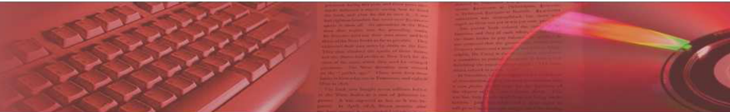

Devika Chawla. *Home, Uprooted: Oral Histories of India's Partition.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 288 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-5643-3; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-5644-0.

Reviewed by Nishat Zaidi (Jamia Millia Islamia University)
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Oral Histories of Partition

"Memory only becomes interesting through its struggle with forgetfulness."–Adrian Forty, *The Art of Forgetting*[1]

The moment of the end of the colonial regime and the birth of two nations, India and Pakistan, was also the moment of the Partition of the subcontinent in which millions were dislocated, displaced, and rendered homeless, or to use a phrase by writer Amitav Ghosh, left "with no home but in memory."[2] "The truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision," writes Homi K. Bhabha.[3] It is with this double vision that Devika Chawla, a "South-Asian, Indian, naturalised American, second-generation refugee ethnographer, who went home to study her own–her own family of Partition refugees, made homeless by India's division"–has produced a work that she terms as "neither *here* nor *there*" (pp. 11, 225). Chawla studies cross-generational oral histories of ten middle-class Sikh and Hindu refugee families to track fault lines, polyphonies, and the intergenerational shift from memory to ignorance evident in the constitution and reconstitution of Partition's memory. The merit of *Home, Uprooted* lies in shifting the focus of Partition discourses away from the intensely polarized Hindu-Muslim, violence-rescue binaries to the problematic of home and homelessness and in exploring how politically enforced displacements lead to complex narrations of home and identity. Juxtaposing her own responses as a migrant / unhomed[4] citizen to those whose ties with their homes were abruptly snapped, Chawla destabilizes the very notion of home / un-home and belonging / uprooting, and in so doing, enjoins readers to revisit and dislodge their own facile notions of home.

Dividing the existing Partition literature into three broad domains of high politics or official literature, fiction and film, and everyday local history and nonfictional literature, Chawla situates her study in the third domain. In this she avoids selecting from the readily available frames of communal identity, gender, violence, political or historical events, or even the issues of rehabilitation, as is done in such works as Ravinder Kaur's *Since 1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi* (2007) or Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar's *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (2007). Instead, Chawla weaves all these strands together within the tapestry of her narrative, which hinges on the trope of "home."

To deconstruct the modernist notion of "home-as-haven," Chawla invokes a vast range of theories on "home," such as views presented by the Hindu system of Ashram; ideas by Western intellectuals like Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard; perspectives from anthropologists like Ruth Behr; and feminist, postmodern, postcolonial, and transnational iterations of "home" by critics like Karen Kaplan, Michael Jackson, Arjun Appadurai, Sara Ahmad, Shelley Mallet, James Clifford, and others. Intertwining threads of theoretical studies on home and memory, Chawla weaves an irresistible narrative in *Home, Uprooted* that in her own words is a "discursive terrain"; as she says, "What I tell here, are some liminal moments of understanding between that space 'there' where I met my participants, and this space 'here' where I revisit them/us in memories and writing, in between fieldwork and homework.... It is a terrain quite like that of the novel." Chawla admits that she aspires to produce a text that is "heterogot," accommodating the polyphonic voices in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "a plurality of relations, not a cacophony of different voices" (p. 30).

"Stories begin in memories," says Chawla (p. 1). Not surprisingly, she starts the book with the story of her own multiple migrations, both personal and inherited, forced and voluntary, disabling and enabling. All of these migrations are rooted in layers of memories, of home in Moga, a village just thirty kilometers from the border with Pakistan; of her paternal grandmother, Biji, who

took charge of the Chawla clan after the Partition and helped everyone with the gold (e.g., jewelry and coins) that she had carried from her abandoned home in Quetta, Pakistan; of her mother who though born in free India experienced displacement due to marriage; and of her own multiple displacements, first from home to Waverly, a boarding school in Mussoorie and then to the United States, where forgoing her Indian nationality she acquired citizenship, an event with which she concludes the book.

