

Theorizing Collective Trauma and Identity-Threat in Select Stories from Deshbhager Galpa: Tripura

Jagriti Chakraborty

Research Scholar

ICFAI University Tripura

Agartala, Tripura, India

jagriti2795@gmail.com

Dr. Madhumita Chakrabarty

Assistant Professor

ICFAI University, Tripura

Agartala, Tripura, India

madhumitachakrabarty@iutripura.edu.in

Abstract

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. There are then two aspects to this memory that concern us here: the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma, and their contradictory relationship to the question of the past. A traumatised memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative. At the same time, however, this memory, in order to be the memory of a trauma, has to place the Event - the cause of the

trauma, in this case, Partition of 1947 in the context of Tripura-within a past that gives force to the claim of the victim. This has to be a shared past between the narrator of the traumatic experience and the addressee of the narration. Yet it cannot be a historicist version of the past, one that aims to diffuse the shock of the traumatic by explaining away the element of the unexpected. Hence the introductory segment of the paper might highlight the facts related to Tripura Bengalis, their arrival, and their stories of settlement. However, the purpose is to examine the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affects an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. The aim is to analyse the features of traumatic memories and, thus, how individuals construct and integrate their experiences and struggles through narratives. The chosen text is select stories from Deshbhagger Galpa: Tripura, a collection of short stories focusing on Nostalgia, Identity-crisis and Collective Trauma.

Keywords: Narrative, Identity, Collective Trauma, Memory, History

1. Introduction:

Tripura is the home for 19 different tribes and majority of the Bengali community. The reason behind this mixture of community is the migration which took place in the past. The Bengali community of Tripura or the Tripura Bengalis has a long history of migration and displacement. The primary reason behind the migration is the partition which took place in 1947. The majority of the Hindu Bengalis who were residing in the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) which came into the territory of Pakistan, they had to move out from their ancestral land. The one who use to live in the parts such Chittagong, Sylhet, Noakhali, Comilla started moving from those places. They crossed the border by leaving their home, identity, people, memories etc. The traumatic past and the distressing stories of partition formulates collective trauma, this trauma pattern effects the entire community as it is a shared memory.

The collective trauma has been represented analysed in various literary works from all over the world.

The collective trauma through shared experiences is passed on to generation after generation. Literature helps to express those traumatic moments by narration of those incidents which helps the reader to interpret and examine the reality. The traumatic experiences which are shared by one generation to other is called as transgenerational trauma. So, the literary works which narrates the stories of those traumatic memories are also part of sharing the stories to the next generation. For the Tripura Bengalis the collective trauma signifies their stories of survival, settlement, struggle for existence etc. Trauma and narrative can be connected as a means of healing. The Tripura Bengalis while sharing their stories to offspring, who were not part of that incident but those stories which are like repositories. This paper shall be discussing select text which focuses upon the traumatic events of partition, migration and post-migration trauma of the Tripura Bengalis.

1.1 Contextualising Tripura- Partition 1947:

The former princely state Tripura was previously divided into two parts; one was the hilly region another was the plain region. The hilly part was called as Hill Tipperah which was ruled by the Manikya kings. The plain part was known as Chakla Roshanabad which was situated in Eastern side, where the role of the king was of a Zamindar. The Bengali community majorly lived in the eastern part and there was a constant communication between the Hill Tipperah and Chakla Roshanabad. But the Partition changed the dynamics of Tripura as the plain lands or Chakla Roshanabad became the part of East Pakistan, which was a great loss for the Manikya Kings. Due to the demographic upheaval of partition, there was huge influx of Bengali community in Tripura. The Manikya Kings on the other hand was appreciating the migration, because of their interest in the rich cultural heritage of the Bengalis.

From the very early times, the Maharajas (tribal kings of Tripura) were very much in favour of Bengalis and Bengali culture. In fact, they encouraged the immigration and settlement of Bengali Hindus in Tripura. Gradually, they adopted Hinduism as the state religion and extended their hands to assimilate Bengali language and literature with their own culture. Most significantly, the Tripura kings adopted Bengali as state language. (Ghoshal.,p.1208)

This was a major reason behind the settlement of the Bengali community in Tripura. The partition forced many people who were settled in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to move away from their ancestral land to live a life of Refugee. The real journey of the Bengali community started right after their settlement in Tripura. While leaving the ancestral home they only carried their surnames as identity and the struggle of reshaping their lives emerged.

1.2 Multiple-ethnicity and History of Tripura Bengalis:

The Bengali community settled in Tripura previously belonged to the East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Before partition the Bengalis lived a peaceful life, they had their land, family, work in East Bengal. But the scenario changed right after the partition when everyone was searching for a safe shelter. For the Bengali community they considered Hill Tipperah as the safest place for settlement. The Bengalis of East Bengal considered their migration as internal migration, as they were shifting from plain Tripura to the hill Tripura to India to escape religious torture.

