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Cartographies of Loss: Memory, Trauma, and Postcolonial Displacement in Dibyendu Palit's "Alam's Own House"

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Abstract:
Dibyendu Palit's short story "Alam's Own House" dramatizes the silent afterlife of Partition through the figure of Alam, a Muslim man who remains in post-Partition Bengal but becomes estranged from his own home. Unlike overtly violent narratives of Partition, Palit crafts an understated, minimalist portrayal of displacement that operates at the intersection of memory, trauma, and postcolonial alienation. This paper interrogates how the story constructs the "house" as cartography of loss, a site where the lived experience of belonging collides with erasure, exclusion, and silence. Drawing upon Memory Studies (Halbwachs, Hirsch, Nora), Trauma Theory (Caruth, LaCapra, Felman), and Postcolonial Studies (Bhabha, Spivak, Chatterjee), the analysis explores how Alam's dislocation exemplifies both personal and collective fragmentation in the aftermath of Partition. Ultimately, the story becomes an allegory of the fragile foundations of postcolonial nationhood, where the promise of home is constantly undermined by borders, religious identity, and historical amnesia.

Keywords: Dibyendu Palit, Partition, memory, trauma, postcolonial displacement, unhomely, Alam's Own House

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh in 1971 have been inscribed in South Asian history not only as geopolitical events but also as profound ruptures in the everyday lives of millions. Literary engagements with Partition often oscillate between the representation of spectacular violence and the subtler, quieter displacements of identity, belonging, and memory. While canonical texts such as Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* (1955) foreground the brutalities of Partition, Dibyendu Palit's *"Alam's Own House"* (1981) provides a nuanced narrative that examines estrangement within the domestic and familiar.

The story centers around Alam, a Bengali Muslim, who returns to his ancestral house, only to find himself alienated within the very space that once defined his identity and

rootedness. Palit's narrative destabilizes the notion of "home" as a stable, protective site, instead transforming it into a fractured geography where personal memory collides with collective history. The symbolic "house" becomes a palimpsest of layered losses—material, emotional, and existential.

This paper examines "Alam's Own House" through three critical frameworks: Memory Studies, Trauma Theory, and Postcolonial Displacement. It argues that Palit creates a cartography of loss wherein the house functions as both a mnemonic site and a traumatic archive, foregrounding the enduring alienation of minority subjectivities in the postcolonial nation-state.

Memory and the Uninhabited House

Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory asserts that individual memories are always embedded in social frameworks (Halbwachs 38). In *"Alam's Own House,"* the protagonist's return is haunted by memories that no longer align with the present. The house—once a vessel of familial life and community—is now emptied of recognition, estranged from the very man it belongs to. This dissonance exemplifies what Pierre Nora describes as lieux de mémoire: places that anchor memory precisely because of the absence of lived continuity (Nora 12).

The house, then, becomes a mnemonic site marked by discontinuity. Alam recalls his childhood, the laughter of kin, and the sense of rootedness that once defined his identity. Yet these memories no longer resonate with the space as it exists in the present. The house refuses him entry not physically, but existentially, as the weight of historical rupture transforms it into a museum of uninhabited memories.

Furthermore, Palit anticipates Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory, wherein later generations inherit the affective weight of traumatic histories they did not directly experience (Hirsch 22). Alam embodies a subject caught between memory and postmemory: though he lived through Partition, his estrangement feels like an inherited displacement that transcends his personal biography. His own memory is inflected by the silence and erasure imposed upon his community, leaving him dispossessed even within familiar geography.

Trauma and the Silences of Estrangement

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an event that is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly in fragmented, repetitive forms (Caruth 4). In *"Alam's Own House,"* trauma is not dramatized through graphic violence but through the pervasive silence of Alam's alienation. The narrative strategy of understatement becomes central to its representation of trauma.