Chawla has interviewed an eclectic set of people, across three generations, each dealing with the event and its aftermath in their own unique way. There is Labbi Devi, who was twenty at the time of Partition, escaped several attempts of abduction by *Musalman*, and subsequently rebuilt her life in Delhi with compensation she received from the government and the gold she brought along. There is an eighty-seven-year-old first-generation female refugee Kiranji, a teacher for whom Partition opened possibilities of selfhood outside the confines of feminine domesticity. There is Anilji, one of the few people who went back to Pakistan to revisit his home. There is Mohanji who has penned his experiences in his autobiography, Roshanji who composes *khayals*,[5] and Dadaji who sings *ghazals* (a Persianate poetic form) in Urdu and Punjabi. Also, apart from many others, there is Rekha a second-generation refugee and Sheilaji's grandson Tarun, a third-generation migrant, who is always busy organizing "Indo-Pak activities" (p. 200). In the midst of all this is the US-settled ethnographer-author, accompanied by her retired father who, six at the time of Partition, is an active participant in her project, carried around by Muslim taxi drivers and listening to *qawwali* (devotional music) at Nizamuddin and in private soirees.

Cognizant of the fact that the "memories we inherit come to us via structures over which we have no control" (p. 159), Chawla opts to read between and beyond the images recalled, events narrated, and stories relayed. She identifies silences, erasures, absences, and hierarchies. As she ruminates about the stories of her participants, marked by nostalgia, triumph of survival, denial, and selective memory, she provides literary, theoretical, and anthropological diagnoses. For instance, why is it that very few chose to go back to their homes in Pakistan? Why do *Musalman* or Muslims remain the "Other," referred to as "they" or "them" in the stories of most of the Sikh and Hindu refugees, despite most participants recalling the goodness and humanity of their neighbors, in Kiranji's case a *Maulvi* (a teacher of Islamic). What is "home" for women who experience displacement from their natal homes after marriage? Why are women's struggles to rebuild lives in their new "home" often suppressed by their family members, rendering them displaced within their "homes?" Each of these investigations are explained with the help of theoretical notions, such as Bryant Keith Alexander's notion of "generative autobiography," Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory," Bhabha's formulations about the un-homely as a postcolonial space, Joshua M. Price and Edward Said's critiques of Bachelard's idea of home as a "romanticised space," Said and Bhabha's view on exile, and Caren Kaplan's critique of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (pp. 211, 200, 152, 153). She also invokes Partition historiography from time to time to explain or reaffirm certain patterns she observes in her participants, such as Anilji's refusal to tell in detail about the illegal occupants of the house allotted to them as refugees, or Kiranji's reticence to talk about her struggles.

This may not appear as a major departure from similar works already available in the field, the closest being Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj's article "Ignorance, Forgetting and Family Nostalgia: Partition, the Nation State and Refugees in Delhi," in which Raj discusses how "intergenerational ignorance underpins the Punjabi-Hindu understanding of partition as a historical event" transforming them from refugees into citizens.[6] (Curiously, Chawla ignores this work, not even including it in her otherwise impressive bibliography.) Chawla is neither the first writer to archive and record oral histories of the three generations of Partition victims (Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* [2000], Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* [1998], or Guneeta Bhalla in her digital archiving of oral histories,[7] have done it before her), nor the first to record displacements experienced by women in patriarchy and its connections with Partition displacements. Hence, many may find *Home, Uprooted* a book of missed opportunities.

Chawla quotes theories with flourish but often restricts them to the obvious. More focus on such issues as how personal memories are linked to the making of the new nation, how they have redrawn identity and culture, and how the various interpretations of home and movement are intertwined with historiography would have enlarged her canvas. Nevertheless, these gaps do not diminish the merit of her book.

