

Muhajir* Narratives of Homes Lost and Found: Nostalgia and Belonging in the Novels of Intizar Husain and the Columns of *The Daily Pasban

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The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan (comprising two ‘wings’ on the west and east of British India) is one of the most colossal and significant redrawing of national borders in recent history. Marked by unprecedented violence and displacement, India’s emergence from colonialism and the birth of Pakistan have spawned a messy history of strained geopolitical relations, perennially fraught borders, liminal borderlands, communal identity-based politics, and a long trail of personal narratives of divided families and fractured identities. This collective experience of a continuing, mnemohistorical sense of dislocation that haunts the narrative of postcolonial South Asia is somewhat encapsulated by what Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar has called the ‘long partition’ (Zamindar 2007).

Central to this idea of the ‘long partition’ is the experience of losing and renegotiating belonging. Does national belonging confine itself to national borders? Is the homeland always congruous to the nation? How do those who have chosen to migrate or been displaced come to terms with the reallocation of national identity? And finally, what are the different meanings and significance attached to ‘home’ in the context of Partition-related migration and violence? The historiography of Partition initially occupied itself primarily with approaching it as a political event with largely political causes and consequences. A shift in this approach occurred when the lens of enquiry was refocused on its protracted and continuing human cost using oral testimonies and memory. However, the questions as mentioned above and their implications figure most potently and organically in what has been called Partition literature: the corpus of literary and creative writing on and around Partition.

This essay looks at how the themes of displacement, loss of home and homeland, and the notion of a never-ending state of exile for those who crossed the refashioned national borders in 1947 find articulation in Partition literature. This is done by focusing on the works of Intizar Husain (1923–2016): one of the most renowned and prolific Urdu writers of Pakistan

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born in India. He wrote extensively on the long-standing psychological trauma attached to the act of *hijrat* or migration for *muhajirs*: Indian Muslims who had ‘chosen’ Pakistan in the wake of Partition.¹ This paper especially analyses his novels *Basti* (Settlement) and *Aage Samandar Hai* (The Sea Lies Ahead). Together they cover a formative and vastly significant period of the subcontinent’s recent history from Partition in 1947 through the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and its aftermath and the tumultuous, violent decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Pakistan ridden with intense ethnic strife,² seen through eyes of *muhajir* protagonists caught in the vortex of these events.³ Simultaneously, the paper shall look at the Urdu newspaper *The Daily Pasban* that was published from Dhaka from 1948 till 1969 and served as a mouthpiece of sorts for the *muhajirs* in East Pakistan who, through its columns, observed and commented on the state of affairs in Pakistan and the condition of migrant Indian Muslims in the province.⁴ It also presented a platform for *muhajirs* themselves to reflect upon their hopes and aspirations for, and disappointments with, the land they claimed was built on the foundation of their sacrifices. Through a comparative examination of how the ideas of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ are evoked and discussed in Husain’s novels and *The Daily Pasban*, the article locates the overlaps, intersections and the divergences in the ways the themes of lament for a lost home, the longing for return and the desire to somehow reproduce it in the ‘new’ homeland in both.

Stuck in the Middle of ‘Then’ and ‘Now’: Navigating Nostalgia in Partition Literature

The identity of a migrating people oscillates between two sets of socio-cultural systems. The first belongs to the community or the nation from where they have migrated and the second to the one they have migrated to. The interactions and the resultant conflict between these two sets of inherent and acquired identities constitute the cultural no man’s land, the landscape of diasporic writing. ‘In this space lies buried a double treasure trove ... of memory and amnesia, of success and failures, of tears and smiles. In short, here is the lived experience – of not one but two communities’ (Sharma 2006, xiii). This fractured sense of belonging and alienation is a literary trope that runs through most diasporic fiction. Hence the theme of migration and all that it entails – a sense of loss, dislocation, disbelief, negation, anger – pervades almost all literary representations of Partition. The other theme palpable in the genre is nostalgia for the lost homeland, a deep, all-consuming longing for return and the sense of being in exile in the new homeland. This is especially evident in Partition literature that focuses on *muhajirs* and their migrations across the newly created borders in 1947 through both an emphasis on the long aftermaths of the actual dislocation and an exploration of the psychological impact of choosing to move or stay.

The 1990s may be designated as the period in which Partition literature, as we know it today, attained a coherence of sorts with the appearance of ambitious anthologies that brought together English translations of a disparate corpus of literary writings on the event, written in

different languages (Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali) and at different periods (some contemporaneous with, others written since Partition).⁵ According to Jason Francisco, the significance of the preparation and appearance of these collections lies beyond the fact that they attested to a resurgence of literary interest in Partition (Francisco 1996, 228). These anthologies, and other translated works of fiction centring around Partition, facilitated a discussion on the possibly redemptive capacity of literature for a reconciliation with a problematic past, in that acknowledgement is perhaps the first step towards recovery (ibid., 250).

The transformative potential of Partition literature in healing old wounds and mending fraught inter-communal relationships that Francisco talks about is inherently connected to the sense of nostalgia for a time gone by and place left behind that runs through much of the creative writing centred on Partition. The corollary to the idea that Partition created a pulsating rift among Hindus and Muslims in postcolonial South Asia that was both captured and mended by this literature, is that there once existed a time where this rift did not exist or at least did not manifest in such a colossal way. And hence, the longing for a return to and/or re-creation of this seemingly idyllic past in the more strained reality of the present, for those who lived through the dislocations of 1947, finds frequent utterance in Partition literature. It most intimately informs fictions that focus on the experience of migration, the choices it entailed, and the trajectories it forged in post-Partition South Asia for Muslims who undertook the *hijrat* from India to the then newly created Pakistan. In fact, as has been pointed out by Faridah Zaman, ‘Lament and loss run riverine through literature on the Muslims of South Asia’ (Zaman 2017, 627). Hence, while Partition and the rupture it caused is central to the nostalgia evoked in *muhajir* narratives captured in the literature of the time, a sense of loss and lament for other pasts and other remembered or imagined utopias pervades much of the literary corpus of the Muslim subcontinent (627–628). Zaman argues that the Muslim political register from the early twentieth century was inherently imbued with a certain aura of melancholia and nostalgia ‘in as much as it meditated on history, on the passage of time and on the fleeting nature of the present’ (631). However, a longing for the recovery of this past or a return to another place was not a part of such articulations (ibid.).

