PAEDEIA: **North South Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law, Vol 1, 2025**
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47126/nsushssjournal.of0002

Forgotten Memory or Hidden Identity?:

Analyzing Krishnendu Chattopadhyay's *Jinnah Is Dead*

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ABSTRACT

More than fifty years have passed since Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan, yet certain communities in the country continue to face socially constructed barriers that affect their identity and belonging. Among them, the Biharis, though legally recognized as Bangladeshi citizens, are often excluded from full social acceptance by the native Bengali population. Bangladeshi media has increasingly highlighted their struggles, and the short film *Jinnah is Dead*, part of Bangladesh's first anthology film, *Sincerely Yours, Dhaka*, vividly depicts the intense identity crisis of a Bihari man attempting to conceal his origins while navigating conflicts within his own community. This paper examines the historical and socio-cultural factors that have marginalized the Biharis from 1971 to the present, exploring the psychological and social consequences of this exclusion through famous works of modern-day Bangladeshi filmmakers. Throughout the paper, the visual portrayal of the Biharis suffering from identity crisis and the reason behind their notion of unhomeliness will be discussed.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Language, Liberation War, Marginalization, Unhomeliness

Introduction

The Biharis, widely recognized as the Urdu-speaking community of Bangladesh, were originally displaced from India to the newly established East Pakistan in 1947 and the years that followed. To escape communal massacres, the majority of them fled from the state of Bihar, while others came from different parts of India. In *The Biharis in Bangladesh*, Ben Whitaker et al. (2007) inform that "the number of Moslems who moved to East Pakistan was approximately 1,300,000, of whom one million came from Bihar and its neighbourhood." (7). As most of the migrants hailed from Bihar, they collectively came to be known as Biharis. The mass migrations were influenced by the communal riots from 1905 to 1946 and the vision of Two-Nation theory, under

which Muhammad Ali Jinnah, President of the Muslim League, promised to create a secure homeland for all Muslims in Pakistan. However, Arifur Rahaman et al. (2020) note, the Two-Nation theory, being primarily based on religious beliefs, largely overlooked crucial components such as language and culture (880). Initially, religion appeared to provide a unifying bond, and the Bengali Muslims welcomed the Biharis as brothers of the same belief, but problems soon arose, as many Biharis considered themselves 'more' Muslim or socially superior, in part because their language aligned with that of the West Pakistanis.

Nida Sattar (2013) states, "Ethno-linguistically the Biharis associated themselves with the ruling elite in West Pakistan and marked a division among the local Bengali-speaking people and the migrants" (16). Cultural and linguistic differences thus created an invisible wall between the migrants and the native Bengalis. The situation worsened when Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared Urdu as the state language of Pakistan, a move that intensified the divide. This decision visibly deepened division among the Bengalis who opposed Jinnah and the Biharis who supported him. As a result, the "politics of religion was replaced by the politics of language and nationalism" (Rahaman et al. 2020, 880). Trusting in Jinnah's vision and anticipating migration to the Promised Land, the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Bihar and other parts of India largely overlooked the growing resentment of the Bengali Muslims and began settling in East Pakistan. Many had held respectable positions in Bihar but migrated in the hope of establishing a secure homeland. After migrating to what was then East Pakistan, they were given shelter in Dhaka's Mohammadpur, Mirpur, and in big cities like Khulna and Chattogram, where separate colonies were created to house them. The Biharis, specifically for their language, lived separately from the Bengalis and found themselves culturally closer to the West Pakistanis. Initially, the Bengalis welcomed their Muslim brothers, but relations deteriorated during the Liberation War of 1971, when many Biharis sided with the Pakistan Army against the Bengali independence movement. This alignment fueled deep resentment among the Bengali population, who have since struggled to fully accept the Biharis as part of their society. Following independence, the government of Bangladesh offered the Biharis the option of repatriation to Pakistan. Around half a million Biharis who chose to remain in Bangladesh were granted the citizenship of Bangladesh, while others expressed a desire to relocate to Pakistan. Though some were repatriated, a large number were left behind. Arifur Rahaman (2020) points out that, though they were not stateless, they were marginalized and deprived of basic human rights (59). Consequently, they came to be known as 'Stranded Pakistanis', a label that obscures their true origin. In independent Bangladesh, the Biharis have lived in refugee camps under the Geneva Convention for the past 50 years. In this way, "Biharis became vulnerable and 'other' in newly established Bangladesh" (Rahaman et al. 2020, 881). In the meantime, tensions have also persisted within the community itself, between those who acquired Bangladeshi citizenship and those who were compelled to remain after being denied repatriation.

