

Forever Displaced: Religion, Nationalism and Problematized Belonging of Biharis in Ruby Zaman's *Invisible Lines*

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Abstract

Nationalism and religion have always been at the centre of political contestation in Southeast Asia. In fact, religion was the determinative factor in the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent, where India was for the Hindus and East and West Pakistan for the Muslims. The emergence of a national identity based on religion let loose unanticipated violence and bloodshed, which led to massive migration as religious minorities—Muslims from India, and Hindus from both sides of Pakistan—crossed borders to be with co-religionists. However, the Urdu-speaking Muslims known as “Biharis,” who migrated to East Pakistan from India during and after the 1947 partition, faced a perilous situation in the wake of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The rise of the Bengali nationalistic movement and the war resulted in the formation of a new nation-state, but it left the Biharis without a nation or national identity. This paper, highlighting the plight of the half-Bihari protagonist in Ruby Zaman's *Invisible Lines* (2011), brings to the surface the ambivalent existence of the Biharis. Applying the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, and Ashis Nandy, the paper further demonstrates how the convoluted ties between religion, nationalism, and national identity problematize the inclusion of the Biharis, thereby displacing them forever, first from their homeland and then from Bangladesh. Even after they were granted citizenship in Bangladesh in 2008, the precarity of their national identity and belongingness still pervades as the country continues to eye them with suspicion and contempt for varied reasons.

Keywords: Bangladesh Liberation War, Bihari integration, Nationalism, National identity, Partition, Pluralistic nationalism

Introduction

Nation, nationalism, and national identity—the already complex ideas, which Benedict Anderson claims to be “notoriously difficult to define” (3), are further problematized in South Asia by the dominance of religion in the socio-political arena. In fact, religion had been the determining factor in the partition of British India in 1947. The Partition, which resulted in the creation of two countries, India and Pakistan, with the latter having two wings—West Pakistan and East Pakistan—heralded one of the largest mass migrations in the twentieth century. The

forced, and oftentimes voluntary, movement from one side of the border to the other left many migrants and refugees homeless and without a nation or national identity. These migrants were not only displaced from their ancestral land but were also internally displaced in the land to which they migrated. The Urdu-speaking Muslims, commonly known as “Biharis,” who migrated to East Pakistan from various parts of India in the aftermath of the 1946 vicious riot and the 1947 partition fell into a precarious situation in the wake of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Although the war led to the creation of a new nation-state, Bangladesh, it left a large number of Biharis homeless and stateless. While there are many narratives on the 1971 war that eulogise the heroic deeds and sacrifices of the freedom fighters, very few narratives showcase the struggles and sacrifices of the minority groups in Bangladesh. Ruby Zaman’s *Invisible Lines* breaks away from traditional war narratives and focuses instead on the stranded minority group, the Biharis, and their sufferings and anxiety during and after the war. Applying the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson, Partha Chatterjee, and Ashis Nandy, this paper demonstrates how the convoluted ties between religion, nationalism, and national identity problematize the inclusion of the Biharis in Bangladesh. In addressing these issues, the paper not only casts light on the ambivalent existence of these people but also attests that the change in the core attributes of nationalism and national identity leaves the Biharis in a precarious position, displacing them forever, first from their homeland and then from Bangladesh. Even after they were granted citizenship in Bangladesh in 2008, the precarity of their identity and belongingness continues to this day as they struggle for acceptance in a society that eyes them with suspicion and contempt for various reasons.

The 1947 Partition and the Bihari migrants in Bangladesh

The demand to create two separate states based on the homogeneity of religion was at the centre of the division of the subcontinent. The two-nation theory thus culminated in the division of British India into two parts, India and Pakistan, where India was for the Hindus and East and West Pakistan for the Muslims. This engendered a traumatic experience for the people on both sides as religious minorities were swept from one side of the border to the other. The emergence of a national identity based on religion let loose unanticipated violence and bloodshed, which led to massive migration as Muslims from India and Hindus from both sides of Pakistan left their ancestral homes and belongings and crossed borders to be with co-religionists. By 1948, approximately 800,000 people had migrated from India to East Pakistan (van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* 132). However, it should be noted that the Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh in 1971, did not move to East Pakistan only to flee persecution; rather many of these people relocated to East Pakistan for better opportunities, or, as Willem van Schendel puts it, “out of enthusiasm for the Pakistan experiment” (*A History of Bangladesh* 131). Muslim leaders who were influenced by Muslim nationalism, “the *raison d’etre* of Pakistan” (Fazal 176), allured many Muslims in India to migrate to East Pakistan with the promise of high paid jobs and better social positions. The Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to East Bengal from different parts of India either during or after the 1946 communal riots in Bihar or in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition (Siddiqui 153; Chatterji 473) were brought under one umbrella term and broadly identified as Biharis. Since most of these migrants, almost 15% (Ghosh 282), were from UP and Bihar, they were called Biharis. As the Pakistan authorities felt that they had a special obligation towards the non-Bengali migrants whom they called ‘Muhajirs’ (one who leaves a place to seek sanctuary), they received special privileges and advantages such as state-sanctioned or supported housing