And yet, a desire for return, a continuous sense of being in exile, a conflicted, disoriented relationship with the present, and a despair at the possibilities the future holds form intrinsic parts of the *muhajir* experience as articulated in the works of literature they produced or the ones they are the protagonists of. Hence Qurratulain Hyder, in her most celebrated work – *Aag Ka Darya* (River of Fire),⁶ writes about being in a constant state of ‘travel’ so that ages, epochs and centuries create a time loop through which the characters of the novel forge notions of community and belonging. As the narrative traverses a temporal span 2400 years of the subcontinent’s history, the text ‘invites readers to think about plurality not merely as an absence of unity, but as a constitutive feature of the ways in which the processes of remembering constitute and form social connections’ (Haider 2018; see also Anjum 2016).

Joginder Paul's more recent novella *Khwabaru* (Sleepwalkers) (1990), set in the city of Karachi in Pakistan many years after Partition, 'focuses on "mojahirs" from Lucknow who construct a mnemonic space by constructing a simulacrum of pre-Partition Lucknow' (Ghosh 2019, 2). In this case, the desire to return to the original place of belonging is channelled into a psychological reconstruction of that place so that it superimposes the present as the refugee subject 'sleepwalks' through this conjured space.

Intizar Husain, while still engaging deeply with the themes of loss and longing caused by Partition in his writing, approached the upheavals of 1947 and the migrations it set in motion as an opportunity for the Muslims of the subcontinent to find not only a 'sense of direction and purpose, a present and a hope for a future, but also a past, or, at least, the desire to know their past' (Memon 1980, 378). The act of migration or *hijrat*, for Husain, is central to actualising this possibility for the rediscovery of the Muslim self even though it leaves behind a legacy of intense trauma and suffering. At the same time, much as the experience of this migration to Pakistan underlines the relationship of the *muhajirs* with the new homeland, Husain, in his writing as well as interviews that he gave over the years, also emphasised that he did not consider this migration unprecedented or singularly exceptional. A theme that he returns to often in his work is that displacement and exile are, in fact, recurrent historical occurrences in the history of Muslims across time and space. They bring with themselves each time the possibilities for a creative rejuvenation along with (or even *because of*) the resultant hardship and suffering.

In that sense, the work of Intizar Husain and his views on Partition differed from the other luminaries of Partition literature and especially those belonging to the Progressive Writers' Movement.⁷ For the latter, Partition was a brutal and tragic disruption of the syncretic traditions enshrined in the lived ethos of South Asia. The fiction and poetry that emerged from this movement were primarily occupied with the violence that marked Partition and the bestiality of human nature that it revealed (Akhtar and Zaidi, 2006). On the other hand, the sense of lament that runs through Husain's work is for the failure of the new nation-state to capitalise on the opportunities its creation heralded and to honour the sacrifices it was built upon. The figure of the *muhajir* here is not merely living in the past but is continuously straddling the present and the past with the awareness that the current state of rootlessness and exile constitutes a small part of the metanarrative of history that has seen other pasts and other narratives of displacement. Hence while Husain has been critiqued for his obsession with the past, the nostalgia that pervades his writing is one that is inherently rooted in the present as well as forward-looking in many respects.

This kind of engagement with the past through the lens of nostalgia has been defined by Svetlana Boym, literally expounding the word's etymological roots. It comprises the Greek roots *notos* or 'return home' and *algia* meaning 'longing', which together form the two elements of the concept: 'restorative' and 'reflective' respectively (Boym 2001, xiii, xviii).

Combining these two aspects, Boym defines nostalgia as a ‘sentiment of loss and displacement but ... [which] is also a romance with one’s fantasy’ (Boym 2007, 7). Hence, rather than a binary of then/now there is a symbiotic duality to the experience of nostalgia that functioned through a ‘superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life’ (ibid.). This duality, according to Boym, plays out in three ways:

First, nostalgia is not ‘antimodern’; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it ... not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible ... Second, nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time ... Third, nostalgia, in my view, is not always retrospective, it can be prospective as well. The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future ... Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory (8–9).

This interplay between restorative and reflective nostalgia, as it enfolds through these three layers, intimately informs two of Intizar Husain’s most celebrated novels – *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* – as they give voice to and make sense of *muhajir* subjectivities against the backdrop of some of the most turbulent and formative years of the history of the subcontinent, particularly Pakistan. The section that follows presents an analysis of these two novels so as to bring out the complexities of the *muhajir* narratives vis-à-vis this simultaneity and fluidity of the experiences of loss of home and ‘rebuilding’ it anew, lament and hope and displacement and settlement filtered through the prism of the Partition experience.

Deconstructing Nostalgia in *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead*

Both *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* are set in two major cities in Pakistan, at two different points in its post-1947 history, with *muhajir* protagonists grappling with two simultaneously running but interconnected conflicts. First, it is the memory of the place they have left behind, the impact that this decision has made on their lives, and the extent to which that time and place in their individual and collective histories can/should be reconstructed in their present. And second, the characters in both novels engage with the stark reality of present-day Pakistan, the processes and trajectories that brought it to that stage, and the impact it has on their own everyday existence in these cities. In *Basti*, the city that forms the novel’s setting remains unnamed, referred to only as ‘the city’. However, from the landmarks described in the text, it is evident that the city is Lahore (which is also the city to which Intizar Husain migrated after Partition). *The Sea Lies Ahead*, on the other hand, is set in Karachi. The two novels, though not technically a sequel/prequel of each other, cover an almost sequential swathe of the history of post-1947 Pakistan. *Basti*, which was originally published in 1979,

begins in pre-Partition in India in the towns of Rupnagar and Vyaspur⁸ somewhere in Uttar Pradesh before shifting to ‘the city’ in Pakistan. It covers the decades of the 1950s and 1960s up till the Liberation War of 1971, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh (from former East Pakistan). The narrative of *The Sea Lies Ahead* (1995) picks up a few years later to cover the decades of the 1980s and 1990s in Karachi against the backdrop of intense ethnic and religious strife in the city.⁹ However, here again, the story moves in flashbacks: as much as it remains in the present, so it traverses the pre-Partition times, and once again, the town of Vyaspur makes an appearance as the original native place in pre-Partition India that continues to have a haunting presence in the mind and life of the narrator long after he left it. Further, true to Husain’s style of magic realism, the narrative structure of both the novels oscillates between the past and the present, time and space, history and lore, reality and mythology as time moves in an almost cyclical manner; the more it passes, the more it contracts.

