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Rape and Beyond: Subversion of Gendered Violence in Jyotirmoyee Devi's Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga

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Abstract: *This article focuses upon the complex relationship between ethno-religious violence, rape, victimhood and conventional historiography in the context of 1947 Partition of India. The riots and mass-migration following Partition posed questions of resettlement and identity formation in the post-colonial nation. This article also focuses upon the gendered nature of the violence and the trauma of rape shaping the lives of women surviving the holocaust. Jyotirmoyee Devi's Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga explores the nuances of survival of such a woman. The deliberate obscurity in the narrative about the extent of sexual violence enacted on this woman farther opens up the social perceptions surrounding rape, femininity, and women's position in society. The article also deals with the text's theoretical and deliberate engagement with conventional historiography and the absence of women's voices in it. Similar absence of women's narratives is also recurrent in literature since classical periods. The text digs at the social and individual trauma of gendered violence and traces the survival story of women through the character of the protagonist. The article therefore attempts to trace the journey of a woman from victimhood to a position of agency.*

Keywords: *Partition, rape, femininity, gender, historiography.*

If we look deep into the chaos that defined the time and traits of the Partition of 1947, a deeper truth emerges about a general confusion among the onlookers who could not decide how to react to the numerous stories surrounding Partition, its narratives and dry facts. The immeasurable accounts of migration and massacre and the enormous loss made such a deep impact that language seemed inadequate in articulating the incident. Probably that is why there is certain indifference in Bengali literature after 1947 towards this cataclysmic event. Like Punjab, Bengal was divided into two parts which resulted in uprooting, torturing and butchering of numberless people. Two post-1947 geographical entities, the Indian state of West Bengal and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, suffered the worst of setbacks. The Bengali society and its economy were deeply incapacitated in this

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event. However, it's quite strange that Bengali literature somehow kept some distance from this burning issue. Though India went through similar types of violence, abduction, migration and resettlement in both its Eastern and Western borders, namely Punjab and Bengal, the outcome of these two experiences certainly differs.

The popular term 'Partition literature' glosses over a fundamental disparity because, at the core the process of division and migration in Bengal is in stark contrast to that in Punjab. While in Punjab it was more of a onetime incident, involving a mass migration of human beings at one point of time, in Bengal it turned out to be a long drawn process, continuing for a number of decades and affecting generations as well. In Bengal it was a slower and longer process of migration. The movement of refugees from East Pakistan into West Bengal continued well into the 1970s. Sujata Ramchandran writes in her article, "Of Boundaries and Border Crossing: Undocumented Bangladeshi 'infiltrators' and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India"(1999) that approximately nine million of Hindu East Bengali refugees moved into West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura and Assam in the 1960s and 1970s.

Bengali Partition literature is clearly lesser in volume in comparison to the Partition literature of Punjab. This relative silence and sporadic depiction of the conditions of post-1947 Bengal still tell something more significant than uttered words. Silence often leads to the submerged story behind the narrative, the brutal contexts which made this particular silence possible. The context here assumes serious significance because of the violence being deeply embedded in a nostalgia which ceaselessly reminds one of the prolonged dismemberment. If there is a pattern in those acts of remembering, that should be looked into and examined through historical analysis. Writing on the holocaust of 1947 Partition of India, Urvashi Butalia identified among the women who survived the Partition a tendency towards keeping silence on their experience, as if 'words would suddenly fail speech as memory encountered something too painful, often too frightening to allow it to enter speech'(1998, 24). Looking at Bengali literature in particular, silence involves avoiding direct account of the incident. Rather it remains in the backdrop, the all-pervasive influence behind the metamorphoses of the Bengali society during and after Partition.

In spite of this collective avoidance of the individual experiences of Partition, Partition literature in Bengal has a considerable volume and it clearly reflects two dominant traits. First, though it will be erroneous to term the Bengali writers as consciously silent about depicting the Partition violence, they preferred to adopt a conscious path of dealing with the subtler impact of Partition rather than recounting the traumatic experiences of the Partition. They lingered more on the emotional entanglements of the refugees. The pain of exile and the physical hardships of resettlement they had to endure after Partition. Atin Bandyopadhyay's famous novel *Nilkantha PakhirKhonje* (literally 'In the Search of a Blue-

throated Bird'), Narayan Gangopadhyay's *Sroter Sange* (literally 'Along with the Tide'), Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Purbo-Pashim* (literally 'The East and the West'), Sankha Ghosh's *Supuri Bon-er Sari* (literally 'Rows of Betel-nut Trees'), and Sunanda Shikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* (literally 'The Tale of Dayamoyee') to name a few, belong to different decades, but each one of them deals with the trauma associated with the loss of one's homeland, the pathos of living a life interspersed with the memories of a bitter past, a futile nostalgia and unrealistic wistful dream of going back to their lost paradise. The authors consciously avoid realistic recounting of the motifs of revenge, genocide or ethnic cleansing and prefer to deal with the effects of untold violence on socio-cultural and economic developments.

