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NPTEL ONLINE
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Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 36 - HOME AND NOSTALGIA

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Nostalgia and the Question of Belonging

- Roots imply stability in a particular territorial, social and cultural locale. Partition signalled for refugees and migrants the displacement of one's fixities attached to one's language, ethnicity, caste, family and village with the liberal secular paradigm of the newly-constituted state for residents.
- Partition induced displacement as an ambiguous state of exile and nostalgia. The narrative of Partition remains unredeemed by the myth of the homeland and the possibility of returning home, even though the desire to return for a visit does not die out.
- There is a certain ambivalence that marks the longing for the homeland in the Partition refugee, as positive sentiments attached to the homeland are darkened by fear and insecurity.

- Return to homeland is impossible because it has become altered beyond recognition. Like Deewane Maulvi Sahib in Joginder Paul's *Sleepwalkers*(2002), the Partition refugee is disoriented in the homeland that has an uncanny resemblance to the real, but can only survive in an imaginary homeland.
- James Clifford "The Transit Lounge of Culture": diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origin or homelands, but are created by continuous process of ongoing migratory histories and its transitional cultural flows(*Times Literary Supplement*, 4596 p.7)
- Urbashi Barat - Bengali literature on the refugee experience of Partition is marked by "commemorative mechanisms," which help the refugees to "(re)create their lost spaces, the heterotopias..." (2004, "Re-membering Home After the Partition of Bengal" 219).
- Ananya J. Kabir – A helpful way of channelizing/expressing nostalgia in scholarship is through a balanced act, accomplished through paying homage to memory and yet drawing attention to its constructed and selective nature and inability to trace back to the original moment.

- Shelley Feldman - middle-class Bengali Hindu immigrants as the primary articulators of melancholic sentiments of Partition. The narratives they construct take on the shape of a virtual myth, simultaneously celebrating the “unadulterated” East Bengali past and ruing the unsatisfactory West Bengali present.
- Sarah Ansari, *Partition, Migrations and Refugees* – the ethnic tensions between the migrants in Sindh and the local population (1994). Conflict between locals and migrants in the Punjab was muted, despite the fact that the migrants outnumbered the established population in such cities as Lyallpur and Ludhiana.
- The sentimentalization in most of these works frequently refer to a particular utopian vision of the countryside. In the case of Bengal, the focus is on East Bengali “home,” without addressing the common landlord and peasant relationship, from which sprout the seeds of sectarianism and hatred. Thus, the pervasive stories of “injustice” and “fall” do not incorporate the relation of dominance that the *bhadralok* shared with the East Bengali Muslim and Dalit wage-workers and peasants.



- Anasua Basu Roychaudhury in “Nostalgia of ‘Desh’” - Nostalgic narratives help “to take control of the frightening diversity and formlessness of the world,” by puffing up a desirable “Grand Narrative” that sutures together dissimilar experiences. (5653)
- Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt and Clay Routledge’s interpretation - nostalgia as a “predominantly positive, self-relevant, and social emotion,” which is conducive in resurrecting a traumatized past (Sedikides et al. 304). Because nostalgia puts together the descriptions of disappointments, losses, death and separation with euphoria and triumph, progress and redemption mark the trajectory of these narratives.
- Historically being associated with keywords such as “warm,” “childhood” and “old times,” nostalgia’s meaning is fully explored in the realm of sentimentality (*Nostalgia : Content, Triggers, Functions* , p.304).
- Sukrita Paul Kumar on importance of literary representations - narrativity of Partition, especially through a spatial-temporal distance from the author’s contemporaneity, entails a strong use of imagination, which allows transformation of historical truth into a fictionalized one, with all rights of the latter’s autonomous existence. Arguably, such a narrator is removed from the position of objective perception and judgment. In this respect, nostalgia is instrumental in giving vent to a host of newly encountered emotional as well as socio-cultural orientations (“On Narrativizing Partition” p. 231).

- For the Dalit Bengali scholars, “Golden Bengal” does not herald similar romanticized nostalgia as in the upper-class/caste immigrants’ memory, as the former describe generations of naturalized exploitation and discriminatory village politics in pre-Partition East Bengal.
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Remembered Villages’ – Bengali Hindu memories tend to easily slip into nostalgic evocations of prelapsarian rural innocence and a bucolic idyll called “Golden Bengal”, which refer to pre-Partition rapture and bliss.
- Canadian-Armenian filmmaker Atom Egoyan – points to the impossibility of narrativising trauma, with the desired whole always being contaminated by the actual holes, i.e. referring to the constant grappling with omissions and selections – the gaps point to the fundamental difficulty in integrating trauma into narrative memory.
- Ananya J. Kabir – In order to reach a more searing level of honesty within ourselves, we have to study the complicated nature of memory and understand the compromised subjectivity of the narrator of such a memory.
- For instance, artworks and analyses valorizing only certain sites of memory, such as the village life, should also discuss how such modes of remembrance happen at the cost of under-focusing/marginalizing other modes/possibilities of remembering.



- People who migrated to the either side always had the memories of their place of birth. They always had in their minds the picture of their nation where they were born and brought up; the nation where they grew up playing in the mud and running in the streets with friends.
- The line that was drawn by the politicians to divide one nation into two could never divide the sentiments and memories of the people.
- The stories of refugees on their feelings of exile and dislocation reveal dichotomy between the legal machinery and the actual practices in the resettlement of the refugees, the variance between state protection and social acceptance of refugees, one making them eligible for entitlements and the other excluding them from the cultural community.
- The rehabilitation measures taken by the state for the settlement of refugees through a number of schemes were sometimes complicated by hostilities from the established communities in those areas and lack of social acceptance of the newly arrived population.