Signboards outside Bihari camps label the residents as ‘Stranded Pakistanis’ or ‘non locals’, reflecting the community’s marginalized status. Having left their own lands and properties, they remained in this country but were treated inhumanely and frequently accused of being ‘war criminals. Their living conditions have remained dire, and the conflict between the two communities have persisted. Following Bangladesh’s victory in the Liberation War of 1971, the Bengalis killed almost 100,000 Biharis, torched their houses and took their possessions, as reported by the Sunday Times of London (Rahaman et al. 2020, 884). As an obvious consequence, the Biharis became economically vulnerable, as “they find it difficult to find a job with their identity as Bihari, living in Bihari camp” (Rahaman 2020, 59). Beyond social exclusion and economic poverty, the psychological strife was unbearable. They fled from India, their homeland, to avoid the communal massacre and though they aspired to move to Pakistan, the government of Pakistan refused to grant them citizenship so “the deep-set trough of self-pity and despair most of the Biharis have developed in their ghettoes” (Whitaker et al. 2007, 13). This precarious situation has persisted for decades. Their distinct identity continues to render them socially excluded, and the resulting identity crisis remains unresolved more than fifty years after Bangladesh’s independence. In general, many Bengalis perceive the Biharis as outsiders who were forced to relocate and who, in their view, have not integrated into the national community. As Zaglul Haider (2016) claims:

> Unfortunately, state-sponsored alienation and denial prevented them from accessing education, employment, health care, and a decent life. These exclusions inflicted inhuman, unsecured, and deplorable living conditions upon them for more than four decades (427).

The hardships of the Biharis extend from their cramped living spaces to the inadequate sanitation in the camps. Each family is confined to a single room smaller than an average-sized bathroom in a Bengali household, where at least four to six members reside. They cannot imagine an attached washroom; rather, shared common toilets are used by more than 100 people (Haider 2016, 433). This starkly illustrates the dire living conditions within the camps. For their financial support, they engage in petty low-paid jobs due to their limited access to education. They perform degrading jobs like sweeping, cleaning, vending, and pulling rickshaws etc. to support their families.

The short film *Jinnah is Dead* opens with stark depictions of theinhuman conditions of the Biharis inside the camps. The gruesome scenes of unhygienic toilets, long queues outside the bathrooms, and a family of four to six members confined to a single, cramped room underscore the harsh reality of camp life. Yet within these confines, the Biharis communicate freely in their mother tongue, Urdu. From children to adults, Urdu remains the primary medium of communication, spoken without hesitation. Remarkably, even after residing in Bangladesh for over half a century, the younger generation, born and raised in the country, continues to speak

Urdu fluently. This persistence highlights the community's resistance to adopting the Bengali language and culture. As Rahaman (2020) notes, "Some of the Biharis have protected their cultural identity for a long time in the face of continuous Bengali cultural intervention in the camp" (61). Thus, the discord between the two communities appears to be more a product of deliberate cultural preservation than mere circumstance.

