

# The Politics of Shikhar and Human Being-Creature Correlation in Bengal: A Study of the Politics of the Human Being and Creature Correlation

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## **Abstract**

*In the light of this my paper proposes to revisit South Asian partition historiography to look at the figure of the refugee. I wish to look at the Bengal Partition of 1947 and discern how the East Bengali refugee maneuvers their identity vis-à-vis their claim of ecological and culinary citizenship. Sunanda Sikdar's novel A Life Long Ago, translated by Anchita Ghatak for Penguin and the recipient of the Ananda Puraskar 2010 award, is a memoir that reproduces the anxieties that are part of the division of Bengal and the subsequent interruption, creation, preservation of the notion of citizenship and the instituting and the drawing of the national border that separates India from Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan. Meanwhile, the anthology edited by Bashabi Fraser, Bengal Partition Stories.*

**Keywords:** Politics of care; ecofeminism; culture; food; Bengal; nation; citizenship; gender

## **Introduction**

This longing resurfaces after she left her marital home and settled with the in-laws. Unusual as her desire may sound, the tree remains significant for what it symbolizes. The branches of the tree, spread outwards and laden with leaves, speak of it thriving and majestically blooming with life. On the other hand, it also has a sturdy trunk and roots firmly holding it to the ground and in this the woman finds her lost symbol for rootedness. In avid contrast to the tree, the woman in question has seen herself as a child to refugee parents and therefore at a loss of understanding her roots. Her perpetual bewilderment as to whether she herself is a refugee or a citizen proves to be the starting point for this article.

The woman from Chatterji's story can be taken as an example of how at the heart of the refugee status is embedded a desire for rootedness and for citizenship. It is this primal desire that this paper will address when it proposes to revisit the site of South Asian historiography. For this present enquiry I shall refer to select stories from Bashabi Fraser's anthology, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, Sunanda Sikdar's memoir *A Life Long Ago* (translated by Anchita Ghatak), Bhaswati Ghosh's *Victory Colony 1950* and Madhushree Ghosh's *Khabaar: An Immigrant Journey of Food, Memory, and Family*. This paper aims to look into the figure of the Bengal Partition refugee to enquire how displacement and resettlement is connected with the ecological and culinary citizenship. The gateway to the understanding of the claims of citizenship shall start with a preliminary glance at the gendered discourse of care which becomes the backbone for the twin models of ecological as well as culinary citizenship.

Although Salleh will go on to argue for "activa[ting] resistance—historical *agency*" she would do it within a maternal role summed up in the birthing terminology that she uses, "birthing and suckling labors" (ibid., 21-22). For Salleh, there are two ways in which women are bound within the "intangible obligations" (ibid, 24) of care, with her role within the domestic space and her dedicated adoption of the care work outside home as she attaches herself to social work for the good of the community. These services offered by the women are not remunerated and Salleh would refer to them as "labors of love" (ibid., 25) in a seeming continuation of the domestic charge. Salleh's work has initiated discussions among the scholarly community regarding care work. The site of investigation has thereafter been revisited and scholars have subsequently attempted to establish a counter discourse to domesticity by stressing on how her care work doubles as activism in the public domain too.

In this gendered discourse of care work, scant attention had been provided to women's testimonies as their roles were spoken about and interpreted by privileged theorists. It is with Sherilyn MacGregor's seminal work *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*, that this is taken care of as she interviews and decodes how twenty first century Canadian activists balance both their domestic as well as ecological responsibilities. In her chapter titled "Introduction: Earthcare or Feminist Ecological Citizenship?" MacGregor goes on

to postulate how her work would seemingly cross disciplines, testing out “connections between *women’s caring* and *ecological politics*” (2006, 6). With her emphasis now on the orientation towards unearthing the role of these women as “political subjects”, her work would claim an inclusion in the larger rhetoric of ecological citizenship (ibid., 3). MacGregor’s pieces are written to question the gendered sphere of the ecofeminist landscape that is produced by Salleh and other ecofeminists who have primarily glorified and romanticized care work. MacGregor contests and challenges this romanticization of women’s “unpaid services” (Merchant, 1981, 25). In her works, the women are brought under “an inclusive space for the public performances of political subjectivity that destabilize and resist dominant ideologies of gender.” (MacGregor, 2006, 6) Macgregor also proposes to view the women as “citizens” who seeks solutions to problems and contemporary ecological crisis, and are “future-oriented” .