Alam's return to his house is marked by pauses, unspoken feelings, and unshed words. His trauma lies in the confrontation with the uncanny—what Homi Bhabha terms the 'unhomely', where the domestic becomes estranged, familiar yet unfamiliar (Bhabha 13). The house, which should embody intimacy and security, instead becomes the site of his dispossession. This spatial estrangement dramatizes Dominick LaCapra's distinction

between "acting out" and "working through" trauma (LaCapra 70). Alam is trapped in the repetitive cycle of "acting out," unable to reconcile past memory with present dislocation. The trauma of Partition survivors is often narrated through spectacular violence, yet Palit insists on the subtler, insidious violence of exclusion. Alam's trauma is the trauma of 'staying back'—the psychic wounding of being rendered alien in one's own homeland. In this sense, his trauma is both personal and communal; embodying the silenced experiences of Muslims in post-Partition Bengal who did not migrate yet remained marginalized.

Postcolonial Displacement and the Partition Within

The story is equally fertile for postcolonial analysis. Partition, as Gyanendra Pandey argues, was not only a division of territory but also a "division of memory" that shaped communal identities in the postcolonial nation (Pandey 2001, 37). Alam represents the "Partition within"—a subject who has not crossed borders but is nevertheless displaced within his own community.

Homi Bhabha's idea of liminality and hybridity helps articulate Alam's in-betweenness. He is a Muslim in a Hindu-majority Bengal, a Bengali in a nation that increasingly conflates citizenship with majoritarian identity. His house, rather than offering rootedness, underscores his unbelonging. The "own house" is thus an ironic marker of non-ownership, a space where the postcolonial promise of home collapses into exclusion.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of the subaltern is also relevant here. Alam's voice is muted; his estrangement is not foregrounded in national discourse. His marginality reflects the structural silencing of minority voices in the narration of the nation. The house becomes a metaphor for the nation-state itself—appearing to be inclusive but fundamentally denying recognition to those deemed outsiders.

This aligns with Paul Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia, the lingering discontent of postcolonial subjects who find the promised liberation of independence marred by exclusion and loss (Gilroy 98). Alam's melancholia is rooted in the impossibility of reclaiming home; the past is irretrievable, and the present offers no solace.

Textual Analysis: The House as Cartography of Loss

In "Alam's Own House", Dibyendu Palit transforms a seemingly ordinary house into a symbolic cartography of Partition's aftermath. The house is not merely a backdrop to Alam's journey; it is the central metaphor through which the story dramatizes the disjunction between memory and present, the quiet violences of trauma, and the alienation of postcolonial displacement. To read the house is to read an archive of Partition itself, where walls, silence, and emptiness register historical ruptures.

The House as Mnemonic Site

Palit repeatedly emphasizes the *physicality* of the house—the walls, the courtyard, the rooms—but these descriptions are never neutral. They are infused with the weight of memory. Alam recalls fragments of childhood: familial gatherings, shared meals, and the warmth of belonging. Yet these recollections surface against the stark emptiness of the

present. The contrast foregrounds the gap between remembered home and lived estrangement.

Maurice Halbwachs's notion of *collective memory* helps us understand this disjunction. For Halbwachs, memory is not an individual faculty but is sustained within a social framework (Halbwachs 38). Alam's memories are unanchored because the communal framework that once validated them—family, neighbors, kin—has been fractured by Partition. What remains is a personal archive of recollections that cannot be socially reactivated. The house, emptied of its social context, becomes what Pierre Nora terms a lieu de mémoire, a site of memory that survives only because living memory has disappeared (Nora 12).

Thus, the house simultaneously preserves and erases. It preserves Alam's affective attachments in the form of haunting recollections, yet it erases them by refusing to affirm continuity. Memory here is both a tether and a rupture, and the house is the geography where this paradox is enacted.

Silence and the Architecture of Trauma

Palit's narrative style is minimalist. Much of Alam's alienation is articulated not through dramatic dialogue or explicit violence but through silence. When Alam walks through the rooms of his "own house," there is a striking absence of description of people, voices, or activity. The silence itself becomes expressive—an aesthetic of absence that mirrors trauma's ineffability.

