

Atreyee Sinha*
Research Scholar,
Department of Basic Sciences &
Humanities and Social Sciences,
National Institution of Technology,
Mizoram

UDC: 821.214 .09-31Saha M.
DOI: 10.19090/gff.v48i3.2377
Original research paper

Dr. Shuchi Kaparwan**
Associate Professor,
Department of Basic Sciences &
Humanities and Social Sciences,
National Institution of Technology,
Mizoram

ADMIRING BORDER AND FORGETTING PARTITION: A POSTMEMORY STUDY OF *CHOTODER BORDER* BY MANJIRA SAHA

Postmemory is an epigenetic study that investigates the transmission of the memory of the earlier generation to their descendants through the art the later generation created. Researchers have shown that the progeny of Partition refugees too inherit the traumatic memories and nostalgia for the lost land of their past generation in their study conducted on the second or third-generation refugees of the Partition of India. However, that transference of trauma seems to be largely absent in the case of the fourth-generation refugee- progeny as exhibited in *Chotoder Border* ('Border, As the Children Have Seen' in English) by Manjira Saha. It should be noted that they possess a soft corner for their ancestral homeland that their fore-generation had left behind despite being conscious of the pain, suffering, and sense of separation the fore-generation had gone through while leaving. Thus, Partition and border are different phenomena for the present generations of Partitioned refugees. The purpose of this research is to find out the reason behind this gradual diverse change in standpoints among the generations. For that, a deductive, analytical, and objective method is intended to be adopted within the thematic framework of the concept of postmemory.

Keywords: nostalgia, Partition, border, postmemory, children

The Indian Independence Act of 1947 defined how the Indian subcontinent would be partitioned and that entailed the political sovereignty of the two nation-states – the Hindu-majority India and the Muslim-majority Pakistan, as well as the accompaniment of mass migration and violence on a large scale. After the Partition, the

* atreyee.literature@gmail.com

** shuchi.hss@nitmz.ac.in

imminent problem of maintaining the sovereignty of both nation-states was solved by drawing a new border, often known as “incision scars” (Chatterjee, 1999: 185), that separated Punjab in the western part and Bengal in the eastern part of undivided India. Consequently, when Partition turned out to be traumatic, people on both sides of the border were forced to leave their habitation, home, property, relatives, friends, and immigrate to a new land, and had to accept the status of refugee. Therefore, Partition literature reflects the impact of that devastating and scarring genocide that has been encountered (Sinha & Shuchi, 2022: 2-7). These kinds of traumatic experiences and violence could not be restricted to the victimized present generation only but passed on to the ‘generation after.’ Firdous Azim (2021) and Anjali Gera Roy (2020) have shown that the progeny of the Partition refugees of India possess a legacy of traumatic memories of “the largest mass migration in human history” (Sen, 2015: 128). Their epigenetic study echoes what Prof. Marianne Hirsch has introduced as ‘Postmemory’ or inherited memory in *The Generation of Postmemory* where she examines the fractured forms of art created by the descendants of the Holocaust victims that refer to the transmission of traumatic memories to the next generation:

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (2012: 5)

Therefore, literary representations or any art forms dealing with the postmemory of Partition in practice capture the memory of violence-induced Partition and its distressful reverberation due to communal incongruity, as well as the nostalgia of amiable and delightful past habitation (Sinha & Shuchi, 2022: 2-7); and the dilemma of the descendants about what their own *desh*¹ should be as there is a gap regarding connotation with the word ‘desh’ among generations. The present text – Manjira Saha’s *Chotoder Border* (literally translated as “Children’s Border” but thematically should be as “Border, As the Children Have Seen”) is distinct from such presentation though the focal point of this text is the border that causes, with its physical entity, the vivisection of Bengal into two parts – the eastern part as Bangladesh as a nation and the western part as West Bengal remained in India – and thus representing a permanent barrier to be reciprocated freely with their ‘past’ experiences in their ‘lost’ *desh*. The book is a collection of writings and

¹ ‘Desh’, in Bengali, means native land or ancestral land, a particular place to which one is culturally associated.