This non-linear structure of the narrative is a literary style that Husain employs for both novels. It is crucial to his interpretation and understanding of Partition, its place in history, and its impact on the life of the subcontinent. In writing about the state of exile and the sense of disorientation it embedded upon the worldview of those who undertook the migration to Pakistan – as something that has resonances with other times in history, even mythology, and that it might come again – the author blurs both the temporal and spatial boundaries between the ‘local’ and the ‘universal’ that Boym talks about. *The Sea Lies Ahead* begins as the narrator, Jawad, is in the middle of a conversation with his friend Majju Bhai. The novel’s starting point is actually the middle of a story: that of a big palm tree that originally belonged to the sands of Arabia but was now planted and flourishing in Andalusia. Upon being admonished by an impatient Majju Bhai about stumbling into this meandering story so far away from the conversation they were having, the narrator wonders how all stories might actually be open-ended and part of ones that came before and after them:

But surely, there must have been some talk of trees which must have led to the topic of trees? On the other hand, if you look at it like this no one can ever tell how any talk on any subject began in the first place. Because there is always some talk on some subject before the present subject ... Isn’t it strange that we start and where we end our talk? But does it ever end? That is the problem though (Husain 2015, 1).

A similar sense of the interconnectedness of things and histories and the vagabond nature of the stories¹⁰ pervades the opening pages of *Basti*. The protagonist Zakir is in the middle of a flashback set in pre-Partition India. He is a child listening to his father telling the biggest of all stories: that of the creation and the end of the world. The question, ‘Maulana, when will Doomsday come?’, is answered in a sequence of interlinked yet disparate ‘whens’:

After one ‘when’ a second ‘when’, after a second ‘when’ a third ‘when’. A strange maze of ‘whens’! The ‘whens’ that had passed away, the ‘whens’ that were yet to come. What ‘whens’ and ‘whens’ Bhagat-ji recalled, what ‘whens’ and ‘whens’ were illumined in Abba Jan’s imagination! The world seemed to be an endless chain of ‘whens’. When and when and when ... (Husain 2007, 7)

Hence, while the story unfolding in both the novels is essentially about the lives of its *muhajir* protagonists as they navigate the memory of leaving ‘home’ and seek it again in Pakistan, it is also simultaneously about the universal nature of exile and the lessons that need to be drawn from history. In *Basti*, through the course of the novel, various characters express their disappointment and disillusionment with the state of things in contemporary Pakistan. There are frequent and recurring descriptions of shootings, violence, curfews and the disruption of everyday life in the city on account of unruly rallies and the divisive rhetoric of leaders and politicians. Abba Jan’s (Zakir’s father) friend Khvajah Sahib laments the decay and destruction afflicting the nation but the maulana, who has seen and read about other periods of comparable decline and turmoil, interprets the current situation as a time of continuity rather than a rupture in the *longue durée* of history: “‘But, Maulana, now what times are coming upon the Muslims?’” ... Abba Jan said gravely, “‘Khvajah Sahib! In this world there have lived one hundred twenty-four thousand Prophets, and has the world changed?’” (60)

A similar character exists in *The Sea Lies Ahead* in the figure of Mirza Sahib, an elderly *muhajir* who constantly dwells upon the trauma of his *hijrat* to Pakistan. Towards the end of the novel, he visits a slowly recuperating Jawad and expresses a desire to pass on to the afterlife, tired of living through and seeing all he has seen. What begins as a tired tirade against the state of Karachi and Pakistan turns into a reflection on the pattern that informs the devastation of the present and how it can be traced to ones that came before it. Mirza Sahib carries within him the deep sorrow of leaving Delhi and of the lost opportunity that Pakistan became even as it was built on the foundations of this suffering. And yet, invoking Cordoba, Granada and Andalusia, he locates the afflictions of the present on a much larger canvas of the past and on the inability of Muslims to learn from their own tragic history:

Jawad Miyan, this isn’t only about the present times. The Muslims have never done good to themselves ... Fact is, Jawad Miyan, we have been stung by our own history. We are not scared of anyone, we are only scared of our own history ... if only someone were to derive a lesson (Husain 2015, 305–306).

The second point raised by Boym, regarding the nature of nostalgia as something that might appear to be the longing for a particular place, but which may actually be better understood as the longing for a different time, is reflected in the two novels in the ways they touch upon the themes of return and reconstruction. The spectre of the place left behind in India and the relationship of the various characters with the idea of returning to it in some way is intrinsic

to both the novels. Older characters in *Basti*, such as Zakir's Abba and Ammi Jan and his friend Afzal's grandmother, hold on to the hope of returning to that 'home' they left behind. However, this is a hope unattached to romantic aspirations of an actual physical return. The more they talk about it, the more its impossibility is made apparent. This is evident in the conversation that Zakir's parents have about the keys to their old mansion in Rupnagar. It had a storeroom in which was stowed away the family's most prized heirlooms when they left Rupnagar, hoping they would someday return to reclaim them. The keys to the storeroom Abba Jan had saved and passed on to Zakir embody the piece of them they left behind. The locked storeroom in the mansion is a time capsule; it does not hold a place or possessions as much as it stores a time that otherwise cannot return.

'Son, these are the keys of a house to which you no longer have any right.' The keys of that house, and of that land. The Keys of Rupnagar. The keys are here with me, and there a whole time is locked up, a time that has passed . . . And houses never stay empty. When those who lived in them go away, the time lives on in the houses (Husain 2007, 188).

