



## **Moving Away and Clinging in: Analyzing Memory and Displacement in Thirst of Rivers by Joginder Paul**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to study the aspects of 'moving away' and 'clinging in' through the twin tools of "memory" and "displacement" by analyzing the short story Thirst of Rivers by Joginder Paul. At the initial stage it will engage with Partition and the wide scale dislocation it generated and the importance memory gains because of this displacement. It will contend the need to juxtapose both history and literature for a better understanding of a crucial event like Partition. After that, it will scrutinize how moving away from their place of hailing because of Partition affected the two characters, Bebe and her son Munna – the way Bebe was overpowered by memory and how Munna, her son overcame memory. It will investigate how the house from which Bebe was displaced became a site of trauma for her and the current one that she dwelt in became oppressive; because it generated deeply negative experience and left behind long-term problems for her that she was obliged to deal with mentally and emotionally.*

**Keywords:** Displacement, Memory, House, Roots, Trauma.

### **Introduction**

The two phrases "moving away" and "clinging in" given in the title have specific significance in the framework of the current paper, so, it is worthwhile to pause and engage with them before analyzing the short story *Thirst of Rivers* through the twin tools of "memory" and "displacement". Time and place are the two motifs interconnected with this affair of moving and clinging; after all, where does one move away from, what one clings into, and when does one do the twin acts of moving and clinging. It is further contended that within the frame of the paper "house" and "place" are co-joined as one is placed in a house, and a house cannot be without a place; no doubt they will not be used synonymously. The activities of 'moving away' and 'clinging in' are associated with Bebe and her son Munna when they were dispossessed off their ancestral home during Partition. Moreover, these acts of displacement give rise to memory which has different bearings for both the characters.

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Before the discussion is concluded it will show the interconnectedness of the three poles – memory, displacement and house – which are the focal points of the paper.

### **Aim of the Paper**

The aim of this paper is to study how moving away from their place of hailing because of Partition affected the two characters, Bebe and her son Munna. It will raise and try to investigate the operation of memory in this act of moving away; the role played by place in this affair of movement by the two characters; and, scrutinize how Bebe was overpowered by memory and Munna overcame memory. At first it will engage with Partition and the wide scale displacement it generated and the importance memory gains because of this displacement. After these initiations it will analyze these aspects in terms of the story under consideration and their related nuances will be engaged with as they emerge in the current paper.

### **Partition, History and Literature**

August 1947 is a watershed moment in the history of the South Asian subcontinent when the two nation states, India and Pakistan, emerged out of the political partition as the British formally quitted India. This act of dividing and untangling the two nations was undertaken within six months and involved high-level political decisions. Yasmin Khan unearths one of the prevalent situations in her book *The Great Partition*:

In New Delhi, politicians and officials created reams of memos and press releases, and held heated debates as they thrashed out the formation of Pakistan and India. This means very little, though, without reference to the millions of people whose lives were being shaped...This human story is a very political one, though. After all, what is the history of Pakistan and India without reference to Pakistanis and Indians? (2007:7)

The concurrent process of division, independence, and decolonization engendered the largest forced migrations in the history of the twentieth century. Between 1946 and 1965, nearly nine million Hindus and Sikhs moved to India and approximately five million Muslims moved to both parts of Pakistan (Roy 2-3).

As this paper develops it will become evident “how the local comes to be folded into the national in new kinds of ways – and national into the local” (Pandey 1) in critical events like the Partition of India. Historical texts have been referred to as they enhance the work of literature because the human dimension of suffering cannot be understood without an engagement with the political circumstances. After all, an uncritical humanism that concentrates only on the pain and sorrow of the ‘human condition’ that resulted from Partition will limit our understanding of the political and civic fault-lines revealed then, fault-lines of religion, gender, caste and class that still runs through our lives (5) as Suvir Kaul opines. However, it cannot be ignored that literary works offer subtle portrayal of everyday trauma that move beyond historical fact. According to Jasbir Jain, “literature goes beyond the empirical reality, beyond treaties and wars and probes the silence of the human mind...literature is “writing” about what cannot be written about” (5) and the current analysis

of the story will show the trauma that Bebe faced after losing her house cannot be scripted within the framework of historical narratives.