and rations (van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* 132). Although the Bengalis at first did not resent the Biharis and the Pakistani government's efforts at refugee rehabilitation (Sen 628), the increasing economic, political, and social disparity gradually germinated the seeds of resentment in the Bengalis against the Biharis. The resentment against the Urdu-speaking community transformed into hostile antagonism in 1952 during the language movement, when Urdu was declared the state language of East Pakistan. Concurrently, the Bengali people's general perception that all Bihari people aggressively supported the Pakistani occupation during the Liberation War ignited anti-Bihari sentiments.

Biharis in Bangladeshi literature and the *Invisible Lines*

Since Bihari people occupy a highly charged space in the rhetoric of identity and belonging in Bangladesh, not much has been written about them in the literature produced in Bangladesh. Although numerous narratives are available on Partition that showcase the miseries of the migrants from both sides of India and Pakistan, very few literary works have been written about the people who migrated to East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. In this regard, literary scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir contends that "Pakistan is examined far less than India, and Bangladesh has, until very recently, been virtually absent" (29). One of the reasons behind the absence of a Partition narrative in Bangladesh could be, as Meghna Guhathakurta points out,

Memories of 1947, or Partition, have often been superseded by memories of 1971 (or the movements leading up to 1971), because in the quest for a Bengali identity many Bengali Muslims have had to rethink their positions. As memories of the Partition are revived, they are often either blocked or coloured by memories of 1971. (98)

Nevertheless, though a handful of literary works (both in Bangla and English) can be found about the Bengali-speaking Muslims who migrated from West Bengal to East Bengal or East Pakistan pre- and post-Partition, there is a vacuum in the case of the Urdu-speaking Muslim

minority narratives. The collective anti-Bihari sentiment is one of the reasons behind the lack of interest in writing about this ethnic group. Interestingly, the young generation of Bengali writers has started to revisit Partition. Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* and Syeda Farhana's graphic narrative "Little Women," which is part of an anthology of graphic narratives called *This Side That Side: Restorying Partition*, are worth mentioning here for their portrayal of the existential crisis of Bihari protagonists. Zaman's *Invisible Lines* is unique in the sense that it defies the general tendency of silence regarding the Biharis and has at its centre two Bihari women who are caught in the middle of politics during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Entwined with the narrative of the Liberation War are the traumatising personal narratives of Zeb and Sakina, who, because of their Bihari lineage, come under the wrath of both the West Pakistani army and the Bangladeshi people. Simultaneously, Zaman explores the psychological turmoil of Bengali political leaders like Nazir Ahmed and Khan Bahadur Mudabbir Ali Khan, who are caught in the middle of politics and are labelled as 'traitors' for their political ideologies.

The 1971 war and Zeb's victimisation

The novel, written in reverse chronology, recounts the traumatic experience of the protagonist, Zebunnessa Rahim (Zeb). Though the novel opens in 1984 with Zeb going to the Bangladesh High Commission in London to apply for a Bangladeshi visa, it goes back to the pre-Partition days. As the story unfolds, readers get glimpses of Zeb's life in the pre- and post-Liberation War of East Pakistan and Bangladesh. Born to a Bengali mother and a Bihari father, Zeb's life was no different from other girls living in affluence. Being the daughter of a textile industrialist and a successful businessman in Chittagong and the granddaughter of the former minister for food and agriculture, Khan Bahadur Mudabbir Ali Khan, Zeb had everything that one could wish for. She led an idyllic life going to parties and enjoying summers at her politician

grandfather's villa, where all her wishes were fulfilled for her. Her grandfather's high standing in Sylhet added to all the privileges and comfort that Zeb was already basking in. However, Zeb's Edenic life came to an end in 1971, when the Bengalis of East Pakistan became desperate to free themselves from the oppression of West Pakistan. The concentration of political power in West Pakistan, lack of autonomy, and imbalance in economic development led to the dissatisfaction of the Bengalis, who had been demanding equality in the socio-economic and political arena for a long time. This discontentment very quickly transformed into fury when, in 1970, West Pakistan rejected the results of the general election, where the Awami League, the East Pakistan political party led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won an absolute majority. In addition, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech on March 7 also played a significant role in fomenting a nationwide demand for independence. Finally, on March 25, 1971, when West Pakistan carried out an armed attack codenamed 'Operation Searchlight' and ruthlessly killed thousands of people in Dhaka city, the entire nation erupted into a formidable insurrection and declared war against the Pakistani atrocities.