While the other characters in both the novels merely toy with the idea of return, it is in the figures of their protagonists/narrators – Jawad and Zakir – that the possibility of a return to the original 'home' comes closest to being realised. *Basti* ends on a somewhat positive yet ambiguous note as Zakir decides to write to his cousin and childhood sweetheart Sabirah in India. Whether he does write to her, and if that eventually leads to a return to Rupnagar, is left open-ended. However, the articulation of the desire to establish contact is significant as it creates the most tangible pathway for engaging with the past than any other character in the novel is presented with.

Jawad from *The Sea Lies Ahead* returns to Vyaspur after rediscovering the letters written to him by his aunt (Phuphi Amma), his childhood friend (Maimuna) and Chhote Miyan.¹¹ The experience of his stay in Vyaspur is suffused by a sense of how much things there have changed while remaining the same. It all looks the same on the surface, but a closer look reveals a picture of simultaneous decay and unfamiliar bustle. In the Vyaspur of his memory, the street leading up to Dilkusha, the mansion where he spent his childhood, was lined by trees and fields on one side and a seemingly never-ending red-brick wall on the other. 'But now, a row of shops had come up along that massive wall' (Husain 2015, 104). The tall trees and the fields were gone, and the once quiet, deserted street is now full of people. Dilkusha itself is almost a ruin with only one recognisable staircase still intact. Jawad eventually returns from Vyaspur to Karachi without the sense of closure he had hoped this journey would bring. Majju Bhai, through the remainder of the novel, asks him the same question several times: why did he leave Vyaspur without really completing the journey he had set out on? Jawad seeks the answer to this question without knowing where to look. The idea of return is tempting, but the actual act never provides the closure the *muhajir* seeks, as the

person returning is not the same as the one who left, and the place of return is not the same as the one that was left behind.

In the absence of the possibility of an actual return, the characters in the novels grapple with the trauma of the loss of home through processes that reconstruct it in the place of arrival. Hence, in *The Sea Lies Ahead*, Karachi is a city carrying within itself several other cities. These are the cities from which the *muhajirs*, who made Karachi their home after Partition, originally came. And so, populating this city facing the expanse of the Arabian Sea were *muhajirs* who identified as Lucknow-walas, Meerutwalas, Delhiwalas, Badaunwalas, Amrohvis and Biharis, among others. They congregated over *mushairas*, sparred over the cities they came from, each asserting their origin city was the most important one among all the others that ‘existed’ within Karachi, and competed over the possibilities of marriage alliances among these identities that had carried over from a different time. The Sindhis, Punjabis, Balochis, Pathans and *muhajirs* all competed for the affections of Karachi, but the *muhajirs* also competed among themselves for it. Majju Bhai explains this with an allegory about the river and the sea:

And it isn’t as though *muhajirs* are all of one type. Some are from the east, some from the west, some from the north, some from the south. Rivers from across the length and breadth of Hindustan came tumbling and gurgling to meet the sea. But they did not merge in the sea. Every river says: ‘I am the sea.’ (Husain 2015, 36)

In *Basti*, it is apparent that the *muhajirs* of ‘the city’ have not been able to (re)create a microcosm of cultural familiarity comparable to the one that emerges in the Karachi of *The Sea Lies Ahead*.¹² Here there is no talk of the Delhiwalas and the Lucknow-walas and the Meerutwalas. And yet a similar desire to reconstruct the lost home or seek its resonances in the new one runs through this novel as well. Zakir tries to find a neem tree in the city but settles for the shade of the banyan that Afzal leads him to and the Shiraz, a local teahouse in the city, becomes the abode and haunt of all the lost and restless souls roaming through the city in search of a ‘home’:

I had started out in this city as a wanderer and had made the Shiraz my camp. Friends came by various roads and with various excuses and gathered in this camp ... in those days when the whole population seemed to be homeless, we knew we had a home – as if we had been sitting in the Shiraz through many births, like faithful priests sitting smeared with ashes, and would sit there for many births to come (Husain 2007, 77).

And finally, Intizar Husain, through these two novels, weaves a narrative where nostalgia not only plays out as fantasies of the past but is as much about the present and the future. Both *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* are very much products of the time around which they were published. And though Husain does not claim to be writing a history of the events that

take place in these novels, they do present a story where the personal biographies of the protagonists and characters overlap, engage and entangle with that of the nation (Pakistan) in inextricable ways so that each provides the backdrop for the other. Through the journeys that the two protagonists go through, as well as through the experiences and positions of the other characters on the state of things in Pakistan, Husain provides a window into the ideologies and influences that shaped this momentous historical period. At the same time, he also presents a glimpse into the cycle of hope, despair, decay and reconstruction that post-1947 Pakistan went through and the everydayness of these conflicts as they played out in the experiences of its *muhajir* characters. Both Zakir and Jawad come across as aloof narrators of a story they are very close to and yet seem to be watching unfold from a distance. It is through their eyes that we see the narrative move through space and time as they struggle to straddle the past and the present. The unfinished romance between Zakir and Sabirah in *Basti* and between Jawad and Maimuna in *The Sea Lies Ahead* perhaps represents the lack of closure and catharsis for *muhajirs* even as they continuously seek to find it through both return (real or envisioned) and reconstruction.

Claiming refuge as rightful belonging in the dawn of Pakistan

Vazira-Fazila Yacoobali Zamindar perceives Partition as a rite of passage that the subcontinent had to undergo so as to eventually arrive at the ‘stable state’ which was ‘the mono-coloured, territorially distinct, genealogically rooted, naturalised nation’ (Zamindar 1999, 187). The concept of the rites of passage was originally developed by the Dutch ethnographer Arnold van Gennep for studying rituals that mark the ‘change in the social status of an individual or a cohort of individuals’ (Turner 1974, 56). The concept is taken further by the British anthropologist Victor Turner who explains its breakdown into three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. It is, however, the middle phase of transition that embodies within itself an ambiguity that Turner focuses on as the space of liminality within the structure of a rite. This concept of liminality has been employed in the field of refugee studies by Liisa Malkki as the transitional phase in the rite of passage that eventually culminates in the incorporation into what she calls the ‘national order of things’ of those outside of it (Malkki 1995a, 516). Refugees or migrants then, Zamindar further elaborates, are liminal subjects on account of their uprooted state of being. This liminal space, however, is ‘marked by a legal and institutional apparatus’ (Zamindar 1999, 187–188) that allows them to exist within the ‘national order of things’ without really belonging to it.¹³ The refugees that Partition created, on the other hand, according to her, could not really be fitted into this liminal space as they ‘were assumed to be incorporated into that categorical order’ (Zamindar 1999, 187). Hence, even as people were displaced and became transformed into ‘people with ‘no fixed abode’, no ‘fixed national status’, available categories allowed for classification as only distinctly ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Indian’ (ibid.). The idea was that those who migrated, rather than inhabiting the liminal space that refugees occupy, would find a rightful place in the national order of things as citizens without that detour. The category of the *muhajir*, however, existing as an