sketches by the students of a school located in the border region of Nadia² district in West Bengal, India, expressing their perspective on the border. Being a resident of the Indo-Bangladesh border region, the contributors of this book perceive the border as a fascinating and mesmerizing tourist spot where illegal activities are just some trivial incidents. Though marked as a smuggling area, they refer to the border as ‘beautiful’ and ‘serene’ in their draft and present the surrounding of the border with natural elements associated with beauty in their drawings. It is a place for them to cherish their patriotism. Their outlook, therefore, differs much from the general pain-tricking perspective on the border that reminds of the Partition and the violence it precedes and succeeds. Moreover, most of the children are the descendants of the refugees who themselves had experienced the circumstances that led to partition and its resultant border. However, apart from nostalgia for lost land, this text records neither mourning for the event of Partition nor the instances of being ‘hinge’ (Hoffman, 2005: xv). This article has attempted a deductive, analytical, and objective exposition to investigate how much postmemory of Partition transmitted to the fourth-generation refugee through the thematic study of the writings and sketches by the teenage students, as well as to bring to light the reason behind the fading out of postmemory of Partition generation after generation.

II

The primary text, Manjira Saha’s *Chotoder Border*, captures the testimonies of school students of Matiari Banpur High School, situated in the Nadia district in West Bengal – “a walking distance of 5 to 7 minutes from the border” (Saha, 2018: 8), as the editor Manjira Saha, teacher of that school, claims in the introduction. Manjira Saha has adopted an effective method of using both mediums – written narratives and drawings – for children to express and articulate their feelings and thoughts through their comfort zone. Considering the local history of that particular locality and the writings by these children, this fact is certain that these students belong to the fourth generation of the Partition- immigrants³. In the introductory section, Saha has also provided an introduction to the socio-economic background of these students and how the border is inseparably

² Nadia is a district of West Bengal adjacent to the Indo-Bangladesh border. According to the data published in the *Demographic Diversity of India, Census 1971*, “after partition, in 1950s, 49.81% people and after Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, 39.23% people came from East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) and entered only into Nadia District.” (qtd. in Biswas, 2021: 61) – turning this place into a hub of refugee settlement. So, we can judge the significance of these artworks created by these children from Nadia in local historiography as the refugee descendants.

³ For further clarification, we approached the author over the phone, and in response, she confirmed that these children must belong to the fourth generation of Partition refugees.

associated with their daily lives. The book, therefore, turns out to be an exhibition of how these progenies of the Partition refugees perceive and present the phenomena of border and the event of Partition. The editor also asserts in the introduction to the book that the sketches and write-ups found in this compilation are the instant outcomes of the students, as neither the topic had been announced in advance nor the students were provided with time to get prepared to write or sketch.

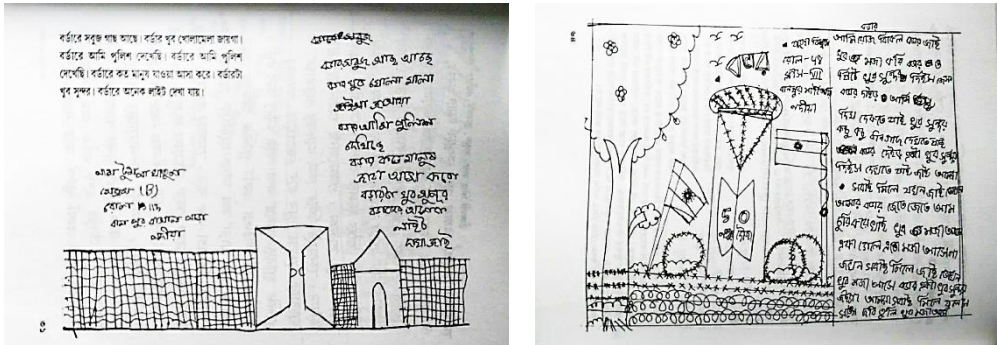


Fig. 1: Border as ‘beautiful’ presented by children in their drawings and written narratives

The most compelling feature of these testimonies is the presentation of the border through their visually embedded images and narratives, as the border no longer evokes the sense of horrific history and consequences of Partition; instead, the adjective ‘beautiful,’ as shown in Figure 1, is readily put before it by these innocent observers of that particular border area of Bengal (Saha, 2018: 23; 31; 65; 212).