Just as the entire country turns into a land of death and destruction with new borders being carved out between East and West Pakistan, Zeb's world also instantly transforms into a life enshrouded in darkness and uncertainty. Within a few months, Zeb is removed from her secured position and turned to a destitute as she loses everything and everyone in her life. Zeb is drastically changed from the "sparkly eyed" girl to a "skeletal girl with large, vacant eyes" (Zaman 11). Although such misery befalls most of the people of a country that is under siege, Zeb's condition is different as she becomes the victim of both sides at war; that is, she had to pay the price of being both a Bengali and a Bihari. The first shock comes when her father is mercilessly slashed with a sharp sickle on the train to Sylhet. Despite her father's sincere attempts to assimilate into Bangladeshi culture and "his conscious efforts to merge, to blend

with the Bengali crowd,” he is not spared as “the stamp of being a non-Bengali could not be hidden” (Zaman 261). Later, when she returns to her grandfather’s house after being saved by Shafiq, the leader of a group of *Muktijodhhas* (freedom fighters), she yet again falls victim, but this time, to the brutality of the Pakistani army, who raid the house and sexually violate both her and her mother. Not being able to tolerate the indignity and humiliation of being raped twice by the young Pakistani soldiers, Zeb’s mother commits suicide by drowning herself in the family pond. The trauma of losing both parents within months leaves Zeb devastated, but what is even more tragic is, Zeb had to bear the brunt of rage from both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Her father is killed for being a Bihari, and her mother for being a Bengali, and she herself is sexually assaulted twice, once by the Pakistani army during the war for being a Bengali and the other time, right after the independence of Bangladesh, by a Bangladeshi because of her Bihari lineage. The traumatic experiences haunt Zeb so much that she cannot even stay at her own house in Chittagong. Her nanny, Didi, takes her to stay with her father’s friend’s family, the Jalaluddins. Later, when the Jalaluddins leave Chittagong, she goes to stay with one of her senior friends, Sakina Qureshi. She has to leave that house too, as Sakina’s home is also attacked by the Bengali mob. Thus, begins her precarious life of drifting from one place to another. The war displaces her forever—first from her home and later from the country—and to put an end to her precarity, Zeb keeps moving from one place to another in search of security and stability, but most importantly, looking for a place that she could call home.

Bengali Nationalism and Zeb’s exclusion from the new nation-state

Bengali nationalism, which was erected on the basis of homogeneity of language, and distinct culture, was, no doubt the driving force behind the creation of the independent nation-state of Bangladesh. The rise of Bengali nationalism was the result of years of exploitation and

subjugation by the ruling power of West Pakistan. Although Bengali nationalism had already developed in the 1950s with the repression of West Pakistan, it fueled up during the 1952 language movement when agitating Bengalis, particularly the students, protested against the Pakistan government's imposition of Urdu as the state language. The language movement, the cornerstone of Bengali nationalism, and later the victory of the United Front in the 1954 election were instrumental in galvanising the nationalistic fervour among the Bengalis. However, after the 1966 Agartala Conspiracy case,¹ the nationalist movement gained momentum, and in March 1971, when the Pakistani government's planned military operation killed the innocent Bengalis, the desire for autonomy and demand for a separate nation-state could no longer be repressed. The heinous act of the Pakistani government, according to van Schendel, was a punitive operation aimed "to eliminate Bengali nationalism and reassert West Pakistan's dominance over East Pakistan" (*A History of Bangladesh* 161). Indeed, if it had not been for Bengali nationalism, people from all strata of life, irrespective of class, religion, or occupation, would not have come forward to fight for the country. Nationalism, no doubt, is a powerful ideology that instilled in the Bengalis the desire for independence and united the entire country to fight against the dominance of Pakistan and establish an independent country. However, nationalism can be problematic at times. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, points to an "'anomaly' of nationalism" (4), suggesting that "nationality [...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" (4). He defines the nation as "an imagined political community" that is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Anderson, thus, claims that all communities are imagined; in other words, nation, nationalism, and nationality are all socially constructed. That is to say, communities are to "be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). In this sense, the commonalities—culture, history, and language—on which Bengali nationalism is based are

not static and can be flexible to accommodate other attributes. But unfortunately, Bengali nationalism turned constrictive as it negated all the other attributes of national identity except Bengali language and culture.

