



Representation of Loss, Memory, and Dislocated Identity in Intizar Husain's *The Sea Lies Ahead*

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Abstract- Intizar Husain is a Pakistani fiction writer of Indian origin who was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize 2013 for Frances W. Pritchett's English translation of his classic Urdu novel *Basti*. His fiction deals with the themes of Partition, its emotional and psychological scars, cultural identity and heritage, mythology and folklore, nostalgia and memory, religious tolerance and harmony, humanism and compassion, etc. He has authored five novels and seven collections of short stories. His trilogy of novels, *The Chronicle*, *Basti*, and *The Sea Lies Ahead* is the most significant among them. *The Sea Lies Ahead* is the English translation of Intizar Husain's Urdu novel *Aage Samandar Hai*. This book is translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, a well-known writer, critic, and literary historian. Set against the backdrop of the Partition of the Subcontinent and its aftermath, it portrays the contemporary reality of Pakistan. *The Sea Lies Ahead* tells the trials and tribulations of Urdu-speaking Partition migrants in the violence-affected city of Karachi. The novel's protagonist is Jawad Hasan, a migrant who chooses to leave his Indian hometown, Vyaspur, and settle in Karachi, the city of Muhajirs. The novel explores the evolving life history of Jawad simultaneously with the historical events leading to discordant nationalism and ethnic violence in Pakistan. Jawad is portrayed as a "carder of memories" who passively witnesses the political and social decline of the city. This paper explores the representation of loss, memory and dislocated identity in *The Sea Lies Ahead*.

Keywords- Displaced, Memory, Loss, Dislocated Identity, Exile, Disillusionment, Ethnic Violence, Muhajir, Estrangement.

I. Introduction

Intizar Husain is a Pakistani writer of Indian origin who was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize 2013 for Frances W Pritchett's English translation of his classic Urdu novel *Basti*. He "is a man very difficult to pin down. A realist, symbolist, writer of abstract stories, romantic, escapist, memorialist, mythographer—he is something of each and yet contained by none of these categories" (Asaduddin). He has authored five novels and seven collections of short stories. Out of his five books, four have been translated into English. His trilogy of novels,

The Chronicle, *Basti*, and *The Sea Lies Ahead*, is the most significant among them. Set against the backdrop of the Partition of the Subcontinent and its aftermath, they all portray the contemporary reality of Pakistan. They delve into the social, cultural, and cultural turmoil experienced by the migrants in the newly created Pakistan. In one of his interviews with Asif Farrukhi, he says, "To me, these three novels seem to form a chain; they can be seen to show how in this country a sequence of turmoils came about.



And each of the three novels was about a single turmoil” (Husain, Talking about Basti: Intizar Husain in conversation with Asif Farrukhi).

Intizar Husain's fiction deals with the themes of Partition, its emotional and psychological scars, cultural identity and heritage, mythology and folklore, nostalgia and memory, religious tolerance and harmony, humanism and compassion, etc. His works explore the issues of time, the inevitability of change, and the impact of colossal historical events on individuals and the larger social fabrics. He covers the repercussions of the Partition on the lives of those uprooted from their homeland.

If Manto laid bare the ugliness of 1947 and its immediate, brutish aftermath with the urgency of a field surgeon, Intizar Husain probes those wounds ever so gingerly, peeling away layers from old memories to reveal wounds that have still not healed and may never heal, at least not in his life time – and certainly not when fresh wounds are repeatedly inflicted on skin that is still sore and tender (Husain, *The Sea Lies Ahead* xv).

The Sea Lies Ahead (2018) is the English translation of Intizar Husain’s Urdu novel *Aage Samandar Hai*. This much-acclaimed book is wonderfully translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, a well-known writer, critic, and literary historian.

This is a novel about those muhajirs, the author himself among them, who went to the promised Land of the Pure and were met with mistrust, prejudice and apathy. Equally, it is a rich portrait of the new culture of urban Pakistan fostered by people who came from the countless towns and hamlets in and around Lucknow, Meerut and Delhi. Bringing alive unforgettable characters with its sparkling prose, this novel is a powerful exploration of Islamic history and the story of Pakistan's great disillusionment (Husain). *The Sea Lies Ahead* tells the trials and tribulations of Urdu-speaking Partition migrants in the violence-affected Sindh region.