### **On Displacement**

Displacement is a keyword in this paper and the paper conforms to what Zamindar says about displacement "...I use the word *displacement* and not *migration*, to describe the momentous movements of people at this time. The word *migration* came to imply both a movement with the intention of permanent relocation as well as a voluntary exodus..." (7). The story depicts that Bebe and her son, Munna did not voluntarily leave their house as a result of Partition; rather circumstances forced them to displace to a new place without putting their lives into peril and losing all opportunities to visit their homeland again.

### **Movement, Memory and Clinging in – the Case of Bebe**

The place and the house where Bebe lived prior to Partition, where she was rooted were the factors which integrated her; and after her displacement from them she gradually got disintegrated. She coiled back to her past where it became her living present; unable to keep pace with the arrows of time that that were hurtling fast, and incapable of coping with the situations that were mutating in the post-Partition period. The first sentence of the story indicated the loneliness and void in Bebe's life; her only company was her thoughts. In a poignant statement the narrator says, "Bebe is sitting in a cot outside the new house of her only son – alone and absorbed in her thoughts" (Paul 80).

It merits consideration that the author did not provide the name of the specific location where Bebe resided in pre-Partition India and where she got dislocated because of Partition. Her location was only termed as house/haveli pointing the importance of the house for any human existence. Perhaps the author maintained such a stance to portray that a person had the susceptibility to undergo the trauma when forcefully displaced from one's house and place, emphasizing on displacement. The narrative unlocked an era when most women were acculturated to diligently adhere to the wishes of their husbands and Bebe left her house despite her wish. The narrator mentions:

Her husband's spirit has stepped forward and is patting her shoulders reassuringly. Go, Munna's Bebe! Conditions here have deteriorated so much that it has become necessary for you to leave...

No! It was you, who advised me not to step out of this house. Now it is you who is turning me out. (Paul, 2001: 82)

The house that Bebe lived before Partition provided her the safety and security and her attachment towards it was deeper and primal; it was her lawful abidance towards it which in reality was an abidance towards herself that she could not move away from it though she was physically displaced from that house; thus the current one, where she lived after displacement became oppressive as she could never integrate herself with it as the narrator tells:

Bebe raises her head and gazes in front of her, but fails to see anything. She is not quite blind for she can still marshal her blurred vision. But what can one do when a veil of the past perpetually hangs over one's eyes. The ancestral haveli, the doors of scores of rooms that open in a continuous succession, and, and.... (Paul, 2001: 80)

The metaphorical house therefore became the space where Bebe's "memories" and her "unconscious were housed" (Bachelard 30, 32) because we find that she could hardly recognize that she has moved away from her original abode to a new house and transferred things associated with it to her current place of dwelling. The bunch of keys that she brought with her, a material memory, became the objective correlative of her earlier house to which she clung into:

Bebe restlessly spreads her legs on the cot, and pulling her dupatta over her breasts, takes a bulky bunch of keys in her hand. The iron of the keys had grown rounded and fleshy from the weight of the soft abrasion of her fingers for the last fifty years. She can see her soul peering out, in the shape of each key. (Paul, 2001: 80)

Each key that unlocked a particular room was an unlocking of a part of *her* world that she held preciously. For example, one of the keys let the readers peer into her son, her Munna's study room where the lantern is glowing above his head, and he is fast asleep with the book held in his hand (Paul 81). She communicated with her husband who was dead then that he unnecessarily reprimanded Munna who was perhaps "studying in his dreams" (Paul 81).

Her original house hovered over her and the events associated with it haunted her in the form of memories to such an extreme extent that there was a blurring of the past and the present which the narrative very well represents. The past created a disorienting vision of the present and revealed how Bebe's experience as a consequence of Partition continued to have effects on her life. In a very paradoxical way, her moving away from her house actually led her to cling into it as she says, "Where else will I leave now, Munna? You settle down anywhere you like, live and laugh, but I have only my ancestral haveli" (Paul 83). For Bebe, her reality was that she was at her ancestral house which she owned but did not remember that she had dislocated.

