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The River Churning and Trauma of Partition

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Abstract:

In many post-partition novels, we encounter women characters that not only embody the struggles of individuals, but also symbolise the collective experiences endured by large communities of women. Main characters in these fictional works frequently symbolise personal humiliation and collective pain. This paper will analyse Jyotirmoyee Devi's work, *The River Churning*, with a specific emphasis on the portrayal of the character Sutara. Jyotirmoyee Devi portrays Sutara as a double refugee, resulting from both the partition of Bengal and her exile from her homeland. Sutara experiences social exclusion within her own family and the wider society. This paper aims to examine Jyotirmoyee Devi's portrayal of the phenomenon of self-condemnation experienced by traumatised women, resulting from deeds for which they bear no culpability. The aim of this paper is to examine the novelist's perception of rape and the perspectives of both the family and society towards sexual assault.

Keywords: Partition, women, rape, silence, marginalization.

The River Churning: A Partition Novel, authored by Jyotirmoyee Devi, is a remarkable contribution to a genre of writing focused on the Partition of India. It provides a comprehensive exploration of the sad events of 1947. This text provides readers with sufficient justification to reassess and re-examine the historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of Indian society prior to, during, and following the holocaust resulting from partition. The female bodies became the battleground for violent conflicts among various ethnic groups, each striving to

establish their superiority over one another, but ultimately failing. Women were subjected to abduction, rape, and social marginalisation on a daily basis, despite the fact that the warning signs of their approaching catastrophe were never acknowledged in the prevailing narrative. Although there are not many women writers who have attempted to address the issue, there has been a lack of discussion regarding the female victims of Partition. An example of such a narrative is *The River Churning*, written by Jyotirmoyee Devi and translated by Enakshi Chatterjee from the original Bengali novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, which was published in 1967.

Jyotirmoyee Devi has endeavoured to construct a fresh narrative of the partition, with a specific emphasis on the anguish and selflessness of women. She has created a forum to bring to light the suppressed stories of pain and suffering endured by millions of women during the partition. Devi has endeavoured to expose the hidden and silenced experiences of these victimised women by recounting the partition riot and the harrowing ordeal of her main character, Sutara Dutta. Devi, along with other feminist historiographers like Ritu Menon, Kamala Bhasin, and Urvashi Butalia, throws emphasis on the patriarchal biases present in discussions about Partition, while also considering the experiences of tortured survivors. To bring awareness to the suppressed sad occurrence experienced by several women, Devi includes a first-person narrative in her work. Devi has drawn public attention to the plight of women during the Partition by examining previous events from the perspective of Sutara, a victim of the Partition.

Amidst the devastating communal unrest in Noakhali, East Bengal in 1946, Sutara, who was a teenager at the time, vividly remembers the terrifying ordeal she went through. While perusing this narrative, the protagonist Sutara recollects the evening in 1946 when her family was profoundly affected, compelling her to assume a new persona. She transitioned from being a modest, naive adolescent who had recently completed her secondary education to being an instructor who had to surmount overwhelming anguish and hardship. The question of whether or not she was sexually attacked is uncertain due to the absence of any textual evidence to substantiate this claim. Tamij Sahib later discovered her in the debris, “blood-spattered cloth heaps” (100). However, the novel does not provide any further information about her whereabouts, except the fact that she fell and lost consciousness during the chaos. Nevertheless, what sets Sutara’s narrative apart is the reality that she experienced unjust treatment from her own society and was subsequently marginalised by the members of her community due to her apparent breach of the class-caste agreement.

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Her frequent relocation, starting from Bamunpara, a nearby village in East Bengal, to her brother's care in Calcutta (West Bengal), followed by stays in a missionary school hostel and later a college hostel, and finally her employment in Delhi, vividly portrays her arduous journey as a survivor of the Partition. The author elucidates the protagonist's contemplation on the causal relationships of events as she delves more into her studies--"The more Sutara studied, the more she wondered- why did things happen the way they did?" (Devi 77). She could envision the grim truth that she would never possess a residence due to experiencing social exclusion on two occasions - once from "the other community" and once from her own family. She comfortably settled into a new setting in Delhi, where she joined a diverse group of Partition survivors with different racial and cultural backgrounds.