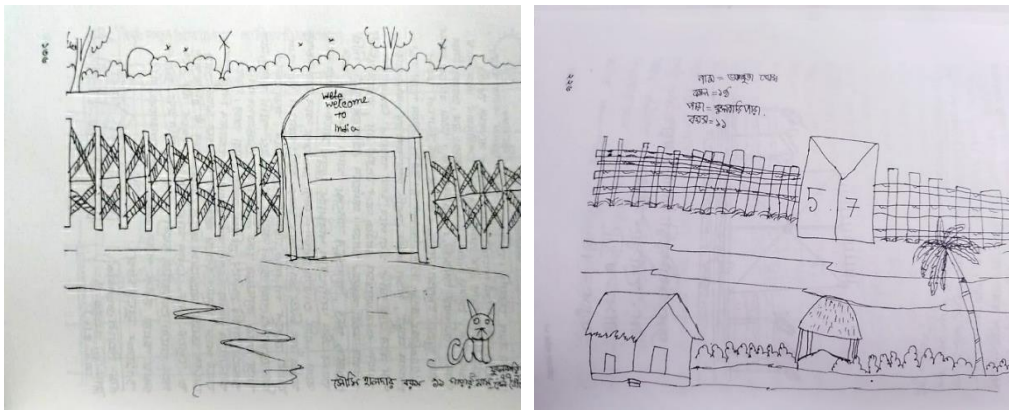


Fig. 2: Natural surroundings and the presence of animal beside the border in the children’s drawings

In the pictures by eleven-years-old Soumi Haldar and Amrita Ghosh (Fig. 2) and Sanchita Pal (Fig. 3), one can see that they have tried to present the surroundings of the border with natural elements, such as sun, clouds, birds, trees, adorable animals, which we associate with beauty (Saha, 2018: 136; 245). In the early developmental stages, children often draw objects that surround them actively. They learn object permanence, and seeing an object in front of them encourages them to recreate them. The common natural motifs that children have always drawn give them comfort and security. These natural objects exist in their everyday life, and they see them as familiar and safe. Likewise, these school children judge the border as a familial and secure place, and therefore, they love that border.

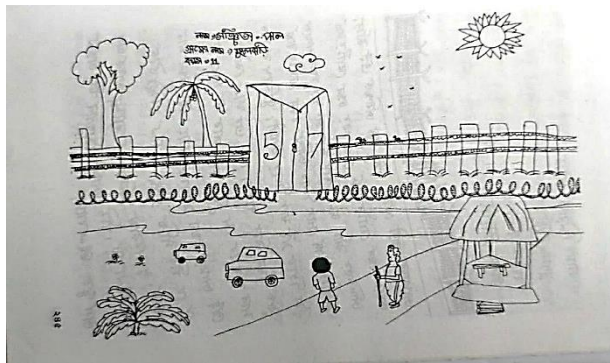


Fig. 3: Border as tourist spot and presentation of common natural motifs in Sanchita Pal's drawings

Accordingly, 'border' and *kantatar* or *tarkanta* (barbed wire or fence) are synonymous for these children, which is why, in most of the drawings compiled in the book, the fences are only present in a wide empty background, especially in the drawings of Arnab Roychowdhury, Arpita Acharya, Tanmoy Sen, Pritam Biswas who draw only wire fences (Saha, 2018: 142; 145; 168; 251). Arpita Acharya even captioned her drawing as *tarkanta* instead of the border (Saha, 2018: 145). Many students, especially from junior classes write sentences like, "Border is a place encircled with barbed wire fences" (Saha, 2018: 196; 209). Jaya Pal of class VIII writes that though she had no preconceived idea about the border, the first thing she noticed when she visited there for the first time was the barbed wire fence (Saha, 2018: 141). Most importantly, the fence is a beautiful work of art in the eyes of these children. The barbed wire fences have patterns or designs (like spiral, rectangles, vertical lines, and horizontal lines) that appeal to the children's aesthetics (Trautner, 2019), as the way the wire is twisted or arranged creates a visually appealing image.

Children start learning patterns in their drawings from infancy, and these school-going children become elated with the reflection of such patterns found in the barbed wire fences. The fences also symbolize safety, security, and boundaries. This symbolic meaning here evokes positive emotions in the children, making the fence appear beautiful. This is a completely different approach to the border from their ancestors, as the latter always consider the border as a sight of pain that reminds them of their forced migration, which relates to huge losses, both emotionally and worldly.