This deliberate omission of the brutalities of communal violence and avoidance of harsh historical realities places the writers of Partition from the East in stark contrast to the writers of Partition like Saadat Hasan Manto or Bhisham Sahani. However, this omission of the traumatic ordeals of a nation and the immediate violence in Partition literature of Bengal is balanced by a comprehensive depiction of the uncertainties during and after Partition. Similar uncertainties haunted the refugee existence in the subsequent decades. On the one hand, present uncertainties constantly forced them to nostalgia about their lost land, a world of hope and fantasy; but at the same time, they were under a compulsion to shape a living for themselves which had a cumulative effect on socio-economic changes in the Bengali society since 1947.

Therefore, as writings on Punjab Partition more accurately represent the horror and trauma of the killings of 1947, the relatively less critically acclaimed Bengal Partition literature throws a useful light on the socio-economic and political uncertainties of the post-Partition decades and the problematic resettlement and consequent disillusionment of the refugees which these issues led to. In Punjab, Partition-time migration occurred for a brief period of time. However, in the Eastern or Bengal Partition the scenario was entirely different as waves after waves of Partition victims migrated freely across the international border through the six decades after independence. . This has often led to the epithet 'Long Partition' in reference to the western partition. It had such an overpowering impact on its victims that their priorities often changed. HasanAzizulHaque in his novel *AgunPakhi* (The Bird of Fire) described how the families which rejected the prospect of migrating in the aftermath of 1947 did slowly succumb to the various socio-economic pressures. This again attests the difference Bengali Partition narratives have in possessing an unusual story to tell.

The general structure of these Partition novels is different in itself and remarkable in the way it interrupts the patriarchal citing of women as the representative metaphor of the nation. The dominant codes of representation embedded in the metaphor are changed because here the refugee woman functions here as an embodied subject who becomes the centre of the narrative. The novel often attempts to analyse how the formation of

this metaphor is perceived by a refugee woman. This figure of the refugee woman brings together the traumatic experience of Partition vis-a-vis the mundane actuality of everyday life; thus it addresses the gendered experience of Partition as a patriarchal execution of violence and it also questions the nature of the post-colonial nation.

Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* is an example of a text which intervenes in the way women are represented as a metaphor in state ideology. Jyotirmoyee Devi attempts to subvert the way women are represented as a symbol for the nation. As the narrative centres round the character of a woman who is a victim of the Partition holocaust, Jyotirmoyee Devi not only questions the position of women as a symbol of the nation from the viewpoint of a refugee woman, she also places the personal trauma of Partition against the available public narratives on the same.

Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga (literally 'Ganga This Side, Ganga That Side') was first published in Bengali in 1967 as *Itihashe Stree Parva*(literally, 'Women's Chapter in History') in the Autumn-Annual volume of the acclaimed Bengali periodical *Prabashi*. In 1968, the book was published with a new title, on request from the publisher (Jyotirmoyee Devi "Author's Note" xxxvi). Jyotirmoyee Devi already wrote a short story in 1966 with the title *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, the title of which she now used for this novel. The book was translated by Enakshi Chatterjee in 1995 as *The River Churning: A Partition Novel.*

As already mentioned, Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* posits questions before patriarchy and nationalist ideologies. Patriarchal narratives upholding the concept of 'violence on women', deal with female honour by positing the victimised woman against larger socio-economic and political concern, thereby effectively silencing her. Jyotirmoyee Devi questions this narrative of female chastity/honour by making a wronged woman the centre of her narrative. This particular viewpoint locates the women as subjects in her novel and the narrator encounters the problematic domain of fiction writing from the perspective of the violated women. The female protagonist of the text is an embodied subject who is victimised at multiple levels of her body, mind as well as social acceptance. Jyotirmoyee Devi is not merely criticising the Partition violence perpetuated on women. Jyotirmoyee Devi's critique targets Partition violence as well as the violence enacted by patriarchy. In this sense the category of 'women' attains a shift in the signification of the term. This shift allows the novel to break away from the coercive historical acceptance of women's inferior social status. The purpose of this chapter would be to read the novel and trace how this particular text accomplishes a shift in the signification inherent in 'women'.