The domain of care work has provided disproportionate attention to the women, but the men doing care work have been on the margins. Caring, whether domestic or ecological, has been an exceedingly gendered discourse. Having established the structures of care work, I now propose to employ these in the study of the East Bengali refugees who emerged in the context of the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent. The refugee identity and their shift and dislocation become crucial to the understanding of how they attempt to re-root themselves in the context of the host nation. This paper would argue that the East Bengali refugee’s claim to ecological and culinary citizenship destabilizes the homogenizing structures embedded within the gendered sphere of care work. In these texts the East Bengali refugee transgresses the gender binaries of care work in order to become “citizens” (ibid., 77). These “citizens” emerge to be working towards a “sustainable, democratic, and egalitarian society” (ibid., 77- 78). Taking cue from MacGregor, this paper shall also attempt to look into another gendered discourse, that of the culinary and gastronomic identity, which will be explained later in the paper with reference to the works of Anita Mannur.

Literary narratives provide an alternate dimension to the interviews that MacGregor would conduct as part of her research and her desire to look beyond the essentialist nature of women’s participation in the care work which subsists on the private and the public spatial

binaries. MacGregor has claimed that it is time to write back the role of the woman in an attempt to contest her relegation to the private space of the home, where “consumption and provisioning have been defined socially as both apolitical and women’s work” (MacGregor, 2020, 8). When MacGregor selects her sample and sits down to interview the participants, she says she was “interested in listening to the kinds of personal rewards and costs that are involved in juggling activist and caring work” (MacGregor, 2006, 240-41). The reward that the refugee expects is a continuation of their East Bengali identity through culinary sustainability and a protection of their own ecology.

The gendered discourse of care work is also extended to the notion of food production and consumption in the case of the migrant and the refugee. Anita Mannur, speaks of food’s affective value as it becomes “both intellectual and emotional anchor” (Mannur, 2007, 11) to the displaced, and providing them with a reminder of home and of the familiar. The responsibility of cooking and serving proper meals, and of providing care vis-à-vis the kitchen is relegated primarily to the women. Mannur speaks of how, for the migrant and the refugee, eating one’s food makes them nostalgic and long for the “familiar” comforts of the home that they had lost (ibid., 11). The East Bengali refugee who migrates to West Bengal in India becomes a producer and a consumer of “authentic” food that they had consumed back home (ibid., 15). In this, the refugee claims “culinary citizenship” (ibid., 11) that would be “serving both as a placeholder [for the refugee] for marking cultural distinctiveness and as a palliative for dislocation” (ibid., 13). Mannur defines “culinary citizenship” as “a form of affective citizenship which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain subject positions via their relationship to food” (ibid., 13).

The East Bengali refugee became a much-debated figure around the second half of the twentieth century and displacement became a controversial site in citizenship studies. Renowned scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty highlights the varied and ambiguous names and ideas that existed with regards to the figure of the refugee- both in historical and administrative documents as well as individual memoirs and writings. Chakrabarty speaks of the ‘refugee’, as “*sharanarathi*, meaning, literally someone who seeks refuge and protection, *sharan* of a higher

power (including God); and *advastu*, somebody who is homeless.... [the word *vastu* used here to mean home” (1996, 2144) drawing each of these interpretations around a home, a space that is remembered and forgotten, partially lost and recovered. The politics of remembering facilitates the actors in these fictional narratives to be both carers and activists vis-à-vis Macgregor. The problem with the terms, migrant and refugee and the displaced and evacuee, seems to be resolved when scholar Udit Sen proposes to review their positions as burdens as they “claimed to be *both* refugees and citizens of their putative homelands” (Sen U., Introduction, 2018, 3).

