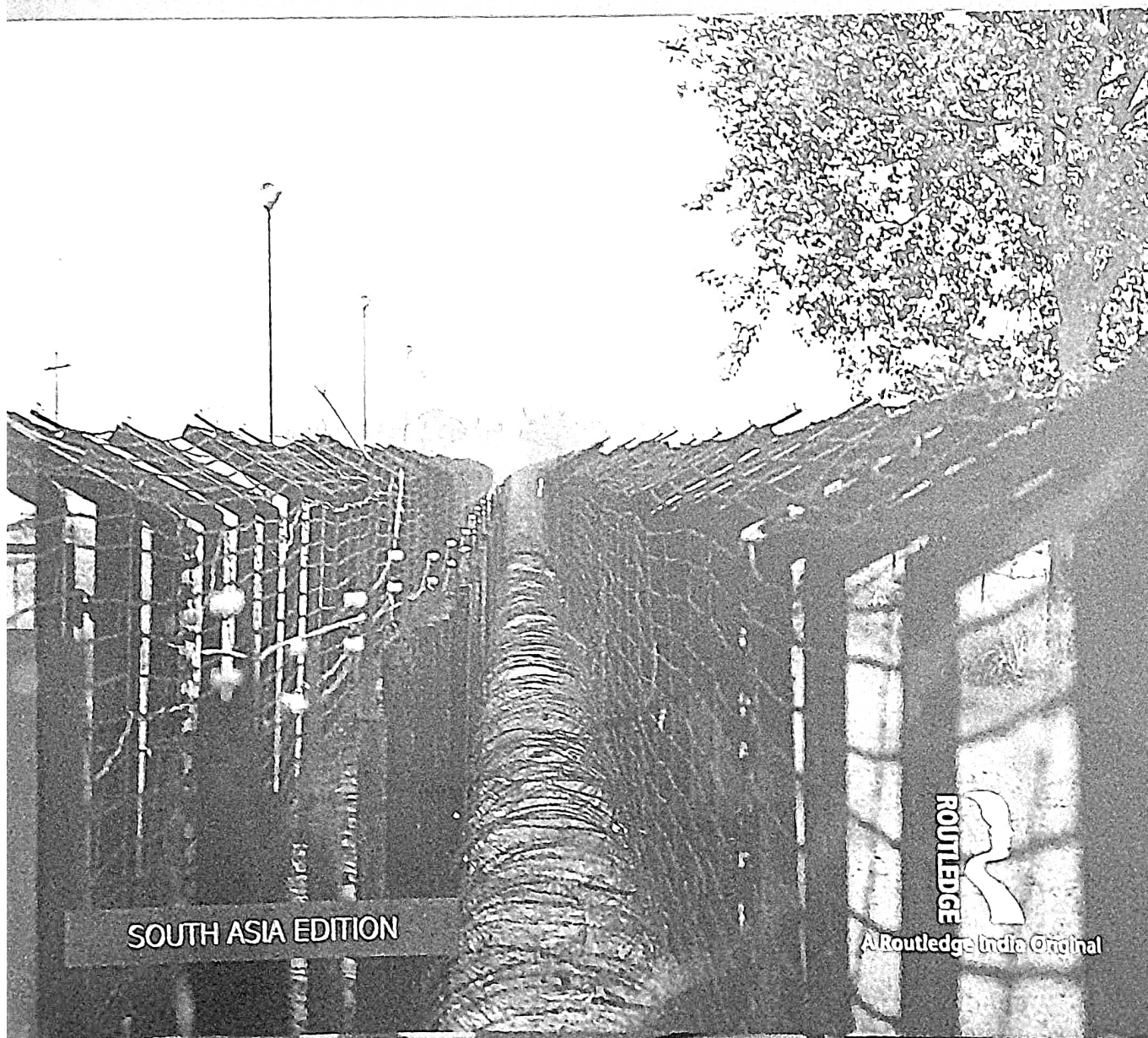


Partition Literature and Cinema

A Critical Introduction

Edited by Jaydip Sarkar and Rupayan Mukherjee



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POLITICS OF MEMORY AND THE MYTH OF HOMELESSNESS

Intizar Husain's *Basti*

Mitarik Barma

The title of Intizar Husain's novel, *Basti*, refers to a place where a group of people live; a settlement. As this suggests, the novel revolves around issues of settlement and home. 'Home' here also bears the greater connotation of homeland, for the novel's protagonist, Zakir, who lives in Rupnagar in India until the Partition in 1947. Following Partition, he leaves India to settle down in Pakistan, his new homeland. The novel chronicles the last few months of 1971 in Pakistan, before the separation of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, also housed relatives of many people living in Pakistan and therefore this second Partition brings in issues of homelessness, immigration and national identity of individuals. The novel shows how the essence of homelessness in the refugee diaspora of the newly formed Nations is related to their diasporic displacement.

Gautam Premnath in his article "Remembering Fanon, Decolonizing Diaspora" states that R. Radhakrishnan

defines diasporic location as the space of the hyphen that tries to co-ordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one's place of origin with that of one's present home... with my diasporic displacement there is a 'now' and 'then' to my life, underwritten by a 'here' and 'there.'