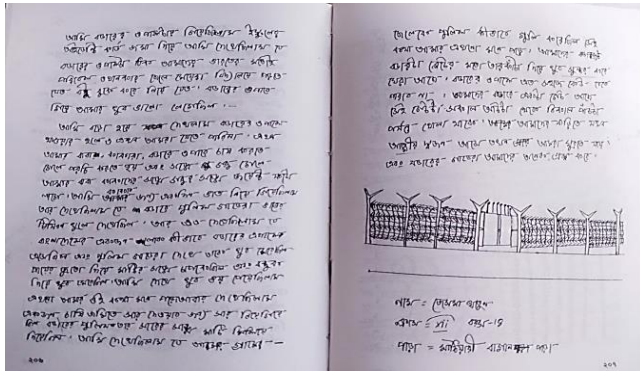


Fig. 4: Border as tourist spot in and Jesma Khatun’s narratives

Thus, the border no longer represents a symbol of demarcation and restriction for these partition progenies. Preferably, its existential entity with wires and bricks reduces the intensity of loss to the citizens of a country over the years and metamorphoses the physicality of the border into a visiting place for these 21st-century children. Sanchita Pal (Fig. 3) has included images of some cars and human figures that ensure that the border region has been converted into a tourist spot (Saha, 2018: 227). Jesma Khatun (Fig. 4) has written that when relatives visit their family, the people of this region arrange trips to show them the border (Saha, 2018: 207). They enjoy and admire the presence of the border in their locality and feel proud of the privileged location of their habitation (Saha, 2018: 247). For Tumpa Khatun, it is also a place for evening walks, sports, and exercise, being “a free and open place” (Saha, 2018: 31). The semiotic resources in visually embedded images and the written narratives of these children break down the traditional concept of border that delimits the area of free movement for their ancestors due to Partition as it barred their visiting to their birthplace on their own accord.



Fig. 5: Border evokes patriotism to the children

Likewise, the border represents not only a specific boundary of a nation but also an existence to promote patriotism from childhood to these refugee-progeny. Sumanta Biswas of class XII concludes his writing by hailing India (Saha, 2018: 183). Students like him possess heartfelt respect for and faith in the BSF who guard the border as well as the country from the attack of enemies. Some of these children got inspired by the BSF and aimed to join the Indian army in the future (Saha, 2018: 174; 250). There are many sketches, as shown in Figure 5, where one can see the Indian national flag beside the fence and attentive BSF on duty (Saha, 2018: 24; 255). Children often favor patriotism after watching the security force at the border because they see them as role models, feel a sense of national pride, recognize their duty and accountability, develop a sense of community, and emotionally connect with their sacrifices. Security forces at the border represent an ideal of patriotism for children, and their behavior influences children's attitudes toward their country.



Fig. 6: Border is a place for smuggling

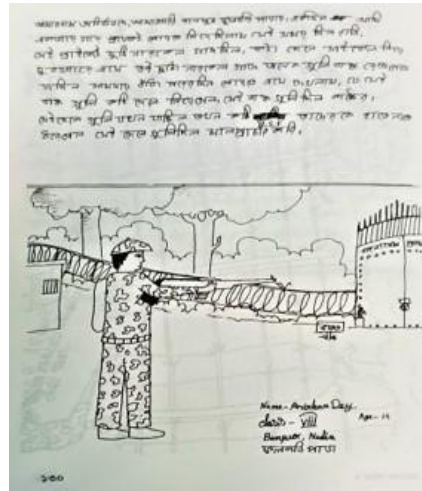


Fig. 7: Narrating an event of smuggling

This realistic border deeply influences the psyche of the children. Despite realizing the homogeneous nature of a nation on the two parts of the border, these children exhibit reverence for their country only, and the other part is exclusively entitled to enmity or a space of smuggling and trespassing. Puja Nath of class V presents an act of smuggling in her sketch (Fig.6) in which someone is handing over a bag to someone on the opposite side of the border, and BSF⁴ is pointing a gun at them (Saha, 2018: 129). A large number of students claim that they have eye-witnessed smuggling and trespassing. Some of them also describe their experiences in their writings, such as Anirban Dey of class VIII (Fig. 7) describes that one night he had seen some boys with a few wooden boxes and how the BSF had caught them (Saha, 2018: 130). He has used the word *mal pacharkari*, a Bengali word for ‘smuggler.’ Not only the students of class VIII, but even the younger students also have used terms associated with smuggling. Some of these words are even unknown to most of the adults of non-border regions. It points to the frequency of the act of illegal activities and their inseparable association with the upbringing of these children. Illegal activities are so regular and customary in their life that they find the border as an assigned place of smuggling, as Priyanka Pramanik of class VII argues

⁴ The Border Security Force (BSF) was established in 1965 with the primary objective of securing India’s borders – particularly with the borders of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The BSF maintains tight vigilance on the border and prevents any infiltration of terrorists, smugglers, and illegal immigrants.

through her definition of border: “Border is a place to smuggle ... cows, gold biscuits, parrots are exported through border” (Saha, 2018: 135). Also, they have mentioned the punishment the smugglers get when being caught by the BSF. It is also to be noted that Kakuli Mondal of class XII describes the border as a secure place in India (Saha, 2018: 176).