On a different note, political scientist and anthropologist Partha Chatterjee posits that in recent genealogy, nationalism is viewed as “a dark, elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilized life” (215). Nationalism can also be exclusive and destructive. Although Bengali nationalism resulted in the formation of a new nation-state, Bangladesh, and provided the Bengalis with their long-cherished and hard-earned independent country, it instantly transformed the Biharis into refugees and “Stranded Pakistanis.” In his research on the Biharis, Sumit Sen claims that the emergence of the nation-state (Bangladesh) denationalised the Biharis and rendered them stateless (642). As a consequence, they were deprived of citizenship not only of Bangladesh but also of the country they had left behind, as neither India nor Pakistan wanted to take them back. Tanveer Fazal unveils the darker side of nationalism as he claims that “nation tends to be constructed in terms of the ‘will of the dominant’, thus making ‘national mainstream’ an [*sic*] euphemism or the cultural proclivities and material interest of the former” (196). The political leaders’ “will” of the Partition problematized the Bihari people’s rights to a nation and national identity, thereby displacing them forever. It is indeed, as Fazal very astutely points out, “the exigency of power and politics that have been deterministic in drawing its parameters and boundaries, in terms of inclusion and exclusion” (195). Religious nationalism first drove them out of their original homeland during the 1947 Partition, and then, two and a half decades later, after the independence of Bangladesh, linguistic nationalism displaced them for the second time. Zeb’s father, Abdur Rahim’s grandfather, had migrated from Bihar to Bangladesh, narrowly escaping being torched to death in the communal riot in Bihar during the 1947 Partition. Similarly,

Sakina's parents had moved from Hyderabad and settled in Chittagong, the port city of Bangladesh. In fact, Sakina identified herself as a Bengali and "was [...] proud to be a Chittagonian" (Zaman 244). She, in fact, never thought of leaving the country, but the antagonistic atmosphere of her beloved country, Bangladesh, forced her to move to London. Unfortunately, the shift from religious nationalism to linguistic nationalism put the Biharis in a precarious position as they were no longer considered part of the Bengali nation. In the eyes of the new nation, these displaced people were considered aliens both in the country they migrated from and in the one they migrated to. Consequently, despite their assimilation, they become victims of non-Bengali rage.

In a similar vein, pointing out the limitations of nationalism, Indian political psychologist and social theorist Ashis Nandy asserts that nationalism "is a more specific, ideologically tinged, ardent form of 'love of one's own kind' that is essentially ego-defensive and overlies some degree of fearful dislike or positive hostility to 'outsides'" (6). Seen from this vantage point, it can be said that the Bengalis exhibited a dislike or hatred towards the Bihari people, who were considered outside the parameters of Bengali nationalism and the nation-state. Bengali nationalism began as post-colonial nationalism but metamorphosed into linguistic and ethnic nationalism during the Pakistani period and took an extreme form after independence. The war and Bengali nationalism that had turned exclusivist and inward-looking unleashed the repressed antagonism against the Biharis. Zeb's father, Abdur Rahim's victimisation, speaks of the hostility and hatred that this group was subject to. Although Carlo, the son of Zeb's father's Italian business partner, believes that the assassination was a "personal vendetta," (Zaman 261) that is, an act of revenge taken by the supervisor whom Abdur Rahim had fired for his misconduct, it cannot be ignored that his Bihari origin was primarily the root cause of his victimisation. Zeb is well aware that it was the Bengali nationalistic fervour that

provided the employee with the opportunity to wreak vengeance on his father. Her father's non-Bengali origin heightened his vulnerability and helplessness; she tells Carlo sadly, "I think my father must have subconsciously nursed the fear that always stalks the outsider—the fear of being singled out in times of ethnic unrest" (Zaman 261). In East Pakistan, Abdur Rahim maintained a low profile and tried to erase his Bihari identity by "melting into the Bengali culture-pot" (Zaman 261). He even forbade his daughter Zeb to speak Urdu. Moreover, unlike the other factory owners who were repressive and exploitative during the Pakistani era, he had been nothing but a benevolent employer. Nonetheless, the furious fury that was unleashed by Bengali linguistic nationalism targets Abdur Rahim because he was Urdu-speaking and, hence, was thought to be anti-Bengali. What mattered most at that time was not whether one was patriotic or not; rather, what gained importance was whether one was Bihari or Bengali.