Although the settlement of those displaced Bengalis was not as smooth as it seemed, they had to face various political, societal and environmental discrimination. All these aspects resulted as the collective trauma of the Tripura Bengalis. They have suffered from migration, partition violence, displacement which somehow contributed to their collective trauma. These experiences of the previous generations of the Tripura Bengalis continues to transfer to the

decedents for appreciating the contribution and struggle of their ancestors. Their fight for existence, settlement and survival stories later on became part of literature which are also very limited in number. The partition stories of the Tripura Bengalis contribute in the cultural identity and to trace out the root of their settlement in Tripura. Their story of past are being passed to the future generation in the form of family memory, in an article named *Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll says:

Family memory is a typical inter-generational memory: a kind of collective memory that is constituted through ongoing social interaction and communication between children, parents, and grandparents. Through the repeated recall of the family's past—usually via oral stories which are told at family get-togethers—those who did not experience past events first hand can also share in the memory. In this way an exchange of “living memory” takes place between eyewitnesses and descendants. Inter-generational memory thus goes back as far as oldest members of the social group can remember either their own experiences or stories that they heard from their elders. (Erll.,p.306)

Through narration one can express the personal perspective of self, which incorporates the reality and helps the listener to visualize about the by gone time. This paper aims to discuss the Collective trauma of the Tripura Bengalis from literary lens with the help of selected stories named “Shekor” and “Chinnabhumi” from the collection *Deshbhager Galpa: Tripura*.

2. Research Objective:

- To explore the traumatic experiences of the Tripura Bengalis.
- To analyse the aspect of identity-threat through literature

- To examine an epistemological study of history, the entire process of partition, their memories of lost home, and their settlement in Tripura through the window of the select texts.

3. Frame work of analysis:

This paper is based on some theoretical concepts:

- Collective Trauma
- Memory and Historical Narrative of Trauma
- Diaspora and identity-threat

3.1 Collective Trauma: The term collective trauma is referred to a traumatic experience shared by a community. Sociologist Kai Erikson expressively defines the resemblances and differences between individual and collective trauma and their impact on the self:

by collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it...[is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (Erikson, 1976, pp. 153–154)

This experience of trauma not only shapes the believe system of a person but continues to pass on generation after generation. The collective trauma gets transmitted through social identity, values and psycho-social conditions. The third or fourth generation who never experienced the trauma directly but they can emotionally connect with the collective trauma by narratives and shared experiences. This results as conscious or unconscious effects of those traumatic events. Because of the understanding of collective trauma, the decedents understand the value of the past as well as importance of the roots.

3.2 Memory and Historical Narrative of Trauma: Memory and narrative are interconnected; it explores how traumatic events are remembered and how it can be shared in different forms of narrative, such as oral narrative, life writing, storytelling etc. It also examines how these narratives shape the individual and collective identities, well-being, and resilience of the people who have suffered or witnessed trauma. Narration of the past can be considered as a means of trauma relief. When a trauma survivor explains his/her past experiences with someone, it gives them a sense of authority over their experience. According to A.J. Kabir as she talks about the narration by a traumatized person, she states:

“I took on board the axiom that ‘telling the story’ was necessary to heal the traumatized subject and/or society—a direct inheritance from the Freudian emphasis on ‘the talking cure’. Freud’s distinction between a harmful melancholia that arises when the psyche is trapped in a loop of repetitions, and a healthy mourning which moves through progressive stages in order to bring about closure, affirms itself by emphasizing the need to talk” (Affect, Body, Place 65)

Literature is a great source for such aspects, where the characters with their narratives formulates an identity of their own. The partition of India created many events which later on became the part of their identity. Those events are no longer limited to themselves, but became the part of the community.

3.3 Diaspora and Identity-threat: Diaspora and identity are two interconnected concept which explores meanings, experiences and feelings of those people who left their ancestral land or the place of origin and are settled in different countries. Diaspora refers to a scattered group of people who forced to leave their country as well as those who voluntarily shifted from their homeland can be also defined as diaspora. A diasporic subject is always in a state of imagining about the lost homeland, they are very much rooted to the culture and community they belong

to. Identity refers to the sense of self and belonging that people develop in relation to their homeland and their new environment. The identity of a person is shaped by the perception of the surrounding. Especially those communities who have migrated from one country to another faces the discrimination and lack of acceptance due to their past history of migration. Stuart Hall in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” discuss about the dynamic characteristics of ‘identity’ that it is, ‘never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation’ (222).