The forced movement from her house was a crucial event for Bebe to accept and assimilate. It generated deeply negative experience and left behind long-term problems for her that she was obliged to deal with mentally and emotionally as the story unfurled – "Bebe has really gone crazy. The poor woman is not even sure whether she is still living in the haveli or whether it has been years since she left it and arrived here" (Paul 82). Bebe's displacement from her house and the ordeal that emanated from it repeatedly came back to her consciousness as an unresolved past. There is an interplay of memory and forgetting in the case of Bebe and the mental trauma that Bebe went through because of the displacement is very difficult to fathom. The state she was in can be well estimated by referring to Cathy

Caruth's work on trauma, memory and narrative that takes as its starting point the awareness of the unresolved nature of trauma, where a traumatic event is so overwhelming that when it happens the consciousness is unable to understand it totally. Because a traumatic event cannot be assimilated to any other kind of experience due to its paradoxical nature, the mind will not treat it in the way it treats all other past events. The event that has not been assimilated tends to emerge continuously, showing the "repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (Caruth 4).

The story under discussion well expressed that the geographical border established as a result of Independence became a visible mark of a trauma which was impossible to express through words as Bebe's seemingly incoherent expressions about her lost house (as a result of Partition) that is irretrievable now tried to encapsulate. Munna, her son articulates in utter frustration, "You are, Bebe. How can I convince you that we have left our haveli, village and country across the border. We've left them several years ago. But you still dwell there" (Paul 83). It is appropriate here to bring Jennifer Yusin's understanding of the border between India and Pakistan. According to her, the border between India and Pakistan is both a geographical separation and the site of an ungraspable trauma; for this reason it can be understood as a physical entity as well as a symbol. She uses the expression "geography of trauma" to convey the idea that "the borders created during the Partition exist at once as geographical separations and as a spatial, temporal figure for the unspeakable experience of that history, and as such become the site where the knowable realities of history become inextricably bound up with the problem of grasping trauma" (459).

### **Moving Away and Forgetting – the case of Munna**

The story did not restrict itself to Bebe and her existential situation but brought within the ambit her son Munna, who too was displaced from the house they belonged to and showed the other side of displacement. The conversations with her and the point of intersections that they have, showed the wedge that was gradually developing between them as Munna wanted to move with his life ahead, and had already raised a family. The narrative did not demonize Munna but indicated the difficulty he encountered in his effort to bring his mother back to what he understood to be the normal world:

No, Bebe. I am the father of a child now, and you still treat me as your Munna. Call me by my name.

When I address by your name, I feel that rather than my own son, I am calling my bahu's husband.

Then consider me your bahu's husband, and please call me by my name. How can I remain your Munna all my life, Bebe? (Paul, 2001: 81)

The fact that Munna does not want to be addressed by his pet name points his desire to make a break with the past instead of carrying its memories forward allowing them to intermingle with his present. The narrative portrays Munna's memory of house and the country he left only as a reminder to his mother that they cannot be reclaimed. His repeated effort to make his mother realize that he is a grown up person with his own identity shorn off

his mother's memories is a tool through which he wants to journey forward where his mother's memories would not restrain him from living his life of aspirations.

The narrative indicates how power operated between the duo – Bebe and Munna – as Munna's way of looking at the loss of one's home conformed to the accepted version of forgetting a past that could not be restored; whereas Bebe's way of responding to that loss was naively tagged as being 'mad' by Munna who was unable to understand the trauma that she faced because of a loss that was irrecoverable, resulting her behave in such a way as he reproves, "Bebe, Bebe! How can I explain it to you? If you go on like this, I'll go mad as well" (Paul 83). It can be argued that he is not grown up to understand the trauma that his mother underwent after her dislocation but it is equally significant that the time he has spent in his place of birth and the amount of attachment that he felt towards it are the determining factors in the generation of his memories and not getting entrapped by them like his mother, who metamorphosed into a tragic character.