III

It is now imperative to evaluate the memory of the border and partition that these refugee children inherited from their ancestors. One can notice in this book that there is a very bounded postmemory of refugee struggle on the part of these descendants that was harshly encountered by their fore-generation. Partition and its related history are repeatedly cultured in the memory of the elders with scars; the border also enkindles not only the sense of separation, pain, and suffering but also the obstructions and unattainability of a desire to cross to the lost homeland, “a site of enunciation for thousands of people living through and resisting communal polarization, migration, rehabilitation and resettlement” (Sengupta, 2016: 1). On the contrary, the visible border, which remains the only reality for these children, turns into a site to memorize for happiness. The progeny has very limited knowledge about the Partition and the history of the border. For them, the border only demarcates two countries, unaware of the fact that it is actually dividing a single nation into two parts. Very few, like Lipika and Biswambhar Raha of class XII, have any knowledge about Partition. Again, Ananya Das of class VII is the only child who has written about the religious differences between the two countries, but she has not mentioned the Partition that actually happened due to this communal unrest (Saha, 2018: 95).

However, the children also wonder at the minimum cultural, lingual, and scenic differences between the two sides of the border. Miraj Mondal of class XII says that the police of Bangladesh speak in Bengali which helps Bengali people from India to interact with them easily (Saha, 2018: 247). It posits a stark contrast with the inconveniences they experience in communicating with the Hindi-speaking BSF. Though very few, some of them have the concept of ‘epar bangla- opar bangla’⁵ (‘this

⁵ Since both West Bengal and Bangladesh constituted the whole Bengal province in the pre-partitioned era, after partition, these two geographical locations have been orally referred to as such appellations by their respective citizens. Patronized by nation-states, the political decision to create a new border redefines the identity of both an individual and a nation. This aspect is further elaborated by David Newman who suggests that “borders create (or reflect) difference and constitute the separation line not only between states and

Bengal - that Bengal') (Saha, 2018: 174) and know about the Bhasha Andolon of 1952⁶ that took place between Bangladesh and Pakistan and the migration to India during that time (Saha, 2018:169).

It is also noteworthy that some students perceive that the language and natural beauty of Bangladesh are better than India. It echoes the nostalgia their ancestors preserved for their past habitation. Lipika of class XII represents those students who even regret not being born in Bangladesh as she has heard that the beauty of Bangladesh is more enhanced than India. It is parallel to the willingness their refugee-ancestors possessed to go back to their original homeland (Saha, 2018: 239). It is to note here that researchers found that one of the reasons the Partition-refugees from Bangladesh collectively decided to settle down in Nadia is that this adjoining place brought back at least "some sort of past ambience of their lost homeland. This geographical space also conduced them to reclaim those discarded cultivated lands that they had left behind and to return again to reap at the harvest time" (Gayen, 2022: 3).

Hence, except in some few cases, the fourth-generation refugees do not retain the memories of memories of their earlier generations, unlike the second or third generation refugee as seen in Kalyani Thakur Charal's novella *Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manus* or the research conducted by Firdous Azim (2021) respectively. It leads us to delve into the question of why the memories of the earlier generation are not being significantly transmitted to the fourth-generation descendants of the refugees. There are many reasons behind it. First, their economic adversity stops them from walking down the memory lane with their descendants. Secondly, they have little interest in education. As Saha has pointed out in the introduction, they went to school only for government incentives, not to get an education, and left school after the mid-day meal (2018: 12). The absence of the 'place of remembrance' which is their ancestral abode and the dominant present of the border together also create a retroactive interference so that postmemory on Partition and its association fade away generation by

geographical spaces, but also between the 'us' and 'them', the 'here' and 'there', and the 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' Borders retain their essential sense of sharp dislocation and separation, a sharp cut-off point between two polarities" (2006: 6).