To focus on the particular, *The River Churning* is the story of a refugee woman. Jyotirmoyee Devi's critique, however, does not depend on a single woman character. The 'gendering' of the refugee is re-created by a simple strategy—all the refugees and survivors of Partition violence are women in this novel. This figure of the gendered victim

is equally within and outside the power structures and marks the relationship between personal suffering and public existence, between the historical representation and the representation of the trauma. In her attempt to foreground patriarchal violence imposed on women, Jyotirmoyee Devi has emphasized the homogeneity over distinctive features in characterization. She does not dwell on the social hierarchies of class or caste; rather she presents an abstract collective of all women. In a way, it also helps to disrupt the conventional binary of Hindu and Muslim women. That is why perhaps she has dedicated the novel to 'all women of all ages, of all countries, who have been violated and humiliated' (Jyotirmoyee Devi "Dedication," *Rachana Sankalan*; translated by self from original Bengali). Ironically, she adopts the logic of what she so successfully subverts. The violence of Partition did not distinguish between Hindu and Muslim women; the logic of Partition erased class and caste distinctions.

Overview of the Author and the Novel:

A brief overview of the author and her text will provide an insight into the context of the text and its justification as a Partition text. Jyotirmoyee Sen was born in 1894 in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Bereft of any formal education, Jyotirmoyee Devi was taught at home and learnt English from her husband. In Kolkata, she found the scope of participating in different literary and cultural events of music and literature, including discussion of English books ("Beginnings" *The River Churning* x). She entered writing, hesitatingly, afraid of disapproval. In her initial writings, she writes about the conventional representation of women in different genres of literature. Jyotirmoyee Devi's first published works are a poem and an essay "Narir Katha" ("A Woman's Tale") in 1921. Jasodhara Bagchi notes, "At the age of Twenty-Eight, Jyotirmoyee, ostensibly a meek Hindu widow, burst into print in the pages of a reputed journal, *Bharatbarsha.* Those who believe that feminism is an import from America or France of the Seventies should listen to this angry Indian voice from the Twenties of this century" (Introduction, xxvi).

Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga (1968)is based on the pre-Partition Noakhali riots in 1946 and narrates the tale of a girl who has survived the communal turmoil but is suspected of being 'polluted'. Not a refugee herself or closely related to one, Jyotirmoyee Devi was a witness to the impact of Partition in North India, probably Delhi. However, she was acutely conscious of the happenings in Bengal too. Her groundwork for the novel perhaps was facilitated by two things—first, her direct knowledge of Bengali Hindu joint families and the location of women therein, and secondly, the shared experience from her daughter Ashoka Gupta who worked with Gandhiji for few months in Noakhali after the riots.

Jill Didur, citing Shelly Feldman's essay 'Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition', writes *The River Churning*:

If the novel does represent a unique perspective on the Partition that links it with the East Bengal experience, it is through the narrative's persistent return to Sutara's incomplete memory of events in Noakhali in 1946. As Shelly Feldman has suggested, the experience of the 1947 Partition in "East Bengal serves as a metaphor for a place that, like women, is constructed as other, invisible, different, and silenced in the real politics of the time" (Feldman169). …Thus, rather than offering an account of Sutara's experience that subsumes it into the larger history of India's partition and moves on, *The River Churning*'s representation of the absence-presence of events in Noakhali, East Bengal, suggests a pedagogy for thinking about partition history that 'complicate[s] the search for a grand explanation or narrative of the past(Feldman 180). (129)

The novel *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* deliberates on the gendered experience of Bengal Partition which has remained unspoken to a great extent. The discourse of violence on the female body is pivotal in the narratives of Partition in Bengal as well, though it is often argued that violence against women did never reach the scale that it did in Punjab. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhaoranjan Dasgupta opine that, "Though there is a general belief that rape was less marked a presence in the Bengal Partition, the fear of rape was enough to marginalize women and to prevent them from being accepted by their own community" (4). Often the fear of abduction and rape became more threatening and led to mass frenzy as well.

Prefaced with an 'Author's Note', the novel begins with a brief introductory section of three pages. The rest of the book is divided in three sections, each named after a chapter of the epic *The Mahabharata*. The first section is relatively short, followed by two major chapters. The novel opens in the middle of a History class in a girls' college in Delhi; the protagonist Sutara Dutta is introduced, who is a teacher of this college. Reflecting on the curriculum and the pattern of things she is bound to teach, she is interrupted by the flashback of her personal memories. The lapses in normative history confound her as she questions herself, where to find these un-archived histories. The first section, narrated in flashback, describes the attack on her family one night by Muslim rioters in which her father is killed, her mother jumps into a pond and her elder sister Sujata simply 'vanishes'. She is rendered unconscious and is rescued by Tamij Saheb. As she became unconscious, she does not know what happened afterwards that evening. There are several references about the possible physical violence done to Sutara, but it remains obscure whether the violation was sexual in nature or not. The novelist deliberately obscures the issue of rape here.