official one in the Pakistani census, was a liminal one in the sense that it remained at the threshold of the nation long after the so-called national order of things had been established. But the difference in how *muhajir* identity was formulated and articulated as distinct from that of the refugee was that it was in their uprootedness that they sought national identification. Following from this, a recurring theme in both *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* is that the trauma of the hardships of the initial days of having arrived in Pakistan is an emotion that exists in simultaneity with the optimism and excitement for the future that faces them in this new homeland created for and built on the sacrifices of the *muhajirs*. In *Basti*, the author describes at length the initial chaos of homelessness and the disorientation of living in abandoned homes of those who had left for India. But accompanying this sense of dislocation was the promise that beyond this initial turmoil lay a time of immense possibilities. Zakir remembers those early days as a time '[w]hen Pakistan was still all new, when the sky of Pakistan was fresh like the sky of Rupnagar, and the earth was not yet soiled' (Husain 2007, 71). Jawad from *The Sea Lies Ahead* also recalls the initial days of the shanties as a great equaliser. For a short but seemingly endless period, the divides between the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, and the privileged and the disadvantaged were rendered irrelevant. To Jawad, the experience of this collective hardship, removed from the shackles of class, was supposed to serve as the foundation for realising the potential of Pakistan in the days to come:

The shanty was Time and under its canopy a new age was wriggling . . . So many possibilities quivered withing the layers of this age. And if one were to go by Majju Bhai's verdict that was the real era of Karachi. 'My dear, the Karachi of today has risen from the yeast of the Karachi of the Shanties.' (Husain 2015, 12)

As the story in each novel unfolds, it is clear that this initial sense of optimism for the fate of Pakistan and that of the *muhajirs* who had made it their home is increasingly replaced by disillusionment and fatalism. However, it is also evident that the *muhajir* characters in both novels, as they emerge from the days of homelessness and the age of the shanties, are able to move on to better times even as the country moves towards greater uncertainties. Zakir from *Basti* becomes a professor of history, his cynical friend Irfan is a journalist, and Jawad from *The Sea Lies Ahead* works as a high-ranking bank official. The story of the *muhajirs*, as it emerges from the two novels, is one about the inherent struggles and dilemmas (both internal and external) of inhabiting a liminal space that straddles the past and the present, the personal and the collective, and is maintained through both the claims of a rightful belonging as well as a state of alienation.

And yet, these are still stories that capture the narratives of *muhajirs* in Pakistan and what was initially West Pakistan. In fact, even as the plot of *Basti* is set against the backdrop of the Liberation War of 1971, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, East Pakistan remains only a distant presence in it. It comes up only through mentions of relatives and

friends stuck in Dhaka during the hostilities, worry about the lack of information coming out of East Pakistan during the war, and the second wave of migration from Bangladesh to Pakistan post-1971. It is a fact that East Pakistan received a considerable proportion of *muhajirs* from the Muslim minority regions of India – especially the United Provinces and Bihar – on account of their physical proximity to the eastern borders. Possibly, the trajectories of *muhajir* lives and their concerns in East Pakistan mirrored those unfolding in the west. However, there also existed added dimensions that further complicated an already strained the socio-political dynamic. This entailed the physical distance from West Pakistan with the thousand miles of Indian territory in between, an increasingly strained relationship of the eastern province with the Centre over the post-Partition decades, and Urdu speakers in a Bengali-speaking region with an incipient Bengali nationalism since the early 1950s.

These issues and their impact on *muhajir* lives in East Pakistan find space and attention in the Urdu newspaper *The Daily Pasban*, which served as the primary *muhajir* mouthpiece in the province. It provides a useful and interesting insight into the narratives of belonging and exclusion of *muhajirs* in East Pakistan vis-à-vis their identity and place in their province of domicile, within the larger discourse of Pakistani nationhood, and within the extended community of *muhajirs* in Pakistan as they navigated a complex and layered insider/outsider divide. And while both of Husain's novels present a romanticised account of and longing for this 'era of the shanties', a study of the columns of this newspaper presents an opportunity to revisit the same period in Pakistan's eastern province. It provides glimpses of *muhajir* lives actually being lived there in the immediate post-Partition years. Hence, the remainder of this essay will focus on the newspaper's issues from this period of newly created Pakistan and the matters it chose to address regarding the state of *muhajirs* in East Pakistan and their place within the nation as a whole.

Hum Mehman Nahi Hain*¹⁴: *Muhajirs* in East Pakistan through the Columns of *The Daily Pasban

Theodore P. Wright Jr., in his paper 'Indian Muslim Refugees in the Politics of Pakistan', has pointed out the heterogeneity that was evident among the migrants who migrated from India to Pakistan based on place of origin, time of migration and place of settlement in Pakistan. He also argues that the level of assimilability affordable or accessible to them depended on all these three factors (Wright Jr. 1974, 191-195). In fact, the differences and disparities within the *muhajirs* and the realisation among them of this fact were reflected in the newspaper columns. These differences, as articulated in *The Daily Pasban*, were primarily threefold. The first dimension was that of class and income. The acknowledgement and realisation of the presence of class-based disparity among the *muhajirs* were a difficult one. It severely clashed with their idea of the ideal Islamic state where all the citizens would be united under the banner of the faith and class would cease to matter. A letter to the editor from an anonymous *muhajir* in Kushtia voices this sentiment:

All that I can say about my state is that I am barely alive! With a lot of difficulty, I had reached an agreement with the landlord. However, at the last moment the deal was cancelled due to the appearance of a rich *muhajir* who bought the house instead ... Now as I lie on the roadside with my wife and children, I can't help but wonder if Pakistan could not eliminate the differences between the rich and the poor then what was the point of all the sacrifices we made for its creation!¹⁵

Second, it seemed to have become increasingly evident to the *muhajirs* in East Pakistan that there existed a clear differential in treatment, in terms of rehabilitation efforts made by the government, between them and their counterparts in West Pakistan. The realisation that there might be unwritten yet practised hierarchies in how Muslims who had migrated from India were perceived and received engendered further vulnerability in the community and once again clashed with the idea of Pakistan they had when they migrated. An editorial in *The Pasban* cites instances where the central government of Pakistan showed prejudice in the formulation of rehabilitation policies and schemes for *muhajirs* in West and East Pakistan, as well as differential levels of effectiveness with which they are executed:

It appears that distance from or proximity to Karachi determines the magnitude of sympathy that a *muhajir* is entitled to in Pakistan. The more this distance the lesser the sympathy. Consequently, the *muhajirs* of East Pakistan who are two and a half thousand miles away from the centre are seen to be worthy of absolutely no compassion. These *muhajirs* of East Pakistan are no better than cattle who were sacrificed for the creation of Pakistan and now are being sacrificed so that those in power can remain in power ... If this is not so then those who are responsible for the welfare of the *muhajirs*, please tell us why it is that lakhs of *muhajirs* in Sind, Punjab and Khairpur have been able to stand on their own two feet on account of the aid provided to them by the government. Even on the borders the *muhajirs* have been able to earn a living. However, not even a single *muhajir* in East Pakistan is even semi rehabilitated let alone permanently. Warm clothing has been distributed to the *muhajirs* on the borders while in East Pakistan they have been left alone to die from the cold ... Are the *muhajirs* settled on the borders human beings while those of us here in East Pakistan mere cattle?¹⁶

Third, it was also the region in India to which they originally belonged, and the community perceived that as a determining factor in their social standing in the new homeland. In this supposed hierarchy, those who came from Punjab, Delhi and surrounding areas occupied a higher position than those who had migrated from Muslim minority provinces such as the United Provinces and Bihar. Even between the latter two, ranking prevailed: those who

belonged to Bihar were at the bottom of the ladder. While both provinces provided the most substantial support base for the Pakistan Movement, some of the most prominent leaders of the Muslim League such as Chaudhry Khaliqzaman and Liaquat Ali Khan belonged to the United Provinces, perhaps imbuing its Muslims with greater legitimacy through their claim of having made recognisable contributions to the realisation of Pakistan. Migration from Bihar, on the other hand, was primarily undertaken by working- and middle-class Muslims who were mostly politically inactive. The injustice in the regional disparity displayed in extending help and relief to the incoming *muhajirs* is pointed out in the same editorial like the one quoted above, which asserted: ‘Whether a Muhajir has migrated from Punjab, Delhi, the Central Provinces or Bihar his identity should only be that he is a muhajir and not from where he comes from. All the world over, wherever there have been muhajirs, they have always been treated as equals and welcomed by the *ansars*. Then why is it that the attitude of Pakistan towards the muhajir community is so different?’

German sociologist Norbert Elias in one of his seminal works, *The Established and the Outsider*, studied the small community of Winston Parva near Leicester in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Elias and Scotson 1994). The study aimed to understand the power dynamics that come into play in the everyday interactions between two groups or communities of people, one of which may stake a greater claim of legitimacy of belonging on the basis of a longer association with the place of residence (the established) than a newer entrant into the same social landscape (the outsider). The conclusions derived from the study are that the relationship between the ‘established’ and the ‘outsider’ shall always be ridden with frictions that primarily originate from a fear of the upheaval that newcomers – even if they are of the same nationality, ethnicity or religion – may cause to the established way of life that has become the norm with the former for a long time. This concept of the ‘established’ and the ‘outsider’ provides an insight into the relationship between migrants and a host population such as the *muhajirs* and the *ansars* in Pakistan and further between the non-Bengali *muhajirs* and the Bengali community in its eastern wing. The creation of the official category of the *muhajir* or migrant by the state and the growing polarization between the non-Bengali *muhajirs* of East Pakistan and both Muslim and Hindu Bengalis since 1947 and through the early 1950s point towards a certain institutionalisation of the ‘established’ vs ‘outsider’ divide. However, at the same time, the self-image of the *muhajirs*, as it emerges from the pages of *The Daily Pasban* – of wronged, disillusioned yet deserving and rightful claimants for membership and acceptance into the nation they believed was built on their sacrifices – somewhat problematises Elias’s thesis of the natural perception of the ‘outsider’ as inferior and the ‘established’ as superior.

The underlying tension of the established/outside binary and the *muhajir* response to it is emphasised in an editorial of June 1955. It discusses in disapproving and satirical tones a speech made by Maulana Bhashani, one of the most prominent political figures of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, in which he refers to *muhajirs* as ‘guests’:

We are grateful to Maulana Bhasani that he has clarified his party's stance with regard to the *muhajirs*. But we are not happy with the fact that he refers to *muhajirs* as 'guests' (*mehmaan*) ... We understand that he might have used the word so as to encourage the local Bengali Muslims to treat *muhajirs* with compassion and as their co-religionist brothers. Yet we want to make it clear that *muhajirs* are *not* guests! They are those people who have sacrificed their lives, property and dignity so that they could realise a homeland where they can live a life in accordance with their worldview.¹⁷

What comes across from the above extract is that for the *muhajirs* in East Pakistan to be categorised as such was acceptable as long as it referred to and evoked the specific nature of their migration to East Pakistan. However, the associated idea that they were *muhajirs* because they belonged to no particular place within the boundaries of Pakistan was an objectionable one. In this sense, *in immediate post-Partition East Pakistan, muhajir identity* vacillated between wanting to occupy the space of liminality that refugees occupy and becoming recognised as legitimate players within the national order of things.