Due to limited access education, most Biharis in the camps do menial jobs such as butchers, fish vendors, or toilet cleaners. This educational and financial disparity further exacerbates the tension between the Biharis and the Bengali community. According to field research by Rahaman (2020), a 30-year-old Bihari believes, "The level of acceptance depends on the economic wellbeing and social status" (62). According to the speaker, the camp residents cannot be accepted by the Bengali community because they are poor and their opinion does not matter (Rahaman 2020, 62). A scene in *Jinnah is Dead* vividly illustrates this dynamic: when two men go to buy fish from a Bihari vendor, one of them insults the vendor by asking if the fish are from Pakistan and when he rejects selling fish to him, the buyer abuses him by calling him a "Pakistani dog!" (Chattopadhyay 2019, 1:52-1:53). The humiliating attitude of the Bengali buyer and the aggression of the Bihari clearly show the mutual hostility. Ironically, one of the two buyers is himself a Bihari living outside the camp, attempting to assimilate into Bengali society by concealing his true identity, which further underscores the complexities of survival and identity within the community. Haider (2016) observes, "Over the years, the Biharis' attitude towards repatriation has changed radically" and "they are comfortable in identifying themselves as Bangladeshi nationals" (483), but in the film, the situation seems more imposed than genuine. The Bihari who tries to integrate with the Bengalis silently endures verbal assaults directed at another Bihari, showing his desperation to assimilate and lead a respectable life, unlike the camp dwellers. In fact, he joins the Bengali buyers in cursing the Biharis, blaming them for "polluting" the neighborhood. But when he comes back home, he speaks in Urdu with his family members and watches Pakistani channels on TV, revealing where he truly feels at ease. This duality exposes two conflicting identities: one, a performative Bengali façade adopted to gain social respect, and the other, his authentic Bihari origin, which he cannot deny. His son, Farhan, who is frustrated with the double identity, argues with his father and shouts, "What else am I other than a refugee camp boy? Will living in a building change my identity from Bihari to Bengali?" (Chattopadhyay 2019, 1:55-1:56). This moment encapsulates the diasporic tension, identity conflict, and anxiety faced by migrated Biharis in Bangladesh. Navigating two identities, the protagonist and his family live in constant fear of exposure. Even as a building owner, he behaves cautiously, speaking softly around Bengali tenants and immediately switching the TV to Bengali channels whenever someone enters, underscoring the persistent insecurity of living between worlds.

The concealment of their original identity stems from the pervasive discriminatory attitude of the Bengali majority. The protagonist of the film is careful to shield his family from

being recognized as camp dwellers. “Those who could afford to live outside the camp usually don’t identify them as Biharis, as a revealing identity means deprivation from several rights” (Rahaman 2019, 64). In other words, beyond merely coping with societal prejudice, the Biharis often mask their origins to access basic necessities and integrate into the so-called ‘civilized’ Bengali community. Despite a strong desire to preserve their age-old culture and language, Biharis living outside the camp must suppress these instincts. Rejecting assimilation may indeed cause them nothing but humiliation and further aggression from the dominant group. In fact, this tension is vividly illustrated in a scene where a Bihari cleaner comes to repair a clogged toilet and is verbally assaulted by a Bengali tenant who shouts, “Bloody Bihari, bloody Pakistani!” and threatens him with a slap. In reply, the Bihari calmly asks if he knows the difference between a Pakistani and a Bihari (Chattopadhyay 2019, 1:58). His retort symbolizes the larger message to all Bengalis who continue to deny Biharis full recognition as citizens. Living in an independent country for more than 50 years could not erase their fear and identity crisis. Even after being accepted as a citizen, they are treated badly. In the film’s climax, the Bihari building owner loses his restraint during an argument with a Bihari sweeper, threatening him in Urdu (Chattopadhyay 2019, 1:59-2:00). Here, two Biharis from two different classes confront the enduring consequences of their unchosen origins. After the incident, the owner retreats to his room, retrieves a photo of Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his cupboard and locks the photo inside a trunk (Chattopadhyay 2019, 2:01-2:02). With Jinnah’s photo, he symbolically buries both his identity and his hope of a homeland. In this sense, along with Jinnah, the “Promised Land” for the Biharis seems to have died as well.