Commemorating 'home' through everyday practices

- Oral history or culling informative data through interviewing the persona who lived through the event, the acute witnesses to history from its formative process is now being associated as an attempt to bring undocumented voices into the picture, to provide another angle in contrast to official history and to counts and interpretations of events constructed by the ruling elite. The transformation is towards the interpretation of the testimonials of the ordinary or subaltern folk who bear volumes as human archive.
- Oral narrative offers a different perspective, which mainly enriches history with first hand testimonials despite subjectivity, where the historian's discretion comes to the fore.
- Ritu Menon – “[individual stories] simultaneously run parallel to accounts of historic events and are their sequel, but almost inevitably get submerged; with them may also be submerged the countering of accepted - and acceptable versions, to be buried in the rubble of history”.(1998, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* ,p 8).



- Historiography or writing of history can be seen as an exchange – or an intricate dialogue- both with the past and others inquiring into the past. An exchange or dialogue is mediated in multiple ways by disciplinary protocols and critical exchanges that are both constraining and enabling, which results in new research and self-criticism.
- Trauma is transformed or transvalued into a legitimating myth of origins- crisis or catastrophe that disorients the collectivity or the individual may become the origin or renewed origin of the myth and serve an ideological function in authorizing acts or policies that appeal to it for justification (La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p.13).
- Writing remains a medium for expressing content and its ideal goal is to be transparent to content or an open window in the past – with figures of rhetoric serving an instrumental role in further illustrating facts.
- Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit accept the distinction between historical and fictional statements on the level of reference to events, but question it on structural levels.

- White and Ankersmit – There is an identity or essential similarity between historiography and fiction, literature, or the aesthetic on structural levels, and their emphasis is on the fictionality of the structures.
- Hayden White - a discursive analogue of the middle voice is most suitable for representing the extreme and traumatic limit events, in history such as Holocaust (La Capra 47).
- Ankersmit and White – discuss narrative substance as in their prior discussions on prefigurative tropes and meaning-endowing, projective narrative structures.
- The narrative substance or structure as fictive and politically or ideologically motivated. Ankersmit infers that “we can never test our conclusions by comparing the elected text with the past itself... narrative substances do not refer to the past” (*History and Theory*, p.212).
- Ankersmit – “we can only speak of causes and effect at the level of statement and that the narrative language is metaphorical; indeed that the historical text is a substitute for the absent past”(p.220).

- The historical text becomes a substitute for the absent past only when it is construed and fetishized as a totalized object (La Capra *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p.50).
- Ankersmit - politics of history claims to say the “true” things and construct ‘pictures of the past’ narrative substances, which is also observable among canonical narratives.
- Memorial documentation, especially by virtue of collective assertion and repetition, can command a totalitarian substitution for the absent past and be prone to fetishism and closure, as a historical text.
- LaCapra - fictional narratives outdo the historical recording in terms of truth claim “by giving a plausibility for experience and emotion, which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods” (13). “Mutually interrogative relation” between historiography and art complicates binary oppositions between them (15).

- Nation-states produce narrative versions of their past which are taught, embraced, and referred to as their collective autobiography. National history is presented in the public arena in the form of monuments and commemoration dates. To participate in a national memory is to know the key events of the nation's history, to embrace its symbols, and connect to its festive dates.
- Assmann – Cultural memory is based on two separate functions: the presentation of a narrow selection of sacred texts, artistic masterpieces, or historic key events in a timeless framework; and the storing of documents and artifacts of the past that do not meet these standards but are nevertheless deemed interesting or important enough to not let them vanish in the oblivion ('Canon and Archive' p.97).
- The institutions of passive cultural memory are situated halfway between the canon and forgetting. The archive is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past. Once outdated, the archives lose their political function and relevance.
- The historical archive is a receptacle for documents that have fallen out of their framing institutions and can be reframed and interpreted in a new context. It is the task of the academic researcher or the artist to examine the contents of the archive and to reclaim the information by framing it within a new context (Assmann , 'Canon and Archive', p.102-103).

- “Memory is a complex phenomenon that reaches out to far beyond what normally constitutes a historian’s archives, for memory is much more than what the mind can remember or what objects can help us document about the past” (Chakraborty, *Remembered Villages* p.2143).
- “Memory ... poses ethical challenges to the investigator-historian who approaches the past with one injunction : tell me all” (p.2143).
- “The question of creating in print something of the sentimental and the nostalgic about the lost home in the villages of East Bengal was the task that the refugee essays had set themselves” (p.2143).
- Two contradictory relationships to the question of the past – sentiment of nostalgia and sense of trauma.
- In order for the memory of trauma to be legitimate one has to give force to the claim of victimization due to Partition.

- 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.
- When colonialism and the partition destroyed a sense of belonging to the land, literary works 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.
- Lacan (and Freud) – the event of trauma, by its very ambiguous nature, recedes to the background while fantasies based on it overpower individual and collective psyches (Sengupta, *The Partition of Bengal* p.16).
- Meenakshi Mukherjee – Just as a cartography is the science of codifying space, history is the discipline of narrativizing time ("Maps and Mirror" 255).
- Mukherjee – Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* merges memory with history, fiction with reality to symbolize that the supposed purpose created by humans are shadows understood in the subjective perspective of individual who inhabit both sides of it, constantly facing the devastating aftermath and meaninglessness of their creation.



Thank You

