of 'texts' although differing generic texts employ differing strategies. In this study, the emphasis on narrative prose and thematic concerns has meant that novels, memoirs and short stories are my chosen forms, leaving out a good deal of poetry, drama and films that have engaged with the partition in the East. The choice of the texts has also meant a capriciously subjective (and arbitrary!) assembly, where I have left out many important writers from both sides of the Eastern border. However, keeping in mind that the historical period under review is vast (1946 till 2010) the process of literary production is also varied and eclectic and impossible to deal within the scope of a single study.

The complex body of texts that I study, originally written in Bangla and its dialects, lays bare the various responses to 1947 through varieties of subjectivities where one scrutinizes cultural works other than those written in the metropolitan language (and in metropolitan spaces) to see how politics and aesthetics are aligned in fascinating ways in them. The Bangla texts, from India and Bangladesh, go beyond the question of survival, accompanied by trauma and nostalgia, to critiques of political leadership and nationality to reinforce questions of justice in our social and political lives. In the context of the formation of our nation that was born

with such potential for transformation, they ask important questions regarding the nature of freedom through the rubric of gender and caste, explore refugeehood not through trauma and nostalgia but through agency and reformulate the question of communal relationship in the subcontinent by articulating difference and plurality as constitutive of the nation itself. They undertake the onerous task of representing the collective suffering of people, whether Hindus, Muslims, women or children, lower castes or peasants, to articulate how 'even among the oppressed there were victors and losers.' [24]

My study is situated in a particular locality and time (without claiming indigeneity) to seek out some of the ways in which Bengal's postcolonial moments configured literary activities, with a special emphasis on the social and cultural fallouts of the partition through an extensive period of the region's history. The texts that form the bulwark of this book are grouped together because they perform a certain epistemological task of translation within the concerns of language. They decipher the partition trauma and 'soft violence'[25] through aspects of class, gender and caste formations that critique the hegemonic patterns of the nation-state. Hindu and Muslim subjectivities that have suffered the agonies of the partition encapsulate certain actions that enable them to translate themselves into citizens of the new state or ones marginal to it. The texts that I study make a 'public use of history' in substituting the absent past with literary texts, which use that history. Therefore they perform an action of legitimizing questions of identity, communal or individual, and search out ways culture can be seen as power. These texts do not take us closer to the hidden truths of the partition nor do they offer a picture of how things really were. We must be aware that their representations are a mode of meaning production, contingent and capricious, depending upon who is reading them. The historical reality they represent may be a representation itself, a construction of reality rather than a mirror of it.[26] The narrative prose pieces that I have studied, especially the novels, have been grouped according to their formal and thematic content and I want to indicate a commonality that we may discern in their aesthetic forms. Although written at various points of time, they explore the partition's aftermath, its legacy of violence and dislocations, through a certain formal trope: the epic-mythic vision. Given the scale and magnitude of the themes, many of the novelists employ certain narrative coda for coherence that are diverse and historically contingent yet situated in a specific locale and geography. We see in these texts 'the epic strain', to use Tillyard's phrase, that suffuses their topography.[27] According to Paul Ricoeur, an authentic epical mode is that which encompasses the totality of a world; these novels are more than that: they explore the totality of a world *after colonization* where the epic focus is not a hero's exploits but the heroic

exploits and sufferings of communities of people who are bound by a history of colonization. We can see a mapping out of this idea of an epic in the words of one of Bengal's most influential novelist Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. In a prose piece called 'Amar Katha' (My Life) that he published in 1964, Bandopadhyay explains what he considers the true objective of postcolonial Indian writing in the context of the country's independence. He begins by comparing India's independence struggle with the Kurukshetra war fought between the Pandavas and Kauravas immortalized in the epic *Mahabharata*, only the former is more noble and lofty. Then he asserts,

> I had imagined a New Mahabharata (*nabamahabharata)* about this vast war. However, this is not just the work of any one writer, nor is it possible: this ought to be a united effort. From all the provinces of India, all the powerful writers must come together to write this epic. Writers from each corner and in each of the languages must thread together the incidents and happenings of their regions and create each *parva:* as many *parvas* as there are languages and as there are writers. When all the *parvas* are written, the writers will come together to string them together in one compendium within a framework. It will be named the New Mahabharata. Among all the themes that they look at, the main exploration will be of the theory (*tattva*) that humans are journeying from violence to non-violence.[28]

Gandhi's influence on Tarashankar's majestic dream of a 'pan-Indian' literature is clearly discernable; so are the radical ideals of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) whose aesthetic search for social and political justice as a distinct template for Indian writers can be seen in the famous Hindi novelist Premchand's inaugural speech at its first session in 1936.[29] Tarashankar was an enthusiastic member of PWA in his early years as a writer and he wanted to overturn the canonical ideals of literature and transform it into an instrument for the masses to challenge existing hegemonic structures of caste, class and gender. Therefore, this vision of a 'national', 'Indian' (not one but many Indian) literature with each language on an equal footing, brought together on a single platform, encapsulates a cultural memorialization of the events around independence in the lives of people and is an important ingredient of Tarashankar's own fiction and of his contemporaries in West Bengal. It is also a theory for the historical-epic impetus of writing in West Bengal in the post-partition years that talks of the nation's psychological progress from violence to non-violence. This thrust to transform the individual life of the people into the component of an epic, to transform personal destiny