Cathy Caruth has argued that trauma is not fully grasped at the moment of experience but returns belatedly, fragmented, and unspeakable (Caruth 4). In Palit's story, the house embodies this belatedness. Its silence is not the silence of peace but the silence of erasure, a testimony to what cannot be spoken. Alam cannot articulate his estrangement; instead, the house speaks through its uncanny emptiness.

Moreover, Homi Bhabha's notion of the unhomely is vividly dramatized here. The unhomely is the moment when the intimate domestic sphere becomes uncanny, when the familiar becomes estranged (Bhabha 13). For Alam, the house is both his own and not his own: he recognizes its structure yet feels utterly displaced within it. The house thereby becomes a spatial manifestation of trauma, simultaneously intimate and alien, sheltering and rejecting.

Irony of "Own": Postcolonial Displacement within the Nation

The title "Alam's Own House" is deeply ironic. The possessive "own" suggests belonging, ownership, and rootedness, but Alam experiences precisely the opposite. His "own house" is no longer his in any meaningful sense. The irony underscores what Gyanendra Pandey terms the "partition within"—displacement experienced even without crossing borders (Pandey 37).

Alam has not migrated; he has remained in India. Yet his very presence as a Muslim in post-Partition Bengal renders him estranged. The house functions as an allegory of the postcolonial nation-state itself: ostensibly a shared home for all citizens, but in practice a

space of exclusion for minority identities. Alam's house mirrors the condition of Muslims who stayed behind in India after Partition—legally citizens, but existentially alienated.
This also resonates with Paul Gilroy's idea of postcolonial melancholia—the lingering condition in which postcolonial subjects, promised liberation through independence, find themselves instead dwelling in exclusion and loss (Gilroy 98). Alam's inability to feel at home in his "own house" reflects the melancholia of the betrayed postcolonial promise.

Architecture as Cartography of Loss

The house itself becomes a cartographic device, mapping the intersections of personal, communal, and national histories. Its rooms and walls are not just physical boundaries but metaphors for psychic and cultural partitions. Each space signifies absence: the courtyard devoid of laughter, the empty rooms that once housed family members, the walls that enclose nothing but silence.

By mapping these absences, Palit creates what might be called 'a cartography of loss'. The house is no longer a coherent home but a fragmented geography of discontinuities. It charts not only Alam's personal estrangement but also the historical dislocation of Partition and the ongoing marginalization of Muslim minorities in postcolonial India.
In this sense, the house is both archive and map: archive, because it preserves traces of what once was—memories, silences, shadows of belonging. Map, because it charts the terrain of displacement, demarcating where belonging fails, where memory ruptures, and where trauma lingers.

Through the symbolic architecture of the house, Palit reimagines Partition not as a one-time rupture but as a lingering condition inscribed in everyday spaces. The house becomes a cartography of loss, simultaneously mnemonic site, traumatic archive, and allegory of postcolonial displacement. By centering the house, Palit shifts the discourse of Partition literature from the border to the interior, from spectacular violence to the quiet estrangement of staying back. In doing so, he offers a uniquely unsettling vision of Partition's afterlife—one that continues to reverberate in the intimate spaces of memory and home.

Conclusion

Dibyendu Palit's *"Alam's Own House"* expands the discourse of Partition literature by focusing on the quieter, less visible forms of displacement. Through Alam's estrangement, the story dramatizes how memory, trauma, and postcolonial displacement intersect in the symbolic space of the house. Memory is rendered as discontinuity, trauma as silence, and postcolonial displacement as unbelonging within one's own homeland.
Ultimately, the story challenges triumphalist narratives of nationhood, revealing how the Partition continues to fracture subjectivities long after borders are drawn. By making the house both mnemonic site and traumatic archive, Palit offers a cartography of loss that complicates our understanding of Partition and its afterlives.

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