⁶ The Bhasha Andolon of 1952 was a language movement that took place in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The movement was a protest against the decision of the Pakistani government to make Urdu the only official language of Pakistan. This decision was seen as a threat to the linguistic and cultural identity of the Bengali people in East Pakistan who already had their own language, Bengali. The movement gained momentum, and the government was forced to recognize Bengali as an official language of Pakistan in 1956.

generation. Last but not the least, these children are no longer refugees. Their ancestors worked hard and successfully settled a habitation in India. So, the status of these children has been upgraded to that of permanent inhabitants from the refugee status of their great-grandparents. Therefore, they have no idea about the struggle their ancestors experienced or the context in which they were forced to struggle. It is appropriate to suggest that the border has always been reconfigured as beautiful, despite the various negativity attached to it, in the cognition of these school students at Matiari Banpur High School, and issues such as Partition and postmemory have disappeared.

[The authors of this article have translated the required portions of the primary text from Bengali into English.]

Atreyee Sinha, Dr. Shuchi Kaparwan

Summary

Manjira Saha's *Chotoder Border* captures the authentic lived experience of the teenage students on the border of West Bengal where they lived. Through drawings and narratives, these students portray the border of Bengal in a positive manner as a safe, secure, beautiful, and visiting place though the very connotation 'Border,' particularly in the Indian context, represents as well as evokes the memory of the past reality of Partition in 1947 that caused the division of Bengal and Punjab. Partition entailed mass migration, violence, nostalgia, and the new stigmatic identity of 'refugee' as well. The traumatic experiences of these refugees are passed on to the next generations. Yet the fourth-generation child- contributors of Manjira Saha's *Chotoder Border* negate these common assumptions of carrying forward the legacy of postmemory by the 'generation after' and it is substantiated through their portrayal of the 'Border' as a place of happiness. This analytical exploration points to the social, economic, cultural, and educational backdrop of the children for the nullification of postmemory in the fourth-generation- refugee.

Keywords: nostalgia, Partition, border, postmemory, children

REFERENCES

- Azim, F. (2021). Introduction. In F. Azim (Ed.), *Inherited Memories: Third Generation Perspectives on Partition in the East* (pp. xv-xxviii). New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Biswas, A. K. (2021): Impact of Refugee: A Case Study in Nadia District of West Bengal. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, 10 (1), 61-64.

Retrieved from [http://s3-ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/ijmer/pdf/volume10/volume10-issue1\(6\)/13.pdf](http://s3-ap-southeast-1.amazonaws.com/ijmer/pdf/volume10/volume10-issue1(6)/13.pdf).

- Charal, K.T. (2019). *Andhar Bil O Kichhu Manus*. Kolkata: Chaturtha Dunia.
- Chatterjee, J. (1999). The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*, 33 (1), 185-242. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313155>.
- Gayen, S. (2022). Seeking Space in Post-Partition Bengal: Reading Kalyani Thakur Charal's Autobiography *Ami Kano Charal Likhi* through a Gender and Caste Perspective. *Sage: Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 1-12
- Hirsch, M. (2012). *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hoffman, E. (2004). *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Newman, D. (2006). The Lines That Continue to Separate Us: Borders in Our 'Borderless' World. *Progress in Human Geography*, 30 (2), 1-19. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258174970>.
- Roy, A. G. (2020). *Memories and Postmemories of the Partition of India*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Saha, M. (ed.) (2018). *Chotoder Border*. Kolkata: Gangchil.
- Sen, J. (2015). Reconstructing Marichjhapi: From Margins and Memories of Migrant Lives. In U. Butalia, (Ed.), *Partition: The long Shadow* (pp. 127-152). India: Penguin Books Limited.
- Sengupta, D. (2016). *The Partition of Bengal: Fragile Borders and New Identities*. Delhi: Cambridge University Press.
- Sinha, A. & Shuchi (2022). From Tattered Past to Triumphant Present: Weaving Partitioned Lives by a Dalit Girl-child in Kalyani Thakur Charal's Novella *Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manush*. *Rupkatha Journal*, 14 (4), 1-15. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha>.
- Trautner, T. (2019). Teaching Patterns to Infants and Toddlers. *MSU Extension*. <https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/teaching-patterns-to-infants-and-toddlers#:~:text=Children%20love%20to%20find%20patterns,be%20numbers%2C%20images%20or%20shapes>.