Anasua Basu Raychaudhury in ‘Nostalgia of 'Desh', Memories of Partition’ has argued that for the East Bengali refugee, their ‘desh’ is an alternative to the idea of the “traditional homeland” which for the displaced but “remains only in their memory” (2004, 5653). Borrowing Raychaudhury’s term ‘desh’, I argue that these ‘citizen-refugees’ negotiate with the idea of their lost homes and establish meaningful connections by being active participants in the recreation of their ‘*desh*’. It is this active participation that provides them with agency, otherwise denied to them in the officially recorded history. The article also emphasizes their role in contesting the rigid gender dynamics that besets the politics of care by arguing for a more gender fluid notion of care.

### **Partition of Bengal, the Displaced, and the Perceptible Ecological Threat**

In the event of the departure of the British colonial administration from India, and the nation gaining its independence, the celebratory mood was compromised by the administrative decision to draw anew the political international border lines and create two independent nations, India and Pakistan. Pakistan further lay on two different sides of India, as East Pakistan lay in the Bay of Bengal side. This part of Bengal was named East Pakistan, but due to the common ethnicity it continued to be referred to as East Bengal, until it finally gained its independence in 1971. The division of the Hindu majority nation Hindustan or India and the Muslim majority nation Pakistan however saw turbulent times as the masses scrambled to be on the right side of the border. This led to a huge refugee influx on both the Punjab and the Bengal side, but the nature and pattern of the movement remained very different on the two sides. Partition scholar Joya Chatterji talks about how the “profoundly destabilizing factor”

in the guise of food shortages worked against the “new province” of West Bengal (Chatterji, 2007, 156). Chatterji also provides details of how the “scarcity of food” continued to build in the Bengal belt for some time and the Partition only accelerated and exacerbated it (ibid., 156). “Even before partition, rice, the main staple in Bengal, had been in seriously short supply” and “most [of the] fertile paddy fields went to East Pakistan”, thereby creating a crisis that endangered welfare of both the refugee and the citizen (ibid., 156).

It is at this crucial juncture that the article wishes to initiate a reading of the two short stories from Bashabi Fraser’s edited and collected volume, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. Atin Bandyopadhyay’s short story ‘Infidel (Kafir)’ is a narrative that speaks of a loss, not simply of a home, but of one’s livelihood, one’s socio-cultural position and one’s identity. Paran, who flees the land because of the communal tension, is seen taking his flight across the lands to which he once belonged, “his Kirni, and his home” quite reluctantly as Paran was a “farmer[and] he cherished nothing more than the land he ploughed” (Bandyopadhyay, 2008, 168). A cultural and ecological utopia is created when Zabida, who along with Hashim helps Paran plan his escape, comments on “how lush the grass was, how numerous the birds, and how fragrant the greenery of the fields” (ibid., 168). Zabida gives him milk to give him strength for the arduous journey and packs “parched rice into a bundle” for the journey ahead (ibid., 167). Paran is to escape by wading in the water, occasionally coming up for breath, as he would have an inverted pot floating with him, his storage of air. Not only does the story talk about displacement, it also talks about the symbolic importance of the cooking utensils that stand for sustenance and survival. Paran’s story however does not end in his successful crossover, but like the loss of his lands, his story too ends in the loss of his life, ending the question of ecological or cultural citizenship and the reminiscing of the utopic lands.

While Bandyopadhyay’s story speaks about a failure, what it is successful at is a depiction of the ecological threat that stood beside the perceived socio-cultural threat in the figure of the displaced. This figure and the threat to the cultural domestic core, is enacted in the next story. The story ‘A Thorn in the Path (Pather Kanta)’ by Ramesh Chandra Sen speaks of a small company of Parashar, Mohini and their son Jadav, who are among those displaced. This group

can be seen travelling symbolically “from the east to the west” as they retrieved essential elements like “a dirty, worn-out lantern, a pot of salt, a bottle of oil, an utensil or two” and the others part of the travelling group too carried similar things as “utensils, pots, pans and other household items” (Sen, 2008, 256). These utensils are symbolic of the hearth, of homes, of their domestic identity and they intend to carry these so they could replicate their homes on lands they settle. Mohini was reminded of her home, as she spotted a place similar, with the “green garden,” “paddy stacks” and “rows of mango, lemon and *tal* trees” (ibid., 258). This again turns out to be very symbolic as indeed Bengal was known for its cultivable lands and the lush green paddy it offered. Joya Chatterji points out that “the majority of the Hindus of East Bengal who were peasants, sharecroppers or agricultural labourers” (Chatterji, 2007, 116) realized it was a challenge to relocate as the lands on which their homes were built were their only possessions. Chatterji further highlights that a small portion of these “had by tradition migrated seasonally into West Bengal to bring in the harvest or to help transplantrice” (ibid., 116) as they were compensated better for their labour here than they would be back home.

This walking group arrives at a place where they “see pots full of rice and daal being boiled over small stoves” (Sen R. C., 2008, 263), giving the members of this group an opportunity to interact with each other. While there is a brief exchange between a woman named Kumudini and Mohini over the caste they belong to, these caste borders would very soon be transgressed. These women decide that feeding the ailing Jadav is a priority for them and thus food supplies are exchanged for milk or barley so he could be fed and he would find the strength to complete the journey. The rice that boils on the stove attracts a small group of hungry children and they gather round hoping the food would be shared. Kumudini feels the need to distribute the food provisions among the children, caring not only for her own family but even those who do not belong to her immediate family. Parashar and Mohini also meet a man in the travelling group of migrants who was called Patit Pavan and was found “carrying some money to buy some land, and also a pitcher full of seeds. He had plans of buying and cultivating a rice field once he reached Hindustan” (ibid., 260). This is indeed symbolic as these migrants

continue to have a deeper connection with the soil and wish to be cultivators on either side of the border. Their stories then are one of temporary disillusionment at the loss of lands and livelihood, but also one of hope that they would be key players in sustaining their cultural and social identity as well as the balance they struck with land. The seeds they carry would be their reminders of a lost home, a lost livelihood, at the same time that it would give them an opportunity to claim citizenship rights as they plant the seeds and hope to be farmers again in these new lands.

What this section significantly establishes is the ecological threat that could be perceived in the Bengal belt because of its agricultural lands and how the political international borders created a tension with the loss of lands and livelihoods, as well as displacement. Swati Sengupta Chatterjee provides the statistics of a survey conducted during the years 1949-50 that reveals that “the refugees were mainly peasants, artisans and lower middle class people” who had thoughtfully decided to migrate towards their “economic freedom” (Chatterjee, 2014-2015, 83). There was another wave of migration from the 1950s that was the result primarily of “communal violence” and this time the migrants were composed “mainly [of] agricultural labourers who now came over to West Bengal”. Reading these stories from Bashabi Fraser’s collection then provides us with an opportunity to look specifically into the meaning of the land and what it means to people who live connected to it. Examining these literary texts furnishes the scholar with an opportunity of “unearthing the sediments of history that lie hidden in the topography through which the people travel” as Debjani Sengupta would say (Sengupta, 2016, 28). These stories about the East Bengali refugees then are highlighted so the farmer, the peasant, the cultivator of the soil and anyone who is connected with the soil is no longer marginalized in the narrative folds of the Partition history and their stories provide us with “various ways of representation and resistance to dominant discourses” (ibid., 28).