On the other hand, identity-threat refers to the psychological anxiety that people may experience when they find their social identity is challenged or threatened by others. Identity-threat can affect the social wellbeing of a person as well it may impact the mental health.

In the case of Tripura Bengalis their migration can be considered as a forced migration, due to the post partition violence. So, the sense of belonging and the nostalgic connection towards the ancestral land is undetachable for them and literary analysis of those events shall be giving new dimensions to the partition stories of the survivors.

4. Methodology:

Methodology has its own importance in any kind of social investigation, because objectivity in any research investigation involves careful and proper adoption of research design, use of valid data, source and information for analysis. This study is qualitative in nature and employed a descriptive research design. The present research work is based on select stories named “Shekor” and “Chinnabhumi” from the collection named Deshbhager Galpa: Tripura, which shall include textual analysis method. In this method select stories from the collection concerning partition shall be taken up as the source of reference to justify the research work. This study is qualitative in nature and employed a descriptive research design.

It includes an analytical discourse, which shall be based on the etymological understanding as well as the concept of collective trauma, narration of past, diaspora and identity are covering the major part of the study.

5. Representation of Collective Trauma and identity-threat through Literature:

Violence is one of the major reasons behind trauma especially the trauma of partition. There were several instances of violence which later on took the shape of communal riots during the time of partition. The Tripura Bengalis faced the partition violence mostly during their escape from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). This paper shall focus upon two short stories named “Shekor” by Pradip Sarkar and “Chinnabhumi” by Shyamapada Chakraborty from the collection named *Deshbhager Galpa: Tripura*. This book is a collection of multiple short stories written in Bengali language. Both the stories revolve around the trauma of partition, and the narrative of Tripura Bengalis.

Pradip Sarkar’s story “Shekor” which can be translated as “Root” is a great example of partition violence and collective trauma. The central character of the story Anindya who visits his ancestral house in now Bangladesh, after fifty years. The story takes back the reader to the childhood days of Anindya with his family, who were totally unaware of the future. This story reflects how the central character Anindya after stepping into his ancestral home was surrounded by all the memories of his mother, aunt, brothers, his friends and many more.

“When Anindya stepped into his house, he opened his shoes. Was it to show respect to his ancestors? Emotion? Or the touch of the soil made him do so? ... He was breaking into two parts, the way his country was divided. From inside there were blurry memories of past, on the outside the harsh reality.”(Self translated, pp.168-169)

That house was full of memories of Anindya’s family, his childhood days, but it also reminds him of those dark days when the entire village was terrorized by the conflicts and mass

killing of Hindus. He started remembering that time when his family members were brutally killed due to the partition violence. This house reminds him of his brothers who were killed during the train journey, while escaping from East Pakistan:

“There were mass killing inside each and every compartment of the train. People were been thrown out of the rooms as if they are birds who were being shot... When Ranga Da saw the blood drenched faces of the murderers he became unconscious. They pulled his tough body and stabbed him with digger. Palash Da heard the last scream of Ranga Da saying MAGOO.” (Self translated, pp. 170-171)

This traumatic event which took place fifty years back became the part of Anindya's existence. Anindya the protagonist remembered everything which was hiding unconsciously in his mind. As the title of the story is “Shekor” which means “Root” which comprises of the situation of the Bengalis who tried to face the past after years of settling in Tripura, because their minds are still stagnant in the ancestral land where they have spent their childhood. This story depicts continuity inside the mind of Anindya as well as the collective trauma which has impacted the entire community. The narrator also represents the identity- threat which gets connected with the past of the migrated person. The search of home the mind of the migrant ends up getting divided into two parts, where one resides in the past and the other in present. Through this narration one can understand the dilemma of the Tripura Bengalis whose minds are still stuck to those painful days of partition. This story not only talks about the protagonist but many more victims of partition violence. The traumatic event continues to haunt those who were the first-hand survivor and urges them to go back to the source to make meaning of the present. This oscillation between the past and the present happens because of unresolved grief, unfinished narratives, and the absence of resolution. By going back to history through narration of traumatic memories is an endeavour for the survivors to try to comprehend the source of

those incidents. Cathy Caruth argues, “that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another” (Trauma 12). In all the stories which deals with collective trauma, focuses upon memory of a person which later on works in reshaping the identity.