Two of the leading characters are from the same ethnic background, but one is neglected and demeaned because he has rejected Bengali culture and embraced his own identity, while the other is depressed and alienated because he has tried to hide his origin and beliefs in order to fit into society. Their memories of the homeland may have faded but their constant search for identity has never ceased. In this way, the film portrays how dislocation and the process of ‘othering’ are responsible for the stress, anxiety, and existential crisis they suffer from even after more than 50 years of independence. The protagonist’s desire to cling to Jinnah’s promise alludes to the idea of ‘imagined communities’ introduced by Benedict Anderson (2006), who argues that the nation is imagined, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). This could be the reason for the Bihari’s hidden affection for Jinnah or Pakistan. In the film, the eldest member of the family, the protagonist’s father, is probably the one who settled first in Bangladesh. Even after living in this country for decades, he still watches only PTV (Pakistani Television), which shows his affection towards a country where he once aspired to settle. Though a large number of Biharis now identify themselves as Bengalis, as the young generation was born and raised in this country, many of them still identify “themselves as Pakistani citizens, because they think that Pakistan is their ideological state” (Haider 2016, 438).

The burning question this film evokes is the Bihari's confusion about the idea of "home". They cannot decide which country or place they should consider as their home, if it should be Pakistan, which was supposed to be their 'promised land' but never became one, or Bihar in India, where they came from. Finally, they are uncertain if they should call Bangladesh as their homeland, where the young Biharis were born and raised but are hardly accepted by the mainstream population. To know the answer, one should understand what the word 'home' means. Sara Ahmed (1999) explained that home can be a place where one is born, a place where one grows up, or one's native country (338). In short, home is a place where one's identity, family, and surroundings coexist harmoniously. She mentions airports or air terminals as comforting places because the passengers waiting there are either coming home or leaving home. It is a comforting idea because they have a place to go to or to leave from, a place they can call their home. For the Biharis, there is no such place as home, because the land in which the young Biharis are born is not their native country. In the film, the youngest member of the family, Farhan, son of the protagonist, does not seem to like the idea of hiding his ancestral identity; rather, he asks his father, "How did changing your origin help you?" (Chattopadhyay 2019, 1:56). This question reflects the family's frustration, as, their family members are not free to access basic necessities such as shelter, education, and healthcare here. Year after year, they have been living as 'stranded Pakistanis'—interestingly, a label tied to a country they have never even visited, yet they are degradingly identified this way. Moreover, Bihar and the other states in India have become foreign lands for them, as they fled the country where their lives were at risk. Therefore, those 'homeless' citizens of Bangladesh do not have any place to return to or depart from. It is not only a loss of a piece of land; rather, there is a deep "relationship between identity, belonging and home." (Ahmed 1999, 331). Thence, they might pretend to hide their identity but their identity crisis cannot be disregarded in any sense. In the film's final scene, when the Bihari owner fails to maintain his fake identity in front of a Bengali tenant, his silence and shattered expression tells that he has failed in his long attempt to assimilate in the civil society. On the other hand, the shocked expression of the camp dweller Bihari reveals the sense of betrayal caused by a member of his own community.

Despite being legal citizens of Bangladesh, the Biharis experience a profound sense of displacement that can be understood through Homi Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness." According to Bhabha (1993), the term 'unhomely' "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" (141). The Biharis cannot be considered stateless; rather, many of them now own property in this country, but their fear of un-belongingness becomes the cause of their identity crisis. The houseowner depicted in Jinnah is Dead exemplifies this tension. As Bhabha states, "to be unhomed is not to be homeless" (141), indicating that physical presence in a place does not guarantee psychological or cultural security. Regardless of decades of residence or property ownership, the Biharis' distinct language, culture, memories, and imagined connections to a different nation render them estranged from the conventional notion of "home." Traditionally, the word 'home' connoted 'comfort' and