This duality in articulating the relationship with the new homeland is evident in the manner in which the community framed its responses to the government's efforts (or lack thereof) at rehabilitating the incoming *muhajirs* in the province. It was a matter that received considerable attention in *The Pasban*. The issues that regularly engaged both the editors and the readers (as gathered from the contents of the letters to the editor and the column *Muhajiron ki Duniya* or 'The world of muhajirs') focused on the problem of physical rehabilitation and employment. The central conflict, as it comes across in these pieces, was that the rehabilitation policy of the provincial government was based on either the idea that the *muhajirs* were essentially asylum seekers in need of temporary relief, or that they were not really refugees at all and hence must make efforts to rehabilitate themselves with only minimal help. Both these stances were found to be unacceptable and inadequate by the community.

In a radio address, Firoz Khan Noon, the governor of East Bengal, explains the position of the government about the *muhajirs*:

I now wish to talk about a matter that I feel is very important. It is regarding the rehabilitation of the *muhajirs* who have come to this province from several places in India and their number right now is somewhere near eleven lakhs and fifty thousand! They have had to leave their homes because of persecution and communal disturbances in India and have come to East Pakistan in numbers that read in several thousands in the months of February and March ... at any rate we must try to help those who have *taken refuge in our country*.¹⁸

The governor's quote emphasises the fact that the *muhajirs* were victims of forced migration on account of troubled circumstances in their home countries and had crossed over the border to seek refuge. Their entitlement to relief and rehabilitation was dependent on their current condition of dislocation. The *muhajirs*, on the other hand, did seek and expect rehabilitation from the government, but not as refugees who belonged somewhere else and were only seeking asylum in a foreign country; their expectation was based on the fact that they had made sacrifices to come to a nation they believed had been created for them.

Khwaja Shabuddin, the Minister for Muhajir Affairs in the government of Pakistan, made a public statement about the prospects of the rehabilitation of the *muhajirs* in May 1950:

... there is no possibility of accommodating any more *muhajirs* in Pakistan ... Conditions in India have greatly improved since the signing of the Nehru–Liaquat Pact for the protection of minorities in India and Pakistan and hence soon there should be no reason for Indian Muslims to feel the need to migrate to Pakistan. Also, since conditions have more or less normalised some *muhajirs* who are already here can also now return. It needs to be paid heed to that no Hindus in East Pakistan shall be uprooted to make room for the *muhajirs* (ibid.).

An editorial piece that appeared in *The Pasban* responding to the minister's statements expressed its disappointment, calling it a sharp turnaround in the state's policy towards *muhajirs*:

For several days now it has been noticed that the attitude of the government and the authorities toward the *muhajirs* has become increasingly hostile. Instances of police atrocity are very common and government officers keep telling us to go back to India. All of this points to the reality that the policy of the government with regard to the *muhajirs* has changed tremendously. It expects that if the *muhajirs* face harassment at every stage then they will eventually go back ... Such action and statements have immensely hurt the sentiments of *muhajirs* and we are now compelled to think that all the praise and adulation that we received for sacrifices that we made for Pakistan was merely lip service. And now that they feel Pakistan no longer needs us then they don't care if we live or die!¹⁹

A further indication of the complexity of the space the *muhajirs* perceived themselves to be occupying – somewhere between liminality and the national order of things – as refugees who refused to be identified as such is further reflected in the community's response to the rehabilitation efforts the government made to settle them in East Pakistan. The colonies of Mohammadpur and Mirpur were established on the outskirts of the city of Dhaka to settle

muhajirs who had migrated to East Pakistan from India. These townships were sanctioned under the scheme of creating five exclusively *muhajir* cities across East Pakistan under the jurisdiction of a newly instituted body called the Muhajir Council. The idea behind the creation of such areas where migrants could be settled was mainly welcomed by the community, but at the same time, the news was received with some scepticism which revolved around two main issues. The first was the fear that the body would merely remain a statutory one and the schemes it was proposing would never see the light of day. Second, the idea that there would exist within the city of Dhaka and elsewhere in East Pakistan pockets of *muhajir* habitation presented the possibility of these areas becoming transformed into camps or ghettos and the *muhajirs* being reduced to refugees.²⁰

The topic of rehabilitation was a very sensitive one, and the newspaper was highly specific about the kind of rehabilitation the community *deserved* while at the same being extremely critical of what the government was actually doing/willing to do in this regard. Before the creation of the Muhajir Council, the provincial government had come up with another scheme of rehabilitation that focused on meeting the immediate needs of the incoming migrants; this was met with sharp criticism. The ground for this critical response was the underlying temporary nature of the envisioned scheme:

Many *muhajirs*, after hearing the news of the government's latest rehabilitation schemes, might feel relieved and grateful that now after three years of Pakistan being in existence the government has finally thought of them. But please do not get too hopeful as the scheme is nothing more than betrayal that has been sugar-coated. We have reiterated several times in the past as well that *muhajirs* are not beggars and should not be treated as such ... The policy of the government should focus on permanently rehabilitating *muhajirs* rather than focusing on short-term temporary relief measures.²¹

The question of rehabilitation remained challenging throughout the 1950s and 1960s. With the creation of the *muhajir* settlements in Mohammadpur and Mirpur, the demand for permanent rehabilitation was somewhat addressed. However, it presented a new set of problems, including the deteriorating, unhygienic conditions in these colonies, complaints of neglect by the government, and the perception of these spaces as zones of subtle segregation between the local resident population of both Bengali Muslims and Hindus and the *muhajirs*. To a large extent, all of these concerns would assume a renewed relevance and urgency in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War. As their *muhajir* inhabitants faced what would go on to become decades of statelessness, the once exclusive colonies of Mohammadpur and Mirpur were transformed into 'camps', which have over the years taken the form of sprawling urban slums in the heart of Bangladesh's capital city.

