

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 14: Decoding Sunil Ganguly's East and West- II

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugee Migration Diaspora. So, today we are going to continue with our discussion on Sunil Ganguly's East-West. I was talking about the refugee crisis and the journey of the refugee into becoming a citizen. So, Meenakshi Mukherjee states in her essay Maps and Mirrors that

in Amitabh Ghosh's Shadow Lines, the Hindu-Muslim divide is created at the same time as it is rubbed away. And the people and situations across the border seem not very different, but only like a looking glass reflection on both sides of the border, right? So, the people, the culture, the habits are so similar, right, on both sides of the border and this is true both in the case of Punjab and Bengal. We see that the Punjabi culture that reigns over and above the communal differences, the religious differences on the western side and similarly the Bengali culture that overrules any kind of religious difference

is strikingly similar. It's almost like a mirror reflection and one wonders why the country was partitioned in the first place if the cultures, the linguistic and, you know, day-to-day living habits are so similar. So, displacement followed by the partition and its impact on the common people, the human cost of partition, the human, you know, crisis during and after the partition becomes clear from a particular scene from East and West where the character of Biman tells the protagonist Pratap that a particular banker is his countryman. So, this is also very common identification that the migrants have time and again made with their fellow countrymen.

East and West continued....

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- Displacement followed by the partition and its impact on common people becomes clear from a scene in the narrative, when Biman tells Pratap that a banker is a “countryman” of his; hearing this, Pratap explodes in anger, and says:
“Wasn’t the entire Bengal province your country as well before Partition?”

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So, if there is a fellow East Bengali, a fellow Bengali from Eastern Bengal who has migrated and who has experienced a similar crisis in the past, there is an immediate connection, there is an immediate identification. So, two fellow migrants can connect over their common experience of a crisis, over their common experience. of jeopardy, and it is from this point of view, it is from this perspective that the character of Biman tells Pratap that this particular banker is from my country. To this remark, Pratap explodes in anger and says, 'Wasn't the entire Bengal province your country as well before partition?' So, this kind of partisanship, this kind of partisan feeling where one can only feel or sense an affiliation with Eastern Bengal and with fellow migrants is

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being chastised in a way by Sunil Ganguly. The fact that migration, the experience of migration, and a sense of otherness, an experience of being othered by the host population to an extent, ghettoizes the immigrant Bengalis, and they also start connecting only in terms of a fellow feeling among the fellow migrant populace. So, there is this rift between 'us' and 'them,' the East Bengalis and the West Bengalis. So, this is a person from my country versus others,

The other person is from the host land—that kind of feeling. And Pratap is actually chastising, reprimanding this sort of ghettoized feeling, saying that a few days back, only some time back, the entire Bengal province would be one's country. So, how has it now become 'us' versus 'them'? So, the novel raises a number of pertinent questions.



How could people who have known each other for such a long time turn into enemies overnight? Does anyone ever leave? his ancestral land out of choice? In the later part of the novel, Sunil Gangopadhyay quotes a poem by Rabindranath Tagore that very poignantly sets forth the essentially united nature of the Bengali identity. So, this poem by Tagore establishes the essentially united nature of the Bengali identity.

I quote from the poem: This land of Bharat does not belong only to you or only to me. The shadow of the Hindu hovers over it, as does the presence of the Muslims. Unquote. In the entire narrative, the river Padma

becomes an important symbol. It becomes a quintessential symbol, simultaneously working as a divider and connector of two Bengals and two types of Bengaliness. In the case of East-West, the treatment of the women's section also becomes poignant because the atmosphere is consistently masculine. It's a very hyper-masculine situation where, in a new land, Essentially, the male kin in a family, the male folks from a family, are the decision-makers.

They make the way for everyone. They decide for everyone, whereas women have to always take the backseat. In some instances, we see a subversion of this gendered role where women also come out, take up jobs, and break the barriers. However, we see that those women who manage to step out of the social confines defined by gender are regarded as extraordinary.

So, we see that women who take up jobs, who work, who are in the public domain, are regarded as out of the ordinary. They are seen as anomalies in a scenario otherwise driven by, and motivated by, essentially patriarchal values. So, the girls portrayed in the novel are neglected in their families. They are frequently neglected in their families. Beautiful girls like the character of Tutul face suffering and persecution for their beauty, and in extreme cases, like those of the refugee women, these girls are raped and left to fill the ranks of the so-called lunatic or fallen women.