Chawla's interest in stories and processes of storying inevitably invites comparison with the work of another trained anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, generally regarded as a work of fiction. Un-

like Ghosh, who insists that he has not added one word to his fieldwork diary and that the book is a result of his fieldwork,[8] Chawla rather resolutely asserts, "Even as I present this book in stories guided by some theory and some analysis, in its simplest description the book is 'what I saw' and heard, what I experienced, and more importantly, what I chose to note" (p. 29). Deploying Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic she gestures toward novelistic possibilities in her oral history. Ghosh's work, despite his disavowal, is read as fiction due to the imaginative texture of its plot. Chawla's work, on the contrary, notwithstanding her vouching for its constructed-ness, fails to cross the generic boundary. In the process, her foregrounding of "I" raises questions about the methodological appropriateness of the oral historian.

Chawla's novelistic instinct is best evident in her recurrent use of the word "home" in various permutations and combinations, giving it a new spin, a new twist, a fresh flavor, and an added semantic field every time. Home thus is what "makes and remakes us," "home may be drifting," "home is always there–always missed ... (also) always (not) there–often dismissed," "home is memories of stepping outside home," "home is an unmemorialized space ... a refusal to speak of home ... a refusal to return home," "homing–a struggle between self and home ... a conversation of struggle," and so on (pp. 217, 147, 151, 164, 167, 174).

Chawla structures her book in a syncopated movement, introducing several notes at a time and then playing and replaying them against each other until they all culminate in one final moment of cyclical return; she, thus, starts the book with an epigraph from Adrienne Rich, "To work and suffer is to be at home. / All else is scenery" (p. 1), thereby establishing distinction between home as a physical space and home as an imagined space, a memory. It is on this very dichotomy that she concludes the book, drawing attention to how she realized while revisiting her interviews that physical spaces are rarely mentioned in her participants' stories of home, thus reaffirming "the absence [of physical landscape] echoes a national amnesia about the Batwara that was encouraged–so that a new nation, independent India, could be forged" (p. 225).

Conscious of a vast body of already available literature on the subject, Chawla starts her book with a little trepidation. She, however, refuses to give up. She rather valiantly insists that like all other memorials to Partition that inhabit "discursive, imaginary and fictive terrains ... about what home was and what it might have been," her own work is "another memorial in words" (p. 225).

In the end, the accessibility of Chawla's prose, its brilliant poetic poignancy, its emotive appeal, its theoretically aware questionings, its constant defiance of linearity in favor of a narrative continually drifting across several convenient categories and destabilizing them in the process, and its criss-crossing of several borders and boundaries make up for the lack of novelty in her book. Besides, when it comes to recounting an experience as traumatic as Partition, novelty is rarely called for; the very telling and retelling produces an effect that is cathartic, both for the participants within the text as well as for those outside it. Herein, rests the merit of Chawla's endeavors.

Notes

[1]. Adrian Forty, introduction to *The Art of Forgetting*, ed. Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler (Oxford: Berger, 1999), 1-18, quotation on 16.

[2]. Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines* (New York: Viking, 1988), 190.

[3]. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

[4]. To Bhabha, "unhomelines ... is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation. To be unhomed is not to be homeless" (see Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 13). The term has been used by Chawla in this sense and it has been used here in the same sense.

[5]. *Khayal*, Arabic for imagination, is a genre of Indian classical music.

[6]. Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, "Ignorance, Forgetting and Family Nostalgia: Partition, the Nation State and Refugees in Delhi," *Social Analysis* 44, no. 2 (November 2000): 30-55, quotation on 30.

[7] See `http://www.1947partitionarchive.org/`.

[8]. See Amitav Ghosh, "The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41, no. 1 (May 2005): 26-39, esp. 28.

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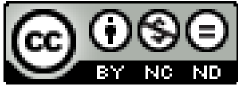

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