The story did not provide any neat resolution as whose way of responding to the loss of the native land and ancestral house was more welcoming: of moving away or clinging in to memory that was to be charted. In the edited volume *Contested Past: The Politics of Memory*, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone puts forward the issue of the past as a source of conflict and dissent where alongside contestation there is a simultaneous drive to consensus, and a need to transform the past in order to move on from it. But the move towards reparation and reconciliation rather than continuing conflict may leave gaps that cannot be filled, holes in the fabric of memory that simply have to be stepped over or around; or may signal the existence of a hole whose presence is unmendable and will prevent any such move (237). In the story we found that Munna's attempt to move forward from the memories of the lost house, to reconcile with the past was not a smooth one as the intrusion of the memories of Bebe, his mother, showed the gaps and fissures that could not be packed up. He had to constantly grapple with them without finding any way to resolve them so that he could move forward in his life the way he desired.

### **Memory, Displacement, House**

The cognitive neuroscientist Michel Gazzaniga has opined, 'Everything in life is memory, save for the thin edge of the present' (qtd. in Foster 2). No doubt memories appear to be personal and 'internal' acts of an individual, without which an individual cannot perform 'external' acts, but they have interpersonal and societal bearings. Yet, it cannot equally be denied that if individual memories are constructed within culture, and are part of cultural systems of representation, so cultural memories are constituted by the cumulative weight of dispersed and fragmented individual memories, among other things. Thus, during Partition there was an intermixing of the individual and cultural memories which was very well represented in the case of Bebe and Munna. Bebe's individual memory that stuck to the past was in this case a marginal one and Munna's ability to untangle himself from such memories adhered well to an emerging culture that wanted to make amends with the past and move forward towards a better future.

Thus, moving away (because of Partition) led to clinging in by Bebe, as she was rooted in her house which she carried with her; but moving away led to forgetting by her son

who tried to re-root himself in the new house and became the alter-image of his mother. Bebe's situation is in tune with what Bachelard has said, "We should therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world'" (26). The uprooting of Bebe from her house without any room to return led her world getting lost as she moved away with the hope that it was a migration with the avenue of return and imagined her dead husband told her:

Bebe, touching the bunch of keys tied to her pallu, has turned her back to the haveli. She can clearly see. Don't be afraid, Munna's Bebe. You are leaving so you can return again. (Paul, 2001: 83)

In her book *The Great Partition*, Yasmin Khan forwards the view that when Pakistan was declared a reality, people thought that the dislocation was not going to be permanent. Even as the All India Congress Committee reluctantly accepted the partition it kept alive the older idea of indivisible Mother India (93). Countless politicians announced that there was every chance that the subcontinent would be reunited within a decade (Khan 95). On the day when the partition plan was made public, Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India declared, "I have not lost faith in an undivided India. I believe no man can divide what God has created as one" (qtd in Tanwar 167).

It can also be interpreted that age of a particular character and the idea of life ahead, determined this moving away and clinging in. Bebe had already passed the prime of her life in her ancestral home and as the story showed, the things that were important to her like entering it as a bride till the upbringing of her son occurred at that house. Partition and the concomitant displacement from the ancestral house was an event that required remembrance for Bebe and amnesia for her son. Munna could script a new life ahead and wanted to move forward where forgetting was a preferable option. As such it can be said that there are two opposite world-views represented by Bebe and her son and both the characters acted as a foil to one another. These opposite world views create a friction and fracture between the mother and the son which hardly got reconciled which the narrative very well draws our attention to:

Bebe gently caresses the bunch of keys with her fingertips.

Even a lunatic is not mad as you, Bebe. You still roam with the bunch of the haveli keys fastened to your pallu.

Here. Drink some milk, Munna.

What is the use of drinking milk, Bebe? I often resolve to try each of your keys and somehow unlock you... (Paul, 2001 :84)

The different ways Bebe along with her son reacted to displacement displayed that they were not connected to the same experience in a similar way. As Bebe's memories overpowered her, she did not know that she was living in her past, and could not understand the condition her son was in.