The Biharis were the target of Bengali wrath because they were considered the national enemy for their putative support of Pakistan. There is no denying that, along with many Bengalis, a few Biharis did join the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF), and other auxiliary forces like the *Razakars* and *Al-Shams* organised by Pakistani armies (Sen 633); the entire community cannot be punished for the wrongs of a handful of miscreants. At the same time, the Bihari people's contribution to the '71 war cannot be overlooked either. There were many instances where many Biharis had helped the Bengalis during the war and risked their lives by giving shelter to Bengalis; some even secretly helped the *Muktibahini* (freedom fighters) (Whittaker 285). There is also evidence that when war broke out in 1971, some Biharis openly embraced the demand for a secular Bengali state (Siddiqi 162-163). Van Schendel records that since many of the Biharis, but certainly not all, were against the secession of Bangladesh and claimed allegiance to Pakistan, Biharis were collectively branded as Pakistani collaborators (*A History of Bangladesh* 173), and hence, regardless of actual political

inclinations, all Urdu-speakers found themselves identified with the Pakistani cause (van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* 163). It is because of this generalised belief that Abdur Rahim is stereotyped as pro-Pakistani and attacked. As opposed to such views, Abdur Rahim, in fact, was quite critical of Pakistan's aggression and had vehemently denounced its political action, saying, "The generals have gone mad! . . . Do they think they can keep the country together by a show of arms?" (26). Even when he is attacked on the train, he fervently tries to convince the attackers that he is not a Bihari and definitely not anti-Bengali: "I'm not a Bihari [...] not like them" (Zaman 55). However, his plea for mercy falls on deaf ears, and he is mercilessly slaughtered in Bengali revenge killings. Ironically, he becomes the victim of the very brutality that he and his family fled from during the Partition.

Again, through Sakina and her family's sad demise, Zaman brings to light how, blinded by violent and destructive nationalism, people kill other innocent people. When Nazir Ahmed told Sakina that "Bengali nationalism is going to raise its head and speak its mind. Not a weak voice, [...] but as the roar of a lion," (137) though a bit apprehensive, she did not believe they would be in a perilous situation. Since they had wholeheartedly adopted Bangladesh as their country, she had complete confidence in the Bengali people and believed that they would come forward to help them if they were attacked, "Ammi has lot of Bengali friends. I know most of the youngsters in the neighbourhood. They'll stand by us if there is any trouble. Besides, we have done nothing wrong. [...] In fact, we gave shelter to Bengali families. I am sure they'll vouch for our non-involvement in this war" (Zaman 164). However, her expectations and hopes of being helped or protected by the Bengalis are shattered as her entire family is viciously killed by the Bengalis as an act of revenge against the Biharis. The Qureshis were not involved in politics, nor did they side with Pakistan; on the contrary, they had sheltered many Bengali families during the war despite their financial constraints. But regrettably, one day after

Bangladesh's independence, Sakina's parents are killed by the frenzied Bengalis, who considered all Urdu-speaking people to be Pakistani collaborators. Sakina herself is raped by one of the two Bengali young men who, along with their family, were given refuge by the Qureshis during the war. Sakina's, Zeb's, and her mother's victimisation reflect the lived experiences of many Bihari women who, along with countless Bengali women, were victims of sexual assault. Soon after statehood, Bangladesh became hostile to the Biharis because of their political opinions and cultural, linguistic, and ethnic affiliations with Pakistan, which resulted in the mass killing and rape of many Bihari women. Yasmin Saikia, who carried out extensive research on Bangladesh war and women, contends that "the rhetoric of war and perception of Pakistanis and Biharis as the 'enemy' propelled Bengali men to commit horrific acts, and vice versa, and these often metamorphosed into sexual violence against women in order to terrorise and force the whole communities into fear and submission" (284). Saikia further adds that it was the spirit of nationalism and nation-building that drove the men on both sides to commit such horrific crimes. She asserts that "Pakistani soldiers and their Bihari supporters raped and killed to save a nation; Bengali men also raped and killed in the hope of making a new nation" (Saikia 286). Evidently, radicalised by militant and chauvinistic nationalism, both sides committed horrendous acts that were beyond description.

Nationalism, which tends to be exclusive, also determines who should be considered to belong to the nation and who should be excluded. Christian Fuchs defines nationalism as "a peculiar modern ideology that justifies the building and maintenance of nation-states. It creates a political and cultural outsider. Those humans belonging to this outside are excluded from the membership status of the nation" (235). And the enemies and outsiders of nationalism, according to Fuchs, are "immigrants, minorities, refugees, or socialists" (239). As a descendant of a migrant, Zeb, along with the other migrants and refugees of the Partition, is excluded from

being part of the Bengali nation-state. Consequently, Zeb is “Othered” and considered an outsider, an enemy of the country. At Nazir Ahmed’s house, when bomb blasts are heard outside throughout the night, Zeb is traumatised, thinking that they would be attacked again by the *Muktibahinis*, and in a panic-stricken voice utters, “Will they kill us [...] because we are non-Bengalis?” (Zaman 163). This is the first time Zeb acknowledges her half-Bihari parentage and feels threatened by it; till now, she has been quite certain of her position as a Bengali, but the Liberation War with its concomitant focus on nationalism generates in her the fear of being executed because of her Bihari roots. Bengali nationalism excluded Zeb from the category of a Bangladeshi and turned her into a homeless and stateless person.

The precarity of national identity and the sense of belonging

As linguistic homogeneity became the defining factor of Bengali nationalism and national identity, Zeb’s link to Bihari lineage deterred her from being a part of the Bengali national identity. Language then seems to play a pivotal role in determining who should be inside or outside the limits of national identity. Although theorists like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have argued that a codified language is integral to nation-building, many nations have multiple national languages. Arguably, then, language does not necessarily have to be a key component of national inclusion. Nevertheless, Bengali nationalistic identity, which was structured around a strong sense of Bengali language and culture, included those migrants whose language was Bangla but excluded those who were Urdu-speaking. Hence, as Bangladesh politically and ideologically moved away from being a state erected on Islam as its religion and turned to a secular state anchored in the Bangla language, almost instantly the Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to a country that had its roots in the similarity of religion became outsiders. Just as Islamic nationalist identity marginalised the people of other religions like Hindus and Buddhists in Bangladesh, the centrality of language in forging a Bengali

national identity dismissed Zeb from the parameters of Bengali national identity because of the language her father spoke. It is quite ironic that the nation that fought against the Pakistanis for their language committed the same crime of repressing the members of another language group merely for the difference of language.

In fact, the new definition of national identity opened up a host of complexities regarding Zeb's identity, as she was already assigned the identity of an alien. Bengali nationalism, as Fazal points out, had already ousted those who did not fall into the preconceived criteria of Bengali nationality. Fazal posits that “‘Bangali nationalism’ espoused by the Bangladesh state, wherein all the citizens were to be called Bengalis, necessarily presupposed either the extermination of non-Bengalis or their submergence in the larger collectivity” (192). Before the '71 war, Zeb never thought that she would be anything but a Bangladeshi; never before was her Bengaliness questioned, never before did she have to hear “her father is a Bihari, so shun her” (Zaman 294). But during the formation of the new nation, with utter disbelief, she realises that she is no longer considered a Bangladeshi; rather, her Bihari identity supersedes her Bengali identity, and she is branded a traitor to the country. Having a clear national identity is crucial, as it defines a citizen's membership in a country and grants ownership to the country. And since, as Nandy asserts, “nationalism insists on the primacy of national identity over identities built on subnational allegiances—religions, castes, sects, linguistic affiliations, and ethnicities” (7), Zeb is excluded from being part of the collective political Bengali identity because of the differences in her language, culture, and history. Zeb's exclusion from this national identity engenders in her an identity crisis and leads her to alienation. Discussing the significance of national identity, Anthony Smith asserts that it is a critical component in an individual's sense of self and collective worth and belongingness, without which an individual cannot function. A sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and

locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its 'distinctive culture' (Smith 17). Smith further asserts,

The primary function of national identity is to provide a strong 'community of history and destiny' to save people from personal oblivion and restore collective faith. To identify with the nation is to identify with more than a cause or a collectivity. It is to be offered personal renewal and dignity in and through national regeneration. It is to become part of a political 'super-family' that will restore to each of its constituent families their birth-right and their former noble status, where now each is deprived of power and held in tempt. (161)

Without a concrete national identity, Zeb feels lost since it is a "psychosocial mechanism which everyone needs if they are to function as members of society" (McCrone and Bechhofer 10). Confusion and uncertainty regarding her national identity traumatise her so much that even after years in London, she cannot figure out where she belongs or what her identity is. When Shafiq, the freedom fighter who saved her during the war and now works at the embassy, asked where she originally was from, she could not answer straight away as she herself was at a loss. Instead, she hesitates and wonders what she should say: "Bangladesh? Pakistan?" but then avoids both asserting, "I'm a *British* citizen" (Zaman 8). Her dilemma clearly indicates the ambiguity of her identity. Even Shafiq was perplexed at Zeb's hesitancy, as he could not fathom why she was trying to hide her identity—why "she avoided telling him about her ancestors? What was she afraid of?" (Zaman 109). What Shafiq fails to understand is that for Zeb, Bengali nationalism has problematized her identity and legitimacy as a Bangladeshi. The constant reshaping of the attributes of the nation and national identity has left her displaced forever and has triggered her existential and identity crises.

Homesickness and the desire for acceptance

Even though Zeb has been away from Bangladesh for thirteen years, she is, more often than not, overcome with extreme homesickness. The horrific experiences of the war had such

devastating effects on Zeb that she was on the verge of losing her mind and was trying to starve herself to death. To save her, she was sent to Italy for treatment. After being displaced from her homeland, Zeb tried to settle first in Italy and then in London. Though Zeb missed her home and her Didi (her nanny and caregiver), at the initial stage, she was not in a position to return to Bangladesh, as “the sights and sounds of her country [...] might bring back those horrible memories” (Zaman 257–258). It would be, as the doctors said, “difficult to get back her confidence and normalcy a second time round” (257–258). The agonising experiences of being displaced, along with the realisation that her own people rejected her, haunted her to such an extent that even the memory of Bangladesh agitated Zeb: “remembering the past always made her restless” (272). Although her memories of home are wrought with memories of trauma and rejection, Zeb is constantly reminded of “her Chittagong days” (271) and yearns “to be with Husna for a good adda” (283). A deep sense of longing and a lost sense of belonging intensify when she goes to Shafiq’s wedding reception. The wedding programme rekindles Zeb’s homesickness; the memories torment her so much that she would often have the sudden urge “to go back to her hilltop house in Chittagong, to hear the noisy crickets and the hummingbirds, to touch the green grass of her lawn, to smell the jasmine, and to pick handfuls of multicoloured Cosmos for her window sill” (303). Zeb’s desire to go back to her home in Chittagong is not just a yearning for the physical spatiality of her home; instead, it is a desire to put an end to her displaced condition and be part of the new nation-state, Bangladesh. In Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling’s opinion, home is not just a place for living that is filled with feelings and attachment but is also a political space of negotiation and contestation. They further contend that, in a broader sense, home is associated with nation and identity. In a similar light, Angelika Bammer asserts that “home, nation and family operate within the same mythic metaphorical field” (x). Home and nation have normatively been interpreted as safe, reassuring places of trust, familiarity and togetherness (Brickell 578). Clearly, then, the idea of home for the displaced

goes beyond domestic space and invokes the country or nation as home. The intersectionality of home and nation surely indicates that Zeb's desire to be in her Chittagong residence is a wish to connect with the nation—Bangladesh. Myria Georgiou explores the multiplicity of the meaning of home as follows:

Home can be the domestic natural space, the immediate family, a private home, the refuge from the outside world. It can be the local space where everyday life evolves – the place to which people always return. It can also be the country of origin, the symbolic Home, the source, or the highly symbolic and mediated transnational context, which shelters diaspora against exclusionary national spaces. More than any one of these, it tends to be all of the above. (160)

Seen from Georgiou's perspective, it can be said that home can mean, as she says, "the country of origin." In that sense, wanting to return home signifies Zeb's search for a territorial space that she could call her own and her desire to gain inclusivity in an exclusionary national space.

Despite her acute sense of longing to go back to her homeland, she falters in her decision to visit Bangladesh since the image of a homeland that she can lay claim to remains evasive to Zeb. The feeling of fear and anxiety that has been gnawing at her so far deepens when, at Shafiq's wedding, she hears how the Bihari people had to live in a camp in Mirpur. The mention of the Biharis being relocated to Mirpur terrifies her so profoundly that she "shivered at the mention of biharis" and wondered if "they would have sent her father to the Bihari camp in Dacca if he had survived?" (292). Zeb's fear is not unwarranted, as is evident in the real-life scenario where the Biharis still live peripheral lives in various camps. Although in 2008 the government of Bangladesh granted citizenship only to those Biharis who were born after the birth of Bangladesh or who were minors during the Liberation War of Bangladesh (*The Daily Star* n.p.), this citizenship did not ensure their access to citizenship rights. It did bring an end to their 'statelessness' but in reality, many of them still lead lives submerged in poverty and lack of opportunities. Moreover, they are still subject to significant nationalist

hostility, and the term Bihari “continues to be synonymous with dalal or wartime collaborator” (Siddiqi 154). Zeb’s constant vacillation about returning to Bangladesh indicates that her wounds remain unhealed. Even after losing everything—her parents, her honour, and her home—she, unfortunately, could not claim herself a Bangladeshi as she does not fulfil the citizenship criteria. In this regard, Fazal has rightly attested that “if religion in Pakistan has failed to subsume various bases of peoples’ identifications, language in Bangladesh has created its own insiders and outsiders” (176). Despite being half Bengali, she does not get the rites of passage to Bangladeshi nationality and cannot, without fear and anxiety, claim herself a Bangladeshi because of her father’s Bihari lineage.

Paradoxically, even though she is wronged and displaced, Zeb feels that she is very much a Bengali and does not belong in London, “there was a part of her that did not belong here, a part that was distinctly Bengali, despite everything” (Zaman 303). Her realisation that she is more a Bengali than a Bihari affirms the notion that “identities are too complex to be captured by concepts that rely on national borders for reference” (Schultermandl and Toplu 11), and it is this powerful feeling of being a Bengali that ultimately instills in Zeb the courage to return to Bangladesh not just to see her Didi but also to discern her position in Bangladesh. However, she is overpowered by a new kind of fear—the fear of rejection. A kind of trepidation enshrouds her as she sits on the plane and ponders, “Would she be accepted or rejected by the Chittagong of her childhood?” (306). It is needless to say that her fear is whether she would be, after so many years, considered a Bihari and hence a traitor and rejected, or accepted as a Bangladeshi.

Conclusion

Over the years, geopolitics and nationalism have driven innumerable people from one place to another. The 1947 Partition, provoked by religious nationalism, forced the Urdu-speaking people to cross borders to Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, only to be displaced once again by linguistic nationalism. Indeed, the 1947 Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 not only changed the map of the subcontinent but also drastically transformed the lives of millions of people forever. There is no denying that many Biharis sided with Pakistan and were against the creation of Bangladesh, but it cannot be said altogether that they did not suffer at all during the war. Researchers like Ahmed Ilias, Joya Chatterji, Yasmin Saikia, and Victoria Redclift have documented in their research the ordeals this group underwent simply for their political opinions. Zeb's quest for a stable national identity and a secured sense of belonging poses questions like what happens to those who consider themselves Bengalis and want to be included but are displaced eternally because of the prevalent mistrust and stereotypes against the Biharis. Drawing a correlation between politics and the precarity of Zeb and Sakina's existence and national identity, Zaman seeks answers to complex issues like nationalism, national identity, and the sense of belonging.

There is no doubt that for the Bengalis, nationalism continues to be a liberation ideology that helped them break away from the domination of Pakistani rule. However, after 1971, nationalist rhetoric in Bangladesh, according to van Schendel, "went the way of Pakistani nationalism after 1947," that is, it came to support ruthless accumulation, cultural hegemonism, selective xenophobia and frequent military rule ("Who Speaks for the Nation?" 126). Pointing out the inadequacy of such a type of nationalism, van Schendel further argues that by categorising the nation into 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim', or 'Bengali' and 'non-Bengali,' nationalism obscures a multiplicity of groups and draws boundaries of citizenships to exclude and destroy the symbols of cultural pluralism ("Who Speaks for the Nation?" 134). He thus

advocates for defining “new, more pluralistic, inclusive and democratic notions of what it could mean to be Bangladeshi citizen in the twenty-first century” (134). Concurring with van Schendel, I too believe that rethinking the notion of nationalism and nation-state and adding the voices of the marginalised to the national narrative of the country, as Zaman does with her *Invisible Lines*, will not suffice. Only by challenging the legitimacy of the rigid definitions of nation, nationalism, and national identity and establishing a pluralist, inclusive, and democratic nation-state can we ensure the visibility as well as the rights of all the people of the country, regardless of their religion, language, or ethnicity.

Notes

1. In this case, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his followers were accused of a conspiracy to separate East Pakistan from Pakistan with the help of the Indian government.

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