The act of marking the body is a very destructive aspect of sectarian and communal violence. Women's bodies are subjected to both weaponization and being exploited as symbols of shame, making them the most egregiously abused. In her article "National Honour and Practical Kinship: Of Unwanted Wives and Children", Veena Das discusses instances of sexual and reproductive violence experienced by women during and after the Partition. Das discusses the impact of this occurrence on our perception of women's purity. Partition led to the transformation of the customary household discussion on women's honour and purity into a matter of public concern. Women began to be regarded as the responsibility of the country, leading to their legal categorisation as either "abducted" or "raped". Das believes that the public categorisation of women resulted in their alienation from their own families. The act of denial perpetuates the normalisation of violence in society, particularly in cases of kidnapping and rape, which are then justified under the pretext of honour, shame, and purity. Das argues that the state's intervention created difficulties for families in accepting women and children who were considered undesirable in various locations. Das contends that the state's preconceived notions regarding the recovery of the abducted women were in conflict with the actual circumstances, leading to the women being victimised again.

Debali Mukherjea Leonard argues in her essay "Jyotirmoyee Devi: Writing History, Making Citizens" that families' rejection of women survivors was driven by the deep-rooted and complex history of patriarchal obsession on women's sexuality, which was both motivated and justified by ideological reasons. Leonard relates Gandhiji's statement to exemplify the ideological requirements of a society (02) in which his "position is rife with contradictory

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social and political ramifications" that "reflect the general social intolerance and non-acceptance of women subjected to sexual and cultural violence" (02). Gandhiji remarked:

> "I have heard that many women who did not want to lose their honour chose to die. Many men killed their wives. I think that is great, because I know such things make India brave. They have not sold away from their honour ... When I hear all these things I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India" (Gandhi quoted in Mookerjea 01).

These words often elicit several questions. These words both normalise violence against women and pay tribute to the numerous women who lost their lives in the pursuit of bravery. What is the perspective on women who have survived instances of suicide and murder, considering that these acts are often seen as courageous? Do they exhibit trepidation? Does having one's honour violated equate to losing it? Following her interaction with her Muslim rescuers, Sutara makes the decision to refrain from suicide and flees from Pakistan to reunite with her family in India. Nevertheless, she becomes a refugee inside her own family and is subsequently enrolled in a residential school for rehabilitation. Unfortunately, she is subjected to ridicule and rejection by the wider population. Sutara established her own distinct personality and found her rightful position in society despite facing unfair rejection from her relatives. She successfully overcomes the trauma and emerges as a self-reliant woman, which makes her a rule-breaker in the eyes of society because her actions defy societal expectations for a kidnapped woman. Sutara encounters ostracism from her family and society as she strives to assimilate and overcome the distress caused by her bereavement. The immediate family regards her as "polluted by the touch of Muslim household" (Devi 31), and outcastes her, who "must be purified with Ganga water" (33). Nevertheless, the abandonment persists following the purification. Despite her efforts, even her brother and sister-in-law, "treated her like an outsider," and did not help her to fit into the family (35). According to the lady of the home, Sutara should be excluded "away from the household work as you would a low caste hadi or Bagdi" (36). Subsequently, she was removed from her residence and placed in a boarding school with the intention of severing any familial connections. However, she has remained marginalised from society ever since.

Bagchi and Dasgupta's book, *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India,* highlights the fact 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). Sutara became a refugee inside her own family and culture due to the imminent danger of sexual assault. Her

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exposure to a Muslim home while being saved heightened the danger of her becoming infected. The novel's second section, named "Sutara Problem" (Chakraborty 142), refers to the issue of women's challenges during Bengal's artistic renaissance in the nineteenth century. The mother-in-law of her oldest brother's wife is very afraid of Sutara's "pollute"[d] touch" (Devi 32) and takes every possible measure to ensure the safety of her family. Ultimately, the family resolves this 'problem' by enrolling Sutara at a missionary school that offers refuge to girls and women who have encountered similar challenges. Despite attaining a prestigious social position as a college lecturer, Sutara's family has always failed to embrace her. Society and the state stigmatised and labelled women who had recovered and migrated with terms such as "abducted," "recovered," "widowed," "unattached," "unwanted," and "cowardly," which soiled their identities and implied impurity.