‘freedom’, whereas the so-called ‘citizens’ are still living in fear and hiding their origin to blend in the society. As shown in the film, the main character does not even let his family members speak loudly in Urdu inside his own home, a striking example of the internalized pressures of unhomeliness. As Bhabha emphasizes, “It has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations” (141). As a consequence of this ‘cultural relocation’, the Biharis are particularly vulnerable to suffering identity crisis. Though they may still cling to their ideological leader Jinnah and his ideals, for them Jinnah’s ‘Promised Land’ is now just an illusion. Like the film’s protagonist, most Biharis lock their dreams inside a box, even though their identity has been shaped by their long-lost memories. Ahmed (1999) recognizes their sense of loss and states, “...the narrative of leaving home produces too many homes and hence no Home, too many places in which memories attach themselves through the carving out of inhabitable space, and hence no place in which memory can allow the past to reach the present” (330). The memories and the fantasies of the Biharis have created many homes, yet reality has denied them one.

Thus, in this short film, two characters belonging to two separate classes long for the same home which their ideal leader once promised. Their ideologies about revealing their origin might differ, but their sufferings as strangers in a land where they have lived for decades is strikingly similar. While describing the nature and reason for feeling ‘unhomely’, Bhabha (1993) claims, “Although the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic post-colonial experience, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions” (142). The Biharis are not a colonized group in Bangladesh. Because of the similar religion, they were in fact welcomed by the Bengalis. It is, however, regrettable that the Bengalis could not forgive the Biharis for the actions they perpetrated during the liberation war of 1971 and Biharis also could not get over their shattered dream. Even though the community did not face a typical post-colonial experience, their distinct culture and social customs along with the different language make them feel alienated and displaced. The Bengali perspective may seem understandable to some extent as the people of this country sacrificed their lives for the right to language and to resist the decision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. That is why after more than 50 years, Bengalis cannot accept the same community who still speaks the language of their oppressors. In fact, their language is the reason the Bengalis continue to question their loyalty to the country. So, the attempts of the Biharis to hide their identity and blend into society are not entirely irrational. Similarly, the attitude of the Biharis towards Bengalis is often defensive and aggressive because a large number of Biharis were killed and assaulted, and lost their honor and homes after the Liberation war of Bangladesh. This made them feel insecure and marginalized among the majority populator. At the same time, their living conditions in the camps have not improved since they first moved here. Bangladeshi government and the Bengalis have shown little concern about the inhuman condition of the camp residents. This indifference may have caused the lack of trust and respect

that the Biharis feel toward the Bengalis. On the contrary, to survive in this country, the Biharis often appear aggressive and violent. As presented in the film, the cleaner returns with his Bihari gang to avenge the insult inflicted by the Bengali tenant.

The main reason behind the Biharis shifting to Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, was religion, but "the place of Islam in Bengali national identity was vague and disputed because of the secular intellectuals and politicians who promoted Bengali identity as a secular construct" (Rahaman et al. 2020, 889). To understand the identity crisis of the Biharis, it is important to recognize that Bengali identity and nationality were formed after the rise of the elite middle-class Bengalis who began to claim their rights during the Pakistani regime. Before that, it was Muslim nationalism that motivated the British regime to divide the Indian subcontinent. So, the conflict between the two communities arose on the matter of different languages, as cultural nationality became more important after the partition. Because of the shared language and culture, the Biharis felt closer to West Pakistanis and became alienated within the Bangla-speaking community of East Pakistan. The memories of the Bihari ancestors who once lived in a country where they could freely celebrate their culture have faded over time, but the community is still suffering the consequences. Despite residing in Bangladesh and being surrounded by Bengali culture, most Biharis have preferred to embrace their ancestors' culture and memory of a linguistically and culturally harmonious community. This tendency has instinctively turned them into a separate group. The contradiction between the faded memory of the Bihari ancestors and the continuous attempt to hide their identity among the Bengali community is undoubtedly the logical reason behind the identity crisis. Though the elder Biharis may think they are preserving their 'original culture', the newer generation, born in Bangladesh, cannot help but question the problematic behavioral divide between the two groups.