The second story named “Chinnabhumi” by Shyamapada Chakraborty, which emphasises upon the life of a displaced family and their fate. The title of the story that is “Chinnabhumi” which can be translated as land which is snatch away from someone. The story begins with the character named Chidam who along with his elderly mother and wife was leaving the house which was burnt in riot. His old mother Priyabala was looking at her burning house, and she was thinking about her fate. The story goes back to the past when Priyabala’s husband was alive, at that time too they had to leave their ancestral land. It was a time full of struggle, Priyabala and her husband was running from place to place in search of a safe shelter in India by crossing the border. Ultimately, they found shelter in a refugee camp, where she gave birth to her son Chidam. But Priyabala’s husband disappeared right after the birth of their son Chidam. Today she had to face the same fate where Priyabala is again homeless,

“She takes out the bowl from the ashes, where Radhakanta’s name was engraved. Even though this bowl is burned now but the old lady was happy. She touches the bowl and tries to feel the memories related to it.” (Self translated, p. 369)

The bowl which priyabala was holding, signifies connection between the past and the present, this connection makes her reminiscence about the memories of her husband and her journey to an unknown country. But now when they again had to leave their house, Priyabala was not ready for it. This was the reason behind Priyabala’s distress, leaving her motherland once and settling in a new land was already very traumatic for her but this was the second time when she had to leave the place. Priyabala was still in the trauma from her past experiences:

“Priyabala did not want to come out. She was holding on to the bowl. Chidam could see from the darkness that his mother is crying.” (Self translated, p. 376)

Priyabala was in deep shock which made her perplexed about the situation. Like many other displaced people Priyabala somehow managed to make a new home in the country which she called as her motherland but it was again taken away. The condition of the woman who was puzzled about her identity and home ultimately resulted in deep trauma by re-experiencing the past traumatic event. Priyabala’s fear of leaving the land is also a result of identity-threat, because of the reputation of the events, which made her feel alienated. By recollecting the memories of past the Tripura Bengalis formulates the sense of Collective trauma. When a traumatized person through their narration shares their experiences, it gives them the charge over their narrative. Here in this story the traumatized Priyabala experienced the pain of leaving home and the belongings not once but twice, which was resulted as the outbreak of her emotions. The reason behind holding back to the past or revisiting the past is associated with the diasporic nature of the Tripura Bengalis. In a study by William Safran who analysed diaspora pertaining to Jewish diasporic perspective:

...they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; (Myth 83- 84).

The upheaval of migration uprooted them from their domesticity, known spaces and comfort to a totally different world of struggle. It becomes the part of the psyche of the victim of partition which haunts them forever. The diasporic identities in both the stories emphasize upon the psycho social condition and the post partition trauma of the Tripura Bengalis. In contrast the identity of the Tripura Bengalis is depicted by all these incidents, as the history of the migration and the stories of their struggle is interconnected with each other.

6. Conclusion:

The process of uprooting from motherland to settling into Tripura was a very painful process for the Tripura Bengalis. But the solidity which later on provided by the new found home, made the Tripura Bengalis to connect themselves with the land. The transition from migrated person to being a part of Tripura was long process, which they acquired with passing time. The diverse cultural spaces of Tripura are surrounded by various narratives and the Tripura Bengalis have their own part of stories like any other communities of Tripura. The literary works based on the Tripura Bengalis juxtapose their struggle of settlement, oscillation of past and present, and redefining themselves by their identity. This is an essential point of view that runs through most of the narratives written about Partition. With time the Tripura Bengalis have come out of the past, and they have restored their identity. The collective feeling of unity through shared memories and events made the Tripura Bengalis confident about their past and helped to create a better present and future. In conclusion, texts that deal with these wide-ranging issues, written over a long period of time, try to rebuild the experiences of Tripura Bengalis, whose memories of trauma and displacement had detached them from their own life stories. This shows how literature shares the untold and unspoken stories which gives the opportunity to the characters to come out from the other side.

References

- Chakrabarty, Bimal. (Ed.). (2018). *Deshbhager Galpa: Tripura. Gangchil.*
- Caruth, Cathy. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Erikson K. T. (1976). *Everything in its Path.* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Erl, A. (2011). Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 42(3), 303-318. Retrieved March 25, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41604447>
- Ghoshal, A. (2010). SURVIVAL QUESTION OF EAST BENGAL REFUGEES: THE CASE OF TRIPURA (1946-71). *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 71, 1208-1215. Retrieved April 18, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147589>
- Hall, S. (2007). 2 'CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORA'. In *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader* (pp. 131-138). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474470674-024>
- Kabir, A.J. (2013). Affect, Body, Place. In Buelens, G., Durrant, S., & Eaglestone, R. (Eds.). *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (1st ed, pp.63-75). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203493106>
- Nayar, Pramod K. (2019). *Post Colonial Literature: An Introduction.* Pearson Education India.
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies myths of homelands and return. *Diaspora*, 1 (1), 83-99. <https://doi:10.1353/dsp.1991.0004>