### **Towards Ecological and Culinary Citizenship and Sustainability**

The dominant discourse which this article contests with the focus on the narrative history of the refugee is that of the “victim and the victor” (Sen U., 2014, 37) stereotype created by the history of rehabilitation and ration in the official parlance. The state government and the role of the



administrative departments in the allocation of ration to the extra mouths as well as the apportionment of lands for settlement render the refugee as a victim whose existence is predicated upon the officially sanctioned share. But the literary texts provide an alternative reading whereby these refugees are rendered powerful, with a voice and agency whereby they create their own homes, the nostalgic 'desh' on the land they are forced to live in. This section of the article is instrumental in designing how the women engage in fathoming the borders of their homes, of their 'desh' through the acts of care and activism, together wrestling towards an ecological and a culinary citizenship, the latter explained later in the article when the discussion is about culinary heritage and legacy.

She decides to leave the camp and step in the making of a colony for themselves on a land that they forcefully occupied and there they maintained "communal" "camaraderie" as well as "economic prudence" by their cooking together. (ibid., 108) Her ecological activism and responsibility are heightened once they move into the colony, as they go back to their foraging, a technique by which plants and tubers and fruits from the wilderness are collected for subsistence, as she is seen usually "fetch[ing] some of the greens" they had planted by the pond for their meals (ibid., 112). Amala also relays how the colony relies on their "resident fisherman" who would bring in their catch of "small fish" to be had with their meals. (ibid., 113) Nitai, one of the colony residents from Khulna district, had originally descended from a family of farmers and he immediately "work[ed] his magic on it" and planted sweet potatoes and engages in "small-scale farming" (ibid., 139). Amala emerges to be a "citizen refugee" (Sen U., Introduction, 2018, 3) as she wrests the power of speaking for her from the youth volunteers. She ensures that she provides for herself and for the ones she has taken charge of, and refuses to survive on the government dole. Her refusal to do so emboldens and empowers her as she stakes her rightful claim on citizenship.

In Mannur's notion of citizenship, she does not create a gendered sphere as is commonly understood with care work. Rather she merges the private and the public sphere when she finds care within and without the kitchen in the refugee home. The literary texts discussed find

the refugee as a conscious political actor, performing his or her duties towards restoring, sustaining ecological and culinary balance and through their everyday performance, affectively becoming a citizen of the homes lost and the ones recreated. On a similar note, MacGregor's research acknowledges the fact that bringing care work into the political domain "involves the self-reflexive creation of new political subjectivities and new knowledges that disrupt gender constructs and gender relations" (2004, 66-67). The final culinary memoir that this article would consider brings together this gender ambiguity that lies at the heart of both ecological and culinary citizenship that is claimed through care and a practice of sustainability.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion then, I wish to reiterate the fact that Sherilyn MacGregor rightly places a call towards the dismantling of binaries within the dominant discourse, which highlight the "darkside of women's moral responsibility to care" (2004, 67) by making it more participatory in nature and thrusting the social actors and performers into a gender fluid territory of citizenship. MacGregor is aware of the pitfalls of calling forth for a project which dismantles the gender binaries and thus goes with a "generic identity of citizen women" as "agents who can politicize cultural notions of femininity and maternity and disrupt the ways they are implicated in social, economic, and political structures" (ibid., 79). In an addition to existing scholarship, this paper's examination of the East Bengali refugee finds both men and women as carers, both ecological and culinary, as they work towards the making of "sustainable communities" and showcasing "green notions of self-reliance" (ibid., 78). The other claim that MacGregor sounds but does not pursue is that of "a degendering of care" (ibid., 79) and this in the article is where Anita Mannur steps in with the guarantee of affective participation in the recreation of the lost homeland or 'desh', completed through the culinary nostalgia. The East Bengali refugee no longer remains to be seen as a victim within Partition historiography but finds their own voices through active roles in making individual and collective identities within the nationalist discourse.

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