The acceptance of women in a few instances is driven by helplessness rather than broad-mindedness, states Kamalaben Patel. In Rajinder Singh Bedi's novel *Lajwanti,* a woman who is in the process of recovery is shown as being accepted into the family, but is nevertheless addressed as "Devi" and treated as an inanimate statue of a goddess. She perceives herself as an "untouchable" and experiences social isolation from the rest of the family. Partition accounts lack sufficient information about the many sorts of assault that women suffered, which is deeply unsettling. "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to the state of anterior language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before the language is learned" (05) asserts Elain Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain*. The story explores the absence of a vocabulary that can effectively articulate the gendered encounters of women. The absence of communication can sometimes convey a stronger message than words alone. An exemplary illustration of this type of "vocal silence" is *The River Churning* itself. The presence of silence frequently disrupts the narrative, occurring at regular intervals throughout the text.

Paulomi Chakraborty describes "*The River Churning* is a text saturated with silence". The narrative consistently has silences, which may be explained both mentally and imaginatively. The novel is regularly disrupted by periods of silence. Periodically, the story pauses as the words become inadequate and, in several instances, the overwhelming physical expression of weeping takes over. Sutara's tears served as a manifestation of her profound anguish. The woman's distressing psychological condition becomes apparent when "she could not say any more, tears welled up in her eyes." (Devi 140), "Wiping her eyes, she embraced Sutara with her left arm. Tears rained down from her eyes." (138), "At the end, her tears

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dropped on my hand." (213), "Tears stream down Pramod's hand … tears brook no end." (244) Indeed, the use of the term 'tears' serves to emphasise the profound misery experienced by Sutara and other women like to her, whose lives were profoundly and negatively altered during the Partition. This silent gesture serves as a compelling yet nonverbal commentary on the forced migration and brutality resulting from the Partition. Throughout the vedic times, the female body has been a subject of dispute in India. The Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana depict instances of ancient mistreatment, torture, oppression, physical abuse, and humiliation of women.

Bibi Inder Kaur's remarks in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* eloquently encapsulate the plight of women who were victimised. She states: "The women were left behind and treated like outcasts, often raped and brutalised—I mean if she came, she came with a guilty conscience, with the stigma of having been 'soiled'. And even if they were and sent on later, ... they were never able to resettle here. Many were sent back forcibly, they didn't want to come, ... the government told them they had to return ... Then the government arranged mass marriages for many of the women who did return— well, that's also like being raped, isn't it?" (Menon and Bhasin 208)
Sutara observes the homicide of her family and is subsequently saved by her Muslim neighbours, who then reunite her with her Indian cousins. Jyotirmoyee Devi characterises the 1947 Partition as the decisive conflict of the recently formed Indian state. This conclusion is drawn by examining the absence of any mention of violence against women and their enduring hardships in historical records, spanning from ancient texts until the Partition era.

She argues that the violence experienced by women during the Partition was of such magnitude that the existing language is insufficient to adequately describe it, similar to the violence shown in the Mahabharata. The author perceives the severity and magnitude of violence to be of epic proportions. Sutara's story is divided into three sections: "Adi Parva", "Anushasana Parva", and "Stree Parva" which correspond to the chapters of the Mahabharata and represent the three stages of her life. The Stree Parva of the Mahabharata was not a typical chapter about women, but according to Jyotirmoyee Devi, it held the key to connecting myth and history, the big secret that everyone had been trying to conceal. The author's goal in penning this work is to get to the heart of the hypocritical and cowardly societal system that supports the oppression of women through violent acts perpetrated by men. When we look at our past, we see that patriarchal ideals have allowed male aggressiveness to flourish, and women have been the primary targets of these crimes. The division of the subcontinent into

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two and subsequently three states was based on such injustice, as Jyotirmoyee Devi has identified. Jyotirmoyee Devi uses the story of Sutara, a middle-class Bengali girl, to drive home the agony of Partition. Jyotirmoyee Devi has conveyed the narrative of a girl like Sutara with great care and subtlety, which is why her story is different from the other victims of Partition. Even Vedavyasa was too terrified to compