

A Critical Reading of Narayan Sanyal's *Bakultala P L Camp*

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While there has been substantial deliberations on borders and refugees and associated trauma upholding a connection between new frontiers and its outcome in the form of refugees and the never-ending humanitarian crisis. But what remains unnoticed is the settlement of the refugee population through the establishment of makeshift camps or colonies slowly turning into a permanent one literally, figuratively and psychologically. The camp becomes a nation of individuals whose identity is fractured and the walls of the camp change for them into a border creating a border within a border. Narayan Sanyal, an acclaimed writer from West Bengal who served the Government of West Bengal as a settlement officer at various such camps set up for them discussed this issue immediately after the brutal bifurcation of the erstwhile British India's Bengal province in 1947 through his novel like *Bakultala P.L. Camp*. Through this work, Sanyal presented his investigation of the victims of forced migration showcasing in detail the poor living conditions existing in those refugee camps lacking basic amenities, economic exploitation of the male refugees and sexploitation of their female counterparts. The methodology employed for documenting the observations for this research will be transdisciplinary and multi-layered including textual analysis, then historical contextualisation and lastly will be founded upon the Freudian-Caruthian model of Trauma theory. A critical reading of this novel churns out the fact that how the victims themselves are reframing their own identity with respect to borders of new India in general and the specific camps in particular.

Keywords: Narayan Sanyal, *Bakultala P L Camp*, Partition, Trauma.

Communal animosity and imperial approach of the British Bureaucracy bifurcated India, Cyprus, Ireland, Palestine etc. under English occupation. Compared to Cyprus and Ireland, India's division was a catastrophe in every sense. Millions died due to riot, millions became victims of rape, gangrape, loot, arson, physical torture. The victims who somehow didn't die became refugees in their own country in rehabilitation colonies or in makeshift camps. India woke to a fractured freedom in the early hours of 15th August 1947 making a section of its own citizens homeless, rootless and with an unexpected, altered identity. Independence from British rule and the Partition of British India thus became synonymous and transformed into two sides of the same coin. The narratives of nation building coincided with that of the nuances of loot, arson, riot, slaughter, rape, gang rape etc. Both the recreation of Partition in art and literature and media and the critical discourses

of the ruination together make up the interdisciplinary field of Partition Studies taking shape in the recent past through critical and intellectual enquiry to study the root of hatred and violence in South Asia involving various disciplines like Literature, Psychology, Sociology, History, Political Science, Folklore, Fine Art, Media, Economics etc. The very same disciplines which try to decipher the phenomenon of psychological trauma, its echo in language and literature along with the part played by memory in a cross-disciplinary approach constitute the academic arena of Trauma Studies.

Even though the initial years after the calamity of 1947, studies over the pogrom progressed cautiously but particularly in the last three decades, critical enquiries on Partition of India are increasing more than ever parallelly with the researches on literary trauma as a well defined theoretical framework

initiated in the early 1990s with a multitude of literary works being published including narratives of victims and testimonies of the witnesses. It's the prime time to categorise this pool of texts into sub genres not only on the basis of existing classification of the pertinent texts along timeline or language or textual format but with respect to the centrality of the theme; like lamenting the forceful displacement or nostalgia for ancestral home or colony fiction (Sengupta 117). Three novels on the after effects of Partition authored by Narayan Sanyal including Bakultala P L Camp, the novel under discussion of this paper falls under the genre of colony fiction. Colony fiction can be defined as the body of literary works where the refugee camp or colony is the principal motif to communicate the manner in which the post Partition refugee crisis was viewed and depicted by the litterateurs which must be re-investigated to grasp the truth value of fictional reality.

For the purpose of re-examination, critically reading the texts is the fundamental step. An initial reading throws the light on the central theme of the text and its plot emanating the core idea behind the narrative. It is the process of critical reading which helps the reader to understand the literary technicalities associated with the composition of the particular text, the nuances of the author's craft and it also brings a change of perspective. Similarly, a critical reading Partition of India in 1947 with respect to its literary reflections is vital for the contemporary society which is suffering from hatred, violence and distrust as it will vindicate the creative encounters to the officially accepted statistics, provide a

platform for the marginalized, unsung and unwept, decode silence, decipher the profound essence of border, identity, memory etc. Social scientist cum Professor Ashish Nandy pointed out in his forward 'The Days of Hyena: A Foreword' to the collection of short stories translated into English from Bangla edited by Prof. Debjani Sengupta entitled Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals; " That is why to look at them is to explore the derecognised, contraband selves we live with and to re-examine one's cherished ideological and ethical moorings. Few have the stomach to do so." (Sengupta xi). This essay is an academic effort for this process of re-examination through a critical reading of Narayan Sanyal's Bakultala P L Camp.

Narayan Sanyal needs a detailed introduction as it will help us to understand the paratextual component of this novel, moreover he is still lost in the oblivion among both the popular readership and the critical intellectual circle. He is himself a witness to the horrors of Partition and penned down the first writing which was published in 1955, within eight years of the bifurcation, that is none other than this novel in this discussion. By profession, a civil engineer and was a government employee who was deputed as a settlement supervisor in refugee camps in newly carved out West Bengal, group A state of the Republic of India. He was also sent as an overseer to the colonies of displaced people in the Dandakaranya region (as a part of the Dandakaranya Refugee Rehabilitation Project) of the erstwhile Central Provinces of India. Though his writing career started with the publication of a play titled Muskil Asan, Bakultala P L Camp is his first

novel. He composed this fiction at a time when his contemporaries didn't focus on the man-made yet preventable tragedy for which there doesn't exist any clear reasons and upon which detailed studies are direly needed. Although he wrote on a wide array of topics ranging from children's literature to science fictions but is mostly known for his detective series entitled Kaantay Kaantay featuring a detective named Prafulla Kumar Basu famously called P.K. Basu.

Till his death he wrote 140 novels. Chronologically, it would be a long list but thematically, his writings traverse eighteen different territories, namely; children's literature, writings for the teenaged, literature about non human beings, science based fictions, novels on fine arts, architecture and sculpture, travel literature, memoir, psychological writings, crime fiction and detective novels especially the already mentioned Kaantay (thorn) series where we find a Barrister turned private detective P.K. Basu, textual writings on engineering as he was an acclaimed engineer, research oriented essays, historical and mythological novels, biographies, a play which he later withdrew from further re-publication, social novels and few essay collections. This information might make the reader assume him to be a professional writer which he wasn't. Writing his observations and experiences was his ideology which is why he chose fiction as the literary platform as it provided him the necessary interface between fiction of his creative imagination and raw facts. Moreover, there also exists administrative and legal compulsions as a gazetted officer of a

government to crank out fact based nonfictional accounts.

While most of Partition writings focused on forceful displacement, lamented leaving ancestral home forever, described the horrors of communal animosity, and the cost of the hasty decision. Sanyal focused on the plight of those human beings who came to be known as 'refugees' and their temporary shelter termed as camp or colony.

This novel also heralds a sub genre within Partition literature, i.e., Colony Fiction (Sengupta 2015) if one follows a thematic remapping of such texts into three distinct sub forms; Partition writings which laments the catastrophe, partition literature which arouses nostalgia of the ancestral land left forever and the last sub category of narratives of the refugees dying in makeshift settlement camps, P.L. camps, colonies etc. Sanyal's writings especially this novel comes under the third category as he is focused on refugees and their current precarious condition which shows signs of improvement at a snail's pace fighting disunity among the refugees themselves, political backstabbing, corruption, misuse of Power, governmental non cooperation, legal complications etc.

With the declaration of Partition Horror Remembrance Day on 14th of August by Government of India and inter disciplinary researches on Trauma theory challenging the Eurocentric point of view of the founding theoreticians of modern literary trauma model (read Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman), lately there has been a surge in the researches on Partition of India and more specifically on Partition literature

alone which gets reflected in few articles discussing the Partition writings of Narayan Sanyal like Asima Sahoo's Narayan Sanyaler Upponnase Udbastu Samasya (Refugee issues in the novels of Narayan Sanyal) published in Bangla in Trisangam International Referred Journal where the research scholar followed the categorisation compiled by The Dey's Publishing clubbing his three different novels under the same umbrella term the way author Narayan Sanyal stated in the preface of his another novel Aranyadandak. (Sahoo 298) . Another article jointly written by Juthika Biswas and Ranita Chakraborty Dasgupta titled Bakultala P.L. Camp and Victory Colony 1950: A Palimpsestuous Study of Dalit Refugees' Reclaimed Space for the journal South Asian Review (May 2025) selectively highlighted the plight of only Dalit refugees to meet the objective of their study making a detailed analysis of Sanyal's writings a need of the day as the first Bangla novel on Partition and that is also before the development of modern literary trauma theory in the 1990s.

This novel takes the reader to one such camp although in order to generalise the camp, avoid political colourisation and create a fictional reality, he named it as Bakultala P L Camp where Bakul is the Indian Medlar tree or Bulletwood tree (*Mimusops elengi* is its scientific name) producing beautiful and fragrant flowers and Tala meaning the shade created by the canopy of this tree. These kinds of shady trees were once the place where the old and the aged used to spend their leisure, a cool place for sharing daily life, a calm place where the community knowledge used to be passed by the elders to the young ones now

became a tranquil site for the homeless Sharanarthis. Moreover, this kind of shady tree also transcends the refugees to their homeland they left where this sort of a tree acts as the passage of memory. (Malhotra xxx). P stands for Permanent and L is the abbreviation for Liability. The state sponsored apathy is clearly visible in the name itself as the administration views the living victims of Partition as liability and not as asset or as simply as human beings Bakultala P L Camp³ (Sanyal 12). This novel is a critique of Farcical rehabilitation the refugees received against the promises of civility they deserve as citizens. As a government official in duty it was legally impossible for Sanyal to express this administrative impassivity compelling him to take the route of autofiction to uphold the narratives of the rootless.

Just like the joy of independence turned into melancholy of the Partition, Sanyal named this novel as Bakultala P L Camp which is paradoxical. The romantic adventurous images of a camp which can appear in the mind of an unknown reader gets shockwaves when one reads through the novel and gets a clear picture of what a camp for refugees looks like. Moreover the title of the novel also paints a bleak image contrary to the illusive claims made by the administration and the erstwhile polity. Bakul is a native flowering plant which is globally known for its for its white flowers and yellow bullet shaped fruits along with its fragrance but the seeds of this plants are harmful, marking a sharp contrast with the imageries of the plant asserting that the camp like the novel is a Pandora's box full with pain and anguish.

Here in this novel, readers will find Characters like assistant engineer Writabrata Basu who is the co narrator of the story along with the author, contractor Singhji or overseer Suren Sengupta and Jiben Kar who all might not be real but their character traits are. Written in the form of an autofiction where Narayan Sanyal fictionalised the young author (himself) into Writabrata can be adjudged as trauma writings as though it speaks of the resilience of the displaced and the compassion of the author for them. In order to paint a realistic sketch, Sanyal created a character named Mrs. Basu, engineer Writabrata's wife who supplied the author a multitude of anecdotes which when joined, created the whole novel organically. The story goes that a young engineering graduate got his first job as an assistant engineer in a makeshift settlement camp created for the refugees who all were displaced by the communal riot during Partition of India in 1947 owing to Radcliffe Line redrawing the homeland of the Bengalis. The novel is actually a reminiscence of a wide range of experiences Writabrata encountered as a government employee, colleague towards the members of the camp administration, Bengali and above all as a human being with humane while fulfilling his responsibilities as a settlement officer supervising the infrastructure development, building new shelters for the ever-increasing refugee population and maintenance of the existing buildings to make it livable.

Sanyal termed the displaced population as former humans (Bhootapurba Manush) given the sub-human conditions of the camps and the treatment they are receiving

from the surrounding and administration. He even dedicated the fiction to these victims of the harsh reality owing to the Indian Independence Act. His style of scientific reporting is clearly visible in all his writings, observant, sharp, witty, unapologetic and unbiased. Moving drastically away from the sentimentality associated with Bangla literature, especially Bangla novels gives him the room to offer the readers a bleak, realistic account of the misery and the repercussions and the reconstruction of both identity and life especially through this novel. The Camp serves as a metaphor for confinement, a forced improvised existence characterized by worsening living conditions. The portrayal of an unnamed aged person who cannot properly pronounce the word refugee becomes representative as how deplorable living conditions cramped the speech of the refugees populace highlighting proper or standard utterance is an outcome of living a dignified life which the camp residents have lost.

Sanyal's intent was not to manufacture trauma induced sympathy in the psyche of the reader which is why he also adds the picture of desperate attempts by the refugee women to make thongas (paper packets made up of old newspapers) as a way towards survival to the collage he painted of the refugee camp. The novel also acts as a narrative of reconstruction by joining the filaments of fiction to that of the fragmented lives of the refugees, an essential feature of postmodern literature which is a key outcome of this critical reading.

Unlike his peers joining the bandwagon of nostalgia and sentimentalism,

he by remaining grounded even within the contours of a fictional framework, deliberated the issue of Partition-driven forced migration and the resultant refugee crisis analytically at a time (*Bakultala P L Camp* was published for the first time in 1955) when there was a bewildered silence among the practitioners of literature in Bangla making it into a seminal text of Partition literature and colony fiction both. The charisma of a novelist lies in the fact that they maintain a fine chemistry among the story, characters, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern and rhythm as stated by E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (Forster 75) which in turn makes the novel timeless, focuses on human nature and its conversational style turns the reading of the novel into a performance establishing a strong relationship among the author, narrator and the reader.

Partition literature in Bangla begins with Narayan Sanyal but his shift to other topics doesn't signal its closure as he opened the door wide enough both for his compeers and future generation writers to experiment with writing itself specifically novel and more specifically Partition literature. His *Bakultala P L Camp* should be treated as a landmark as it was not another Partition based emotionally charged fiction but an integration of literary trauma as a theoretical background and the tenets of the Great Divide of Bengal as its praxis.

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