Conclusion

Within the formidable corpus of literature on Partition, the oeuvre of Intizar Husain finds a singularly unique place. His work traverses the difficult and complex terrain of writing about Partition by placing it within the larger canvas of the history of the subcontinent without trivialising the monumentality of the impact it had on the lives of those who ‘survived’ it. In making the experience of migration or *hijrat* central to the identity of the figure of the *muhajir*, the two novels discussed in this article create a space for understanding and examining the long aftermath of Partition beyond the discourse of the violence that informs it while still acknowledging the trauma that it entrenched. Both *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead* are deeply personal novels that also speak to the universal conditions of displacement and exile; the nostalgia they engage with is not simply an obsession with the past but a re-conceptualisation of the idea of home and belonging. Finally, the two novels, when read alongside *The Daily Pasban* – the *muhajir* newspaper from East Pakistan – provide a unique insight into not only the psyche of the *muhajir* subject in Pakistan straddling the past and the present but also of the *particularities* of the *muhajir* experience of dislocation, rehabilitation and reconstruction of ‘home’ based on the differentials of class and region and ethnicity.

Notes

1. While migration to both wings of Pakistan in the wake of Partition was prompted and driven by the communal violence that was unleashed in the months leading up to it, the use of the word ‘chosen’ here is intentional. It is meant to emphasize that even as the displacement caused by Partition was traumatic and ridden with hardship for those subjected to it, the idea of ‘choosing’ Pakistan is integral to the figure of the *muhajir* – which literally means someone who undertakes a momentous migration for the faith – who populates much of Intizar Husain’s work. As I shall unpack in this piece, it is supposed to simultaneously convey narratives of the pain of loss of home, of the disorientation of dislocation, and of hope for the possibilities that lay at the end of this journey. Together, they all became ways of claiming belonging to and ownership of Pakistan.
2. The ethnic strife and mobilization of the 1980s and 1990s in Pakistan had the Muhajir Quami Movement or the MQM (now called the Muttahida Quami Movement) at its centre and was most intense in the province of Sindh. The movement was a step towards the political assertion and mobilization of Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan after Partition as a separate and distinct ethnic group or *quam* (which loosely translates as ‘nation’ based on a community sharing a common history, language, culture or ethnicity and which may not necessarily correspond to or fit within physical/tangible borders) in Pakistan. For a detailed discussion and analysis on the history and politics of the MQM see Verkaaik ‘‘2016; Khan 2010.

3. For the purpose of this paper, I shall be using the recent excellent English translations of the two novels by Frances W. Pritchett (*Basti*) and Rakshanda Jalil (*The Sea Lies Ahead*). Henceforth I shall be using the translated title – *The Sea Lies Ahead* – to refer to *Aage Samandar Hai*.
4. I found the newspaper, previously unexplored to my knowledge in any other academic work on Bangladesh, stored at the Department of Urdu at Dhaka University, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Shihab, the student assistant from the university who helped me with organizing this material and Dr Ahmad Badr from Karim City College in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India, for assistance with translation of select portions from the newspaper.
5. Some of the earliest and most influential in this regard have been the anthologies edited by Alok Bhalla, Mushirul Hasan, and Saros Cowasjee and K. S. Duggal. See Bhalla 1994; Hasan 1995; Cowasjee and Duggal 1995.
6. Originally published in 1959. The English translation – *River of Fire* – which was also done by Hyder herself, came out in 1998.
7. The Progressive Writers' Movement, also called the Progressive Writers' Association, was a literary movement born in pre-Partition India. The Association was formed in 1936 in Lucknow and was inaugurated by renowned Hindi writer Munshi Premchand. The PWA, with celebrated literary figures such as Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mulk Raj Anand, Hiren Mukherji, Hasrat Mohani among others as its founding members, engaged fervently with the idea of bringing about socio-political change through creative writing and literature. At the centre of this quest was to use literature as a voice of the anti-imperial freedom struggle as well as to infuse the struggle itself with social intent so that it could be a potent voice against all kinds of injustices, oppression and ignorance. In that sense the PWA's ambition was to go beyond the significance of the written word as art or purely for its literary or aesthetic value and dwell on the political role that writers themselves play in the society they write about. For further reading on the PWA, see Ahmad 2006; Sahni 1986; Ali and Rashid 1977–78; Haq 2017.
8. These towns, with their explicitly Hindu names (Rupnagar or the beautiful city and Vyaspur – the city of the Indian sage Ved Vyas, the author of the epic Mahabharata), are invented, imaginary ones. However, their essence invokes many small towns and cities in India where Hindus and Muslims have coexisted for ages and which witnessed large-scale migration to Pakistan during Partition.

9. Between *Basti* and *The Sea Lies Ahead*, the novel *Naya Ghar* covers the decade of Zia-ul-Haq's regime during the years 1978–88. However, Husain does not particularly consider the three novels a trilogy. See Lindgren 2020.
10. In an interview with Alok Bhalla, Intizar uses this phrase: '*Kahani toh awara hoti hai*. Story is a vagabond.' Bhalla 2015, 246.
11. The letter from Maimuna informed Jawad of the deteriorating health of Phuphi Amma and her longing to see him and requesting him to pay one last visit. The letter from Chhote Miyan was to inform him of the demise of Phuphi Amma.
12. For a detailed analysis of the impact Partition and Partition-related migration had on Lahore and how this differed from the situation in Karachi in the decade that followed Partition, see Talbot 2007.
13. For a more detailed scrutiny of the concept of the national order of things, see Malkii 1995b, 1–17.
14. Urdu sentence translated as 'We are not guests', which was the subheading in an editorial piece titled '*Tauseem*' (Expansion) in *The Daily Pasban*, 15 June 1955.
15. Letters to the Editor, '*Ye Tafreeq Mit Kar Rahegi*' (This difference has to go), *The Daily Pasban*, 17 May 1950.
16. Editorial '*Humein Bhed Bakari Samajhne Waale*' (For those who think we are no better than cattle), *The Daily Pasban*, 9 November 1950.
17. Editorial, '*Tauseem*' (Expansion), *The Daily Pasban*, 15 June, 1955; emphasis added.
18. Editorial, '*Apnon ki Begangi*' (The alienation of those you call your own), *The Daily Pasban*, 12 July 1950; emphasis added.
19. Editorial, '*In Sataron ki Gehraiyan mein Jhaank Kar Toh Dekho*' (Try to read between the lines), *The Daily Pasban*, 20 May 1950.
20. Editorial, '*Muhajir Council*', *The Daily Pasban*, 9 November 1950.
21. Editorial, '*Ise Aabadkari nahi kehte*' (This cannot be called rehabilitation), *The Daily Pasban*, 13 May 1950.

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