The discussion above demonstrates how modern visual media can effectively portray the conditions of dislocated communities. Through cinematic elements such as the setting, the characters' manner of speaking, their facial expressions, and even the tension in silence—films can convey nuanced social, historical and political contexts that may be difficult to capture in other mediums. In the short film *Jinnah is Dead*, Chattopadhyay illustrates the characters, dialogues, and setting in a manner that leaves the audience with numerous unanswered historical, political, and social questions. This paper highlights the complex social status of the Biharis and highlights the internal stratification within their community. The conflict began with the partition of the subcontinent based on religion, which disregarded linguistic and cultural differences at the time. Attempting to unite different groups solely on the basis of religion later led to communal riots. Among the affected communities, becoming victims of Bangladesh's national and political upheavals. They were forced to accept a fate they did not choose and therefore cannot be blamed for it. Legally, they are citizens of Bangladesh, but socially they remain excluded due to their distinct language and culture. Moreover, the alliance of Bihari ancestors with the Pakistani army during the Liberation War should not justify the marginalization of the newer generation, who

were born as Bangladeshi citizens. At the same time, the inhumane conditions of camp dwellers should be a matter of urgent concern. Decade after decade, they have been denied basic rights, as sufficient steps have never been taken to improve their situation. If such neglect persists, a significant portion of Bangladesh's citizens risks remaining underutilized as human resources. Beyond economic and societal challenges, the psychological dilemmas faced by Biharis continue to force them to hide their identities in order to blend into society. This forced assimilation often fosters aggression and hostility among both young and adult Biharis toward the Bengali population. Haider (2016) notes, "Their main dream is to stop transferring their sufferings to their children" (438). To ensure their children's equal rights, Biharis often hide their origins to avoid Bengali animosity. This dynamic mirrors the protagonist of Jinnah is Dead, who strives to prevent his son from becoming a camp-dwelling Bihari. In the pursuit of a new identity while clinging to their original culture, many Biharis compromise their own dignity. As depicted in the film, the protagonist feels humiliated before his tenant merely for speaking in Urdu. If the Biharis' attempts to assimilate were acknowledged and respected, tensions might be reduced. It must be remembered that Biharis are not Pakistanis—they are legal Bangladeshi citizens. The economic disparity between camp-dwelling Biharis and landowning Biharis results largely from the harsh treatment of the Urdu-speaking community by Bengalis. Improving their economic conditions could foster a greater sense of inclusion, reducing the need for many Biharis to conceal their identities and easing long-standing communal tensions.

In conclusion, although most Biharis were born after 1971 and have limited knowledge of the historical roots of Bengali hostility toward their community, their experiences of identity crisis and feelings of statelessness deserve acknowledgment. Living with two distinct identities and behaving differently inside and outside their homes, their sense of un-homeliness is likely to deepen over time. As depicted in the film through the photograph of their communal leader, Jinnah, they may attempt to suppress their emotions and origins, yet such repression can eventually manifest in harmful ways. Therefore, Bengalis must exercise greater tolerance toward the cultural and social differences of the Biharis, fostering a sense of inclusion. Simultaneously, Biharis should strive to embrace their citizenship and foster positive relationships with their Bengali neighbors. Promoting social harmony within society can improve both the nations' economy and the mental well-being of Biharis, helping them recognize Bangladesh as their true home. Both communities must critically reconsider their attitudes. The Biharis' expectations are modest—they seek nothing more than respect from Bengalis, whether they are sweepers or educated citizens. By forgiving the past and remembering that the younger generation should not bear the burden of their communal leaders' actions, Bengalis can help alleviate the psychological turmoil that Biharis have endured for decades. Their forgotten memories should no longer be a source of grief; instead, recognizing their rightful place as fellow Bangladeshis can allow Biharis to reclaim their identities with dignity, free from fear and shame.

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