Section II, continuing the flashback mode, tells the story of Sutara and her journey

from a family-less refugee woman to her present position as a lecturer of history which is narrated in the opening three pages. Due to the tense situation, her brothers, for the time being, were staying with their in-laws.She is abhorred by the female members of the family who are apprehensive about what food she had eaten in the last six months. The suspicion of possible rape also adds to her marginal status in the family. She is considered to be a germ or a pest by the other women off the household, one who can contaminate the whole family. She is strictly forbidden to take part in any activities in the kitchen. Her sexuality is also a threat because the women feel that someone or other in the family will fall for the young girl and bring shame and dishonour to the family. Sutara herself is the problem and here she voices the general rhetoric of the problem faced by East-Bengali refugee women in West Bengal.

Section III moves to Delhi where Sutara is now a professor of History. She does not have much intimacy with her larger family in Calcutta, except sending them occasional letters. She develops a bonding with her colleagues, especially the North Indian women. As Debali Mookerjea-Leonard points out, "Significantly it is among the women refugees from west Punjab, residing at Delhi, that Sutara, for the first time, feels the bond of community, of being part of a shared history of violence"(37).

In her prefatory authorial note, Jyotirmoyee Devi reflects over the existence of any exclusive book or chapter dedicated to women in any literature and she lights upon a particular chapter in the epic *The Mahabharata* named '*streeparva*' or 'chapter for women'. Jyotirmoyee Devi writes,

History is not written by cowards, and there are no female epic poets. Even if there were, they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonour and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned, so naturally StreeParva does not figure anywhere. …. The king gets back his kingdom. Heroes of war are honoured. The world resounds in praise of male bravery, acts of heroism — but has nothing to say about the eternal *StreeParva*, the humiliation of women, the endless exploitation of helpless women, which continues through the combined efforts of savage men, and lurks behind all heroic deeds. No history has recorded that tragic chapter of shame and humiliation that is forever controlled by the husband, the son, the father and their race ["jati"]. (xxxiv-xxxv)

The authorial note introduces two central concerns of the novel—the violence inflicted on women and the absence of women's narratives in the documented collective memory. Jyotirmoyee Devi not only highlights the absence of women's narratives, remarkable is the silence of the female survivors that stands at par with the silence of the dead. The survivors of the Partition violence still cannot get over the trance and wear a shroud of silence associated with those unable to recover from trauma. In the missionaries' hostel

where Sutara stays, there is a prohibition on the inmates about public discussion of their personal experiences. Much later in life, when she is teaching in a college, Sutara still cannot sum up her experiences accurately and adequately because the pain in her mind is yet too fresh. This personal failure of Sutara to narrate her experience is echoed by the silence maintained by the author at the meta-textual level.

The travails of Sutara hinge upon her being kidnapped during the riots. However, the novel does not specifically say what kind of violence was inflicted upon Sutara. The exact nature of violence remains a mystery to the audience as well as to Sutara herself. Though the suggestions of sexual assault or rape are very obvious, the narrator keeps it deliberately ambiguous. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard observes that Sutara's memory and "trauma of the sexual assault" are registered in the text "mostly as a confused, nebulous memory, with scattered references to her torn and dirty clothes, her friends' suicides, drownings, and abductions" (41).

Mookerjea-Leonard argues that the details of the assault are omitted because the "veiling of a bodily trauma through language constitutes a counter-discourse to the economy of display of woman" (41). Similar view is also found in Jasodhara Bagchi. Bagchi describes Sutara's harassment by her own community, the proverbial "second rape," as "a prolonged and unbearable panopticist gaze by the community over Sutara's body and mind" ("Introduction" xxxii).

Mookerjea-Leonard argues that the silence about the details of the assault on Sutara is a narrative strategy and it "recovers something of the private pain that women suffered."(41), Jill Didur contends that readers should not necessarily fill such gaps in the narrative. According to Didur, silence does not imply that rape certainly did take place. She argues, "These silences and ambiguities in women's stories should not be resolved, accounted for, unveiled, or recovered, but, rather, understood as women's inability to subsume their experience within projects of patriarchal modernity that has produced them in the first place" (11). That way, the deliberate silence can be seen as a refusal against the recovery of the past. Didur's interpretation of this silence consisting the core of Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel can be taken as a useful case study on how to read this silence as a case for reading such lapses in the Partition narratives of violence and trauma. Such a reading of the narratives of Partition trauma shows that the trauma of the Partition victims and the ensuing silence can be read from a gender perspective as the process of silencing itself.