(Premnath 2000: 61)

Premnath goes on to argue how Radhakrishnan's position in an American university led him to present his "diasporic displacement as the enabling condition for his considerations of postcoloniality" (ibid.). While spatio-temporal dislocation may act as a way to cosmopolitanism for some, it is much more difficult to justify such displacement to oneself, especially when it is related to Nation-formation and requires the acceptance of a new nation-identity for individuals. Politically defined national boundaries might not necessarily align with culturally defined selfhood,

and when national identity is in conflict with one's cultural identity it leads to the same kind of uprooted, homeless feeling that Zakir in the narrative deals with. Zakir's constant remembrance of his childhood in the days of political turmoil in Pakistan shows how his childhood memories become a mode of escape for him since he is emotionally not at 'home' in the new country. The name of the place in India where Zakir's childhood was spent, that is Rupnagar, immediately suggests a place of fantasy – 'roop' meaning beauty, or forms, and 'nagar' meaning city. Rupnagar for Zakir is a city of forms, of beauty to which he no longer has access. Muhammad Umar Memon notes in his introduction to Frances W. Pritchett's 1995 translation of the novel;

The ostensible purpose of the prolonged flashback is to acquaint the reader with Zakir's past. But it is not there merely to evoke a childhood idyll, as some have already assumed. After all, the childhood is recalled through the eyes of an adult Zakir, who both meditates and transforms its events, assigning them a value and importance based on his experiences in the present. The process of remembrance itself is triggered moreover, by specific events in the present. The purpose of the idyll is thus to bring into form some fundamental psychological traits of Zakir's personality – traits which will later provide the rationale for his conduct and responses to events in the present.

(Memon 1995: n.p.)

While it is true that the idyllic representation of Zakir's childhood functions as a literary device for Zakir's psychological exposition, Umar Memon's claim that Rupnagar is pure fiction can also be argued against. It might be true that Rupnagar quite possibly does not have a real-life equivalent outside of the narrative space. However, questioning the fecundity of Rupnagar in the narrative would require us to accept almost the entire narrative as a mere fantasy, which is detached from Zakir's reality. It would invalidate Surendar's letter in chapter 6 of the novel and Zakir's yearning for Sabirah as well. Treating the entire narrative as a purely fictitious allegory would also downplay the realities involving the real-life Partition which the novel is trying to address.

The novel deals with a diasporic nostalgia at the moment when national identity of individuals is at crisis. Stuart Hall in regard to diasporic nostalgia notes in his article, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora":

Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past'? And yet, this 'return to the beginning' is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor required, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery – in short, the reservoir of our cinematic narratives.

(Hall 2000: 120)

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Narrative Function and Identity in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

Mitarik Barma

Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist* (first published in 1988 in Portuguese; the English translation was published in 1993) has been translated into 72 languages and has sold over 65 million copies. The novel remains a bestseller to this date and there are specific reasons behind the continuing popularity of this particular narrative. Coelho in the Preface of his novel admits the fact that he is unaware about the reasons behind the popularity of the narrative, but emphasises on the religious aspect of the narrative. However, the narrative has been accepted by readers belonging to a diverse group of religion quite possibly due to the fact that the Christian religious motifs are not directly enforced and rather have been presented through allegories. There also seems to be little or no religious jargon in place, and the major characters in the narrative take quite a liberal attitude towards non-Christian religions. Moreover, it seems Coelho has borrowed religious motifs common to non-Christian religions as well, which might have resonated with readers more inclined towards other religious beliefs. The allegorical nature of the narrative that talks about overcoming real life obstacles in the path of one's spiritual journey makes it easier to transpose those motifs in non-religious settings as well. Also, Coelho takes up quite an optimistic outlook towards life, interpersonal relationships and the problems of life in the narrative. Perhaps for these reasons, the narrative also works as a self-help text and garners a universal appeal in a society where at the height of individualisation self-help industry sees a surging popularity. Therefore, the narrative serves three distinct categories, the religious, the novel readers and those seeking motivations in self-help narratives. In the following discussion I intend to show through a structural, linear analysis of the narrative how Coelho manages to blend elements of motivational religious themes (both Christian and non-Christian) with

existential beliefs to his advantage to create a narrative that remains open to interpretation to readers belonging to a diverse group of religious communities (although it seems the target audience might primarily be the members of Abrahamic religions).

The narrative begins with the description of an abandoned Church where a shepherd boy has taken refuge. The ruined Church with an enormous sycamore tree immediately evokes Christian motifs as Zacchaeus (Hebrew for innocent, or pure) in the Bible climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus and later gave away half his wealth. In Coelho's narrative the shepherd boy Santiago (whose name refers to Spanish 'santo' for saint and also carries certain other Christian motifs) embarks on a journey which over time transforms into a spiritual one and he has to climb a mountain in the end to be able to converse with God. He also ends up giving part of his wealth away, and has been portrayed as pure hearted in the narrative. If the statement "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" from Matthew 5:8 is taken as a reference to Zacchaeus, then that statement would assert the shepherd boy Santiago's spiritual experience near the end of his journey in the narrative. However, these religious references are not always emphasised in the narrative and while they may appeal to the devout Christians, they present no obstacles for comprehension to the casual reader otherwise unaware of these religious motifs. The narrative talks about how the boy Santiago has become accustomed to the routine of his herd and therefore provides an implicit suggestion that in order to bring change in one's life, one needs to break out of their habitual routines. Suggestions like these replete throughout the narrative enforces the self-help elements of the narrative. Similar suggestions appear later in the narrative when the boy starts working with a crystal shop owner.

The fact that the boy is in search of a treasure he sees in a dream adds to the theme of spiritual quest and at the same time brings in an element of detective fiction in the narrative, since the boy has to find out not only the exact location of the treasure but also the alchemist who comes later in the narrative. The element of romance introduced early in the novel with the boy's romantic interest being the girl of a merchant quite possibly attracts attention