According to Peter Burke “People tell stories to themselves and others all the time in order to make sense of their experience” (285). In this way memory acted as a cohesive story of personal histories, and as argued by Duncan Bell stable identities depend on the coherence of this memory narrative as their foundation (7-19). It was the memory of Bebe that gave her a sense of identity, it was her cohesive device; but as the place from where this memory came did not correspond with the location that Bebe actually was in, it made her narrative incoherent.

### **Bebe – Placelessness, Non-place**

By now it is well evident that place is central to the discussion, the place that Bebe lived for years, where she had the sense of belongingness made her feel as an insider; she felt placed because the people that mattered to her like her husband lived in that place and she even understood her son till the time he stayed in that place. Yi-Fu Tuan’s opinion regarding abstract knowledge and ‘feel’ of a place can delineate the situation of Bebe. According to Tuan:

Abstract knowledge *about* a place can be acquired in short order if one is diligent...But the ‘feel’ of a place takes longer to acquire. It is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. (Tuan 1977:183)

Bebe felt totally different in her new house, located in a new place and became an existential outsider. Thus, she literally became a displaced character, could not emplace herself in the displaced place and merged her haveli with the house where she was displaced. For her, her memory became the reality, as she could not discern that they were her memories:

Bebe has really gone crazy. The poor woman is not even sure whether she is still living in the haveli or whether it has been years since she left it and arrived here. (Paul, 2001: 82)

Once Bebe was dislocated from the place she belonged to, the meaning that provided the sense of attachment to place radically thinned out, there was an erosion of place as she became a placeless character and could not identify herself with the new place she was in becoming a stranger and pined for her dead husband, “The pain is that you are gone forever. Had it been me, I would have looked after you even when dead” (Paul, 81). Place, Marc Auge claims, has traditionally been thought of as a fantasy of a ‘society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil’ (110). Auge’s argument is that such places are receding in importance and being replaced by ‘non-places.’ Non-places are sites marked by their transience, the preponderance of mobility, temporariness. It can be claimed that the place Bebe had been dislocated permanently became a ‘non-place’ for her, an unrooted place, in which she was a rootless character whose history and tradition had no importance for her.

Bebe was haunted by the past; the keys that could unlock things had not been able to unlock the way of thinking of her son; her life and legacy that she needed to carry forward was there in the haveli; she was rooted in it, in a paradoxical way her dislocation did not

dislocate her from it. Rivers are the source of water, in the current story Bebe epitomizes the river that was thirsty, was parched; the thirst was for the haveli that she belonged to which could never get quenched, as she could never go to her haveli; making the river remain thirsty. For Bebe, her original home was her logic, sans it, what she said appeared illogical as they were not placed within the logic of her house; her memory became her reality; the thing as it happened and the thing as it was now was different. The narrative ended with a poignant note where Bebe tried to unlock the doors with the keys which did not get open.

## Conclusion

To conclude, in its larger agenda, nationalism advocates what to remember and what to forget; no doubt, it is undeniable that memory keeps alive minority voices from oblivion. In some cases, memory may be the only thing separating the minorities from mainstream narratives. The current story presented the memories of a person like Bebe once die, we cannot know the kind of trauma how that displacement created muddling the past and the present. And when her reason of survival is the clinging love for the house and place she belonged to, she became an outsider forever, and relationship with her son was on the verge of collapse with little chance of reconciliation and recovery. The story at the same time brings to the forefront the private, the domestic, the details of daily life, that are embedded in great events like the Partition of India. Bebe's memories evoked a counter-narrative, a corrective to the simplifying and patronizing assumptions of the traditional records. Yet, it is also worthy to note that memory is not an abstract force: it is located in the specific contexts, instances and narratives, and decisions have always to be taken about what is the story to be told. This paper shows that the Partition in the life a nation was not a thing of the past as it haunted the present, it affected generations; and its legacy of hurts and ruins continued in one form or the other. Furthermore, it has brought to the forefront that acts of violence like redrawing borders affect the psyche and the soul, and are likely to be imprinted in life throughout.

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