The reading of this silence and ambiguity at the core of the narrative in *The River Churning* helps in reconstructing the regular rape narrative and the deeply embedded patriarchal codes of representation. This in turn leads to my reading of the story of an individual refugee woman as one that narrates the process coming to terms with one's

personal trauma and the coming out of the woman from the realm of passive objectivity to subjective agency in the everyday world.

The River Churning problematises the classic rape narrative. The experience of Sutara who is probably a rape victim, brings into focus not just rape as an aspect of Partition violence but also the patriarchal violence of the society. The patriarchal perception of rape strongly differs from the female experience of. From a feminist perspective, Jean-Francois Lyotard's discussion of the incommensurability between fact and truth in *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988) is useful here. According to Lyotard, the problem between truth and fact is that the latter is historically verifiable. According to Lyotard, an event like Auschwitz is incommensurate with the rules of the knowledge set up by history. In a similar fashion, there is an inherent incommensurability between a woman's experience of rape and the legal definition of rape. With reference to *The River Churning*, we need to take into consideration the deliberate ambiguity regarding rape. This ambiguity surrounding rape can be regarded as a mark of feminist representation. Writing on raped women in the chapter "Life after Rape: Narrative, Rape and Feminism" in her book *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has argued that the deliberate silence at the heart of a rape narrative can be strongly oppositional to feminist politics. She says that such strategies can subvert the narrative purpose to critique the gendered injustice to rape victims. According to Sunder Rajan,

A feminist 'thematics of liberation,' as Teresa de Lauretis has cautioned, is insufficient to counter the forces of masculine desire that invests all narrative. This is why feminist texts of rape must also engage in textual strategies to counter narrative determinism. Such negotiations are achieved by and result in alternative structure of narrative. (73)

Sunder Rajan also refers to *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India*, both of which actually represent the scene of rape.

Critically important in the narrative strategy of *The River Churning* is the refusal to articulate the actual experience of Sutara. Rather than a deliberate mystification of rape as something unpresentable, *The River Churning* reverses the usual reaction to rape. A rape victim is usually not believed to have been raped, whereas in the case of Sutara, a woman is accused by the society of having been raped, and thus generating fear in the society. Her words are not of much importance, and, in any case, whatever she might say none would believe her. Whether she can prove her innocence or not, is immaterial in this context. Jyotirmoyee Devi's strategic mystification of Sutara's experience during the riot is a comment on as well as a critique of Hindu social norms regarding treatment of their 'polluted' women. According to Jill Didur,

by refusing to fill the gap in Sutara's story, Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel denies the reader 'the evidence' he or she needs to assess whether or not Sutara was sexually polluted and

instead redirects 'our' attention to the patriarchal rationale that informs the construction of women's sexuality as polluted or pure. (155)

If 'rape' or 'physical assault' becomes a tool for patriarchy for social ostracization of the victim, then the absence of factual reality at the crux of the narrative in *The River Churning* is a conscious decision of the novelist not to use such devices. The text questions the problematic assimilation of women like Sutara in the society as her unsupported words are never believed, neither by her contemporaries, nor by the so-called modern ones. Jyotirmoyee Devi performs a double function by this narrative silence. On the one hand, she critiques the inability of the patriarchal society to believe a woman's words and secondly, she critiques the readers' desire not to trust Sutara's silence and their desire to perform an independent opinion of her treatment.

Whether Sutara was actually raped or not is a cognitive cul-de-sac for the society because the actuality of the rape is not of much importance. *The River Churning* actually acts upon and constructs a critique of the vulnerability of women to the threat of rape as a systematic violence. Consequently, the rape does not form the climax of the *The River Churning* as in normative rape-narratives like *A Passage to India*. Here rape is structurally positioned beyond the time-frame of the plot and has been alluded to throughout. This structural location of rape in the plot is read byRajeswari Sunder Rajan as a mean to achieve a liberated narrative structure:

the position of the rape scene at the beginning pre-empts expectation of its late(r) occurrence. Not only is the scene of rape diminished by this positioning but it is also granted a more purely functional purpose in the narrative economy, and narrative interest becomes displaced upon what follows. (73)

Referring to Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* and Maya Angelou's *I Knowwhy the Caged Bird Sings*, Sunder Rajan points out the similarity that "[t]he development of the female subject's 'self' begins after the rape and occupies the entire length of the narrative" (73). We have a similar case in *The River Churning* where the identity of the victim is realised after the rape and the novel actually deals with how she comes to terms with her life and realises her true identity.

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