The novel's protagonist is Jawad Hasan, a migrant who chooses to leave his Indian hometown, Vyaspur, and settle in Karachi, the city of Muhajirs. He is a widower and works as a bank manager. He is well-off but lives alone with the memories of his haunting past. The novel explores the evolving life history of Jawad simultaneously with the historical events leading to discordant nationalism and ethnic violence in Pakistan. Jawad is portrayed as a “carder of memories” who passively witnesses the political and social decline of the city. For him, Karachi, the “city of opportunities and mobility” for migrants, is “also a city of curfews, bomb explosions and frequent random violence (Raghavan).

The title of the novel is full of symbolic connotations. It is presumed to be derived from a literal threat to the migrants (Muhajirs) by Pakistani military general Ayub Khan. He warned them against supporting Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Pakistan's Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Fatima Jinnah was the candidate for the presidential elections in 1965 who was fielded by the combined front of all the opposition parties. So, General Ayub Khan callously warned the Urdu-speaking Muhajirs in Sindh not to vote for his opponent, Fatima Jinnah. He famously believed to have declared “Aage samandar hai” to impart an intimidating message to the Muhajirs.



The implicit threat in the seemingly innocuous words was two-fold: the muhajirs had burnt their boats when they had crossed the border for, clearly, they could not go back; and two, having done so, with their backs to the sea and the combined force of the local ethnic peoples, that is the Sindhis, Punjabis, Pathans and Balochis who constituted the four provinces of Western Pakistan, this fifth entity (paanchvi qaumiyat), namely the muhajir, really had no place to go. In other words, if they did not like it they could lump it! (Husain, *The Sea Lies Ahead*).

Loss is a recurrent motif in the novel as it results from the experiences of migration and exile in the context of the Partition of the Subcontinent. In the case of Jawad, it becomes a metaphor for alienation from land, culture, and self. So, the motif of loss manifests in various forms, like loss of homeland, identity, loss of relationships, loss of cultural continuity, loss of hope, and the shattering of the dream of Pakistan. The scars of loss continue to shape and transform the characters' lives in the novel.

The protagonist, Jawad, is a man of a brooding nature who represents a generation of Muslim migrants who shifted to the newly born Pakistan. This generation of migrants is caught between two worlds: loss of the homeland, the memories of which continue to haunt them, and the land they inhabit, which they struggle to identify with. Their physical displacement also alienates them from their socio-cultural roots. At the same time, they also feel alienated while building new lives in the land of their dreams. The loss of homeland means the dislocation of identity for Jawad. This loss and duality of alienation create a crisis of identity and belongingness. When Mirza Sahab asks Jawad the sudden question, "Which city do you belong to, my dear?" He replies, "Sir, the sense of belonging is gone; now I roam around like a vagabond in this city" (23-24). They fail to identify either with India or entirely with Pakistan. Jawad's memories of his pastoral past in undivided India persist like ghosts as he hangs between "remembering and forgetfulness". That makes him unable to embrace his new reality in Karachi wholeheartedly. His subsequent disillusionment with Pakistan of his dreams fills him with a profound sense of alienation.

...he is paralysed by the way the nationalistic and personal dream of Pakistan has turned to dust. Violence is a way of life in day-to-day Karachi and the grand banners of democracy and equality have been trampled into the ground under the weight of collective banditry, corruption and religious hooliganism (Attari).

Amidst this wreckage of ethnic violence, the iconic words of famous progressive and revolutionary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz sound prophetic. They fully capture this failed dream of Pakistan in the aftermath of Partition.

These tarnished rays, this night-smudged light —
This is not that Dawn for which, ravished with freedom,
we had set out in sheer longing,

Another type of loss comes as an offshoot of fragmentation caused by the more significant historical tragedy. It is the migrants' fractured relationships and broken families. Intizar Husain delves into Jawad's loss of connections and severed relationships with family members and loved ones he left behind in India. His connection with his "less of an aunt and more of a mother" Phuphi Amma, childhood



love Maimuna, Chhote Miyan, and Badi Bhabhi, is severed by estrangement and the lack of communication on his part after separation. He could not visit Phuphi Amma when she was on her deathbed. He is often found “hanging between remembering and forgetfulness” (Husain, *The Sea Lies Ahead* 88) as their long-lost memories fill him with a strange nostalgia. A sense of incompleteness, guilt, and ambivalence grips his psyche whenever he thinks about going back to India to visit them: -

My heart sank when I tried to imagine how Maimuna would look at me and the coldness with which Chhote Miyan would meet me, and the desire to go there cooled within me. But the thought did not leave me. A fit of shame seized me. The wave that had subsided raised itself yet again. I should go. A shiver ran through my body. Perhaps I might feel invigorated if I go there. But ... once again, I was reminded of Maimuna’s coolness and Chhote Miyan’s poison-filled remarks and Badi Bhabhi’s taunts, and once again my ardour was dampened (84-85).