Also, one sees that the role of women remains confined to their homes, and they mainly serve their husbands. They are depicted as weak yet scheming individuals, and their primary function lies in supporting their male relatives. So, in this regard, Udit Sen makes a very important intervention, pointing out how the collective anxiety of the refugee male resulted in stereotyping the refugee female in terms of certain factors. very archaic patriarchal yardsticks. The women would be categorized either as the pioneers—the first female jobholders in the public domain—or they would be seen through the lens of the archetype of a spinster, a woman who never married and only supported her family.

The figure of the martyr, the kind we see in Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, You know, the protagonist, Nita, who never gets married, who supports her family financially, or there would be yet another stereotype, the worst of the three: the fallen woman, the prostitute. So, male anxiety would define women through certain stereotypes. Very pigeonholed stereotypes—through certain very narrow stereotypes of either being a pioneer, a prostitute, or a spinster, right?

So, the woman would be curbed, would be kind of burdened by these stereotypes that were created by patriarchal society. Sunil Gangopadhyay's *East-West* is also considered a crucial work of diaspora studies, using the theoretical tenets of memory studies and trauma studies in the novel. Scholar Avishek Parui has suggested this theoretical framework can be crucial in examining the movement of humans across spaces in the novel *East-West*. And he examines how such movements connect political and existential experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and alienation.

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- Sunil Ganguly's *East West* is also considered as a crucial work of diaspora studies
- Through using the theoretical tenets of memory studies and trauma studies in the novel, Avishek Parui has suggested this theoretical framework can be crucial in its examination of the movement of humans across spaces in *East West*, and how such movements connect political and existential experiences of displacement, nostalgia, and alienation
- Essentially a tale of many families, chiefly members of the zamindar Majumdar family from East Pakistan who move to Calcutta and experience a series of loss and existential changes, *East West* also portrays a set of semi-fictional characters, historical figures, and political events which reflect the rapid geopolitical changes in South-east Asia post-1947



So, *East-West* is essentially a tale of many families, chiefly the members of the Majumdar family from East Pakistan, who moved to Calcutta and experienced a series of losses and existential changes. *East-West* also portrays a set of semi-fictional characters, historical figures, and political events that reflect the rapid geopolitical changes in South Asia and Southeast Asia post-1947. In fictionalizing the events of partition, and also mentioning the Naxalbari movement through complex depictions of political figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru, M.A. Jinnah, Ayub Khan, Indira Gandhi, Charu Majumdar, and Jyoti Basu.

East-West emerges as a story of unsettled and interrupted identities whose interruptions are an index of political and existential changes and remappings. So *East-West* is trying to capture these existential changes, these trajectories of remappings. Sunil Ganguly's position as a diaspora author is layered and complex. It is nuanced and complex, especially in relation to the other Bengali diaspora authors who are writing in English, such as Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose works share a significant thematic overlap with *East-West* relations. The 1947 India-Pakistan partition as well as the 1971 Pakistan-Bangladesh partition which informed the characters' lives and metamorphoses in Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, to an extent, they also come back in Jhumpa Lahiri.



All these historical events, historical junctures feature in a major way in *East-West*. The 1967 Naxalite movement in West Bengal that produced a diaspora out of young ideologically ultra-left Bengali men shifting to the USA in order to escape encounters with the Calcutta police and which forms a major political event also in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Lowland*, published in 2013, deeply informs the later part of Ganguly's novel. So, the chapter of Naxalbari movement, which finds its mention in Lahiri's *Lowland*, has been explored substantially in Ganguly's novel. Regarding Ganguly's *East-West*, Lewis Harrington suggests, I quote the scholar and critic here,

This novel emerges as a complex narrative of the ontology and alienation of diasporic experience in different geopolitical settings, unquote. So, *East-West* is an intergenerational fiction about diasporic alienation written by a writer who was born in Bangladesh and who moved to India eventually, retaining the Bengali language while changing the national identity after partition. *East-West* also portrays how diasporic alienation can be experienced within what is notionally one nation-state, such as East Bengal or East Pakistan which houses different cultural and linguistic landscapes. During the partition what happens is that these different cultural and linguistic landscapes are not able to accommodate one another.

A section of the East Bengali populace, which is the Hindu Bengalis, were considered as minorities. They were staying on the wrong side of the border. Suddenly, during the partition, it emerged as a fact that the Hindu-Bengali section, who became minorities, were staying on the wrong side of the border. Thus, it was suggested that they should join their co-religionists on the other side of the border and become part of West Bengal. In this regard, Avishek Parui suggests that the novel dramatizes how the formation of a new nation, Pakistan, in 1947 also produced existential alienation akin to diasporic sentiments.

Such alienation of the refugees is very similar to diasporic sentiments, even within the notionally same nation-state.

This refers to East Pakistan, which was culturally very close to West Bengal in India and which subsequently became Bangladesh in 1971. So many complexities arose as an aftermath of this partition. The entire history of South Asia, its future, and further ramifications are entirely hinged on the watershed of partition. So, alongside the usual travel to and subsequent sense of alienation in the West or in West Bengal, which forms the later part of the novel titled *Paschim*; *East-West* also depicts how the city of Calcutta can contain subjects of the same culture and language belonging to different national and political registers.

So, how the Bengalis can further, you know, identify with different national and political registers depending on whether they are native West Bengalis or have migrated from Bangladesh. So, Through these different registers, Ganguly's novel depicts how diasporic identities are produced, how these identities are formed and experienced through shadow lines, layers of memories and imaginations, rather than through neat geopolitical divisions. Thus, partition is not an end in itself.

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- Alongside the usual travel to and alienation in the “West” which forms the later part of the novel titled *Paschim* (West), *East West* also depicts how one city (Calcutta) can contain subjects of the same culture and language (Bengali) belonging to different national and political registers (Indian and Bangladeshi)
- In doing so, Ganguly's novel depicts how diasporic identities are produced and experienced through shadow lines of memory and imagination, rather than through neat geopolitical divisions
- Ironically undercutting the apparent simplicity of the novel's title, the geographical binaries (East/West) emerge less as zonal categories and more as existential markers in *Purba Paschim* – ones which are mutable and not always oppositional and inimical



It is Actually, it unfolds new ramified meanings, new crises, new human interfaces and relations. Ironically, undercutting the apparent simplicity of the novel's title, *East-West*, Quite contrary to this title *East-West*, the geographical binaries of East and West emerge less as zonal categories and more as existential markers in the novel. And these two markers, the East and the West, the cultural burdens that each carries are mutable and not always present as

diametrically oppositional in nature and not always inimical to one another. Diaspora in Ganguly's novel is a complex experiential phenomenon that connects the cities of Dhaka, Calcutta, London, New Jersey, and Boston through common human experiences, emotions, and sentiments. So, home as an effective category emerges as a shifting state of being, with the novel's climactic part dramatizing the father-son dynamic through the depiction and symbolic juxtaposition of the liminal space of an American hotel where the character of Atin is trapped; which is almost compared to a transcendental nostalgic fantasy of return, experienced by the dying Pratap in a Calcutta nursing home.

So, on the one hand, Atin is trapped in an American hotel. He is in a liminal space in an American hotel. On the other, we have the transcendental nostalgic fantasy of return that the dying Pratap is experiencing in a Calcutta nursing home. Quoting Soren Frank, Avishek Parui comments that East-West, through its several stories about migration and memories across borders, shares its narrative frame with some of the major works of 20th-century world literature, where the main protagonist is a migrant, a figure that is not viewed as an anomaly in a global culture, where migration has actually become the norm and has resulted in a profound renegotiation of the concepts of identity, belonging, and home.

So, applying the tenets of memory studies in Sunil Ganguly's East-West, Monica Reif-Huelser argues that the genre of multi-generational family novels such as Purba Paschim, To quote her, illustrates the impact of politics on personal relations and the effects of state violence on social structures in a way that makes a problematic history accessible and comprehensible to the reader, unquote. East-West's complexity as a novel about migration and diaspora experience emerges from its different depictions of the same city space of Calcutta from the point of view of the same subject at different points in historical time. This is most immediately exemplified by the character of Mamun. Mamun, who is a former member and editor of the Dhaka Muslim League magazine,

and a friend of Pratap Majumdar from Malkha Nagar in Bangladesh. So we see that Mamun is arriving at Calcutta with his two daughters after the 1971 Pakistan war and there is a reminiscence of the times when he had studied in a Calcutta college during his graduation days decades ago. So visiting Calcutta now versus visiting Calcutta or staying in Calcutta at a different historical juncture, at a different point of time in history. That kind of a comparison is presented again and again in the novel.

In its many movements across borders, airports and political circles, the novel *East-West* therefore depicts the entanglement of ideology and intimacy, of experientiality and identity in public and private spaces, through its many memories and migration narratives. So, I would like to end our lecture here today and let us meet in our next lecture with another round of discussions on another topic. Thank you.