Dislocation, separation, and abandonment also play a significant role in this saga of loss. The spatial distance between Jawad and his fiancée, Maimuna, proved a big blow to their relationship. Maimuna also happens to be his first cousin and childhood companion. Their lives were transformed due to the Partition. The cruel destiny and incomprehensible circumstances separate them. Jawad’s passivity, escapism, estrangement, and detachment from his homeland destroy the chances of their happy union.

Jawad recalls his childhood memories with her when they both used to hold “each other’s fingers, wandered far and wide” in the alleys of Vyaspur. The metaphor of “moss-encrusted wall” represents the loss their relationship suffers. They are “like two islands of silence, miles apart from each other” (213). Their fate is just like that of Zakir and Sabirah, as we find in Intizar Husain’s other novel, *Basti*. The Partition also separates the childhood friends and lovebirds Zakir and Sabirah. Vyaspur, Intizar Husain compares Jawad and Maimuna with a pair of swans that are destined to meet and separate birth after birth. “the swan and its mate would meet and separate, meet and separate yet again as though this epic union and separation was a *dastaan* of eternity and successors” (316).

Loss of homeland and its haunting memories also serve as a recurring leitmotif in this novel. It is reflected in Jawad’s mournful yearning for the past, sights of trees, alleys, sounds of birds, smells, and seasons of the surroundings of Vyaspur. He admits, I could now remember who had first recognized me: it was the trees. Actually, it is always the tree that are the first to recognize you, then the birds, then the four walls. Human beings recognize you much later; perhaps they are the last to recognize you (195).

This sense of loss is heightened to a great degree when he visits his native land in India after a gap of years. His Pandora’s box of memories after seeing the “tumbled-down building” of his ancestral home, “Dilkusha,” and the miserable state of Purani Haveli is noteworthy in this context. He compares the ruins of Dilkusha with the ruins of Andalusia.



So, all that remained of Dilkusha was a decrepit and dilapidated staircase. And this decrepit and dilapidated staircase brought back to life the memories of Dilkusha of days long gone. Now, I am going about with this staircase inside me. Yes, and that tumble-down moss-encrusted old wall of the haveli. Who is to know all that lies hidden in a moss-encrusted wall? (212),

While discussing the displacement, migration, and uprootedness from the homeland with the migrants, Intizar Husain keeps on portraying loss as a universal human experience by referring to the golden period of medieval Muslim history. To evoke a sense of loss and nostalgia among the readers, the narration is filled with specific references to medieval cities like Seville, Malaga, Granada, Cordoba, and Andalusia. The migration of Muslims to Pakistan is compared with the Fall of Granada and the subsequent migration of the Muslim populace from the Moorish Spanish empire.

Islamic Spain, al-Andalusia, is evoked consistently as a symbol of lost glory and subsequent rootlessness and the experiences of these 20th century migrants is often placed alongside the trials of those in medieval Islamic history (Pradhan). Intizar Husain also employs certain myths, symbols, anecdotes, and legends from Panchantra, Jataka Katha, Katha Sarit Sagar, Mahabharata, etc. to explain the experiences of dislocation. He describes in detail the example of Krishna and his subjects' migration from Mathura to the newly created city of Dwarka. The anecdote of Ganesh's unhappiness exemplifies living even in a god's country after the displacement.

But Ganesh was not happy even there. Everyone was happy, except him. Those who cannot forget can never be happy. He was not able to forget the city of Mathura ... And, sometimes as though he was in a dream and sometimes as though he was still roaming around in the streets and alleys of that city. Sometimes the years of separation seemed as though centuries had passed, and sometimes it seemed as though he had only just left Mathura (275-76).

Karbalai Saheb's narration of his recurrent dream about his lost home in Shikarpur also illustrates migrants' relationship with the land, portrayed as pure and sacred in the novel. Karbalai Saheb is doomed to face the tribulation of displacement in his life. Though he lives in Karachi physically, his heart and soul are stuck in Shikarpur. He keeps hanging between the haunting memories of Shikarpur and Karbala as there is a constant conflict between his homeland and faith. Majju Bhai also talks of land as a living entity. He says, "Land is the most God-awful thing. One is better off till one is not reminded of it. There are some people who live their entire lives and don't let the thought of their land come anywhere near them. But the moment one thinks of it, the thought seizes you" (97).

Loss of cultural continuity as a consequence of the migration is also one of the significant aspects of *The Sea Lies Ahead*. Intizar Husain portrays the characters uprooted from their cultures, traditions, and lifestyles in a wave – everything they had been nourishing for generations. Their grief and nostalgia are reflected in their naming of "enclaves, gardens, and housing societies" (xvi) after the ones they had to leave behind in India. This loss aggravates the rift between their past and present. In Karachi,



they find themselves in a cultural vacuum where they strive to preserve their heritage and cultural identity. Unfortunately, Karachi could not serve as a melting pot for this sudden flow of various cultures. Its post-partition culture is defined by just two things – “Mushairas and Kalashnikovs” (178). In the violence-ridden Karachi, the constant cultural differences lead to some precarious situations in the novel as the migrants often refuse to mingle together harmoniously.

This city is an extremely quarrelsome one: Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi, Pathan, Muhajir ... our friends have not made a city; they have cooked up a khichri! And it isn't as though muhajirs are all of one type. Some are from the east, some from the west—some from the north, some from the south. Rivers from across the length and breadth of Hindustan came tumbling and gurgling to meet the sea. But they did not merge in the sea. Every river says: “I am the sea(36).

The novel is replete with many cultural references, such as Lucknawi Juban, the khari boli of Meerut, the poetry of Amroha and Budaun, Nauchandi Mela, and the snobberies of migrants about various cuisines from the Hindi belt of India. This diasporic universe gives a rich picture of Karachi. Muhajirs are recognized through the names of their native towns and villages.

Karachi is a city carrying within itself several other cities. These are the cities from which the muhajirs, who made Karachi their home after Partition, originally came. And so, populating this city facing the expanse of the Arabian Sea were muhajirs who identified as Lucknow-walas, Meerutwalas, Delhiwalas, Badaunwalas, Amrohvis and Biharis, among others. They congregated over mushairas, sparred over the cities they came from, each asserting their origin city was the most important one among all the others that ‘existed’ within Karachi (Dubey).

Their culture loses continuity, but their connections and rivalries continue transforming and shaping their lives. In this culturally diverse city, Jawad’s life also goes through a journey of transformation that contributes to constructing his diasporic identity.

The people's struggle with the harsh realities of life in Karachi reflects the loss of faith in the romantic dream of Pakistan and the shattering of hope for a better future. The subsequent disillusionment with the idea of a new nation exhausts the zeal of migrants. Failure to build a sense of nationhood among the masses and create a sense of community among the migrants spelt the quick erosion of idealism. The promise of a new identity and betterment was shattered with time. Faulty resettlement, economic hardships, and ethnic violence left people struggling for survival. Jawad needs to have a sense of belonging to the city. His identity suffers a loss with time as it heightens his sense of estrangement from the city. He says,

“It doesn’t seem like the city we know; it has undergone such a transformation that it is unrecognizable. After all, where are we heading? Aren’t we on the way to destruction?” (35).

There is a pervasive sense of despair among the masses. For them, the sea is transformed into a symbol of hopelessness, fear, uncertainty, and an unresolved past.



Things change so rapidly that people start to see uncertainty and an alien future in Karachi. The hideous scars of personal and collective loss refuse to be healed. “By the end of the novel, both Dwarka and Granada, like Karachi, are in imminent danger of being destroyed” (Kumar). Socio-political instability and day-to-day ethnic violence in the city create a profound sense of disruption and alienation.

The peace and calm disappeared suddenly. Dacoities, kidnappings, murders, bombings...masked crowded bazaars... one would fall here, another lay trembling there. Warm bodies would turn cold as one watched. A frenzy would course through the bazaar and then there would be silence! And suddenly tyres would be burnt. The burning tyres would catch a bus in their grip and, within minutes, the bus would be burnt to the ground. The shops that were about to open would shut again. And curfew would be clamped” (34).

So, the displacement of the Muhajir diaspora relates to the exploration of identity in a relocated hostile land. The displaced characters from the plains of UP/Bihar grapple with the sudden loss of their identity in a city surrounded by sea. Thus, they must face the challenge of constructing a new sense of self in the alien surroundings of Karachi. “Transported there from landlocked bastis and bazaars, in search of a promised land, the migrant experienced a desolation which could not even be fully or openly articulated” (Chishti). Wrenched away from their moorings, they desperately search for a sense of belonging in a developing nation. They are cut off from their roots and unsure about their place in the new world. They face the challenge of reconciling their Indian culture and heritage with their new Pakistani identity.

The Muhajirs in the novel attempt to affirm their identity by holding on to certain rites associated with their lost homeland. Attachment to the homeland is specifically evoked through two things: food and mushairas. Food becomes a way of preserving locally circumscribed identities and articulating connection to erstwhile homelands. The Muhajirs also affirm their identity by clinging to the tradition of poetry recitals and competitions. The Muhajirs not only proclaim the superiority of the culture that they brought to Pakistan vis-à-vis the culture of the already existing population, they also scramble to prove that the food or poetry of their abandoned hometown is better than other Muhajirs (Sen).

They are caught between two identities—neither fully Indian nor fully Pakistani—and stuck somewhere in the liminal space. Their struggle is further aggravated by the fact that Pakistan as a state is also grappling for its true identity. Most migrants fail to forge a new identity in Pakistan. Hostility, insecurity, and suspicion from the native populace also heighten their sense of dislocation and fragmentation.

We see the characters clinging more and more to their memories of home when they saw the circumstances deteriorating due to some ethnic conflict, which led to the Muhajir Quomi Movement in the 1980s. Attacks on the basis of ethnicity started taking place and consequently the trauma of the days of Partition resurfaced among the migrants (Raman , Bhattacharya and Verma).



The isolation and apathy they experience at the hands of the Pakistani authorities is also traumatizing. In the wake of the unhindered ethnic violence, they stand alienated both from their past and present. Sayad Aqa Hasan, who migrates from Lucknow, vents his anger and laments the decay and decline of the city of Karachi: -

... why do you fret over Karachi; the entire country is in a mess. It is a reign of tyranny and dictatorship. Those who were low born roll in wealth and the shurfa go hungry for even one meal. And on top of it all, no one's life or property is safe (47).

Jawad's psychological state also mirrors this internal conflict of being caught between two irreconcilable worlds. He struggles to adapt to Karachi's life, but his deep attachment to memories of his past and heritage prevents him from fully embracing a new identity in the new surroundings of Karachi. His sense of dislocation and alienation keeps compounding as he further lapses into nostalgia. He also keeps bemoaning the apathy and disinterest of his fellow countrymen "in stemming the rot" of the city.

The translator of *The Sea Lies Ahead* says the novel has been written in elegiac mode – shehr-e-afsos tradition. Muhajirs express their loss and sorrow for the cities, kasbas, bastis, and villages they were dislocated from. Intizar Husain maintains an elegiac note from the novel's beginning to the end. A sense of mourning and loss always pervades the entire narration. The migrants lament the decay and decline of Karachi, but at the same time, they are found mourning the loss of their homeland and the cultural centres in India. We find Miza Sahab shedding tears over his lost home and the syncretic culture of Old Delhi. He keeps on alluding to Delhi via Mir Taqi Mir's famous verse about the abandonment of the city "Dilli jo ek shehar thaa aalam mein intekhab" ("Delhi, that was once the preeminent city in the world"). The novel explores these complexities of identity in the characters whose existence is marked with a sense of incompleteness, which they continue to lament. The unsettlement and disillusionment with the nationalistic dream of Pakistan further exacerbate their estrangement.

The narrative is replete with lament for not just the loss of ancestral homes and the touch of native soil but also for the gradual dilution and dissipation of a nationalistic dream. The muhajirs cannot but remember the hopes with which they came to Pakistan against all odds, and the growing incidences of terror and crime leave all of them unsettled and disillusioned: As society spirals into violence, life, it seems, is about to come full circle for them. Yet, whereas Jawad cannot but wonder at the manner in which Karachi and the nation at large have deteriorated, at the betrayal of democracy and the rise of fundamentalist and ethnic militantism (Pradhan).

Thus, *The Sea Lies Ahead* explores the effects of migration, displacement, nostalgia for the lost past, socio-political decay, and inevitable disasters on the Muhajirs of Karachi. Husain portrays his characters' existential quest, exile, and crisis as they search for their identity and meaning, as well as the purpose of life in the new nation loaded with the cultural baggage of the past. To highlight the questions related to loss, identity, and memory, he draws heavily from the richness of myths, folklore, and old traditions of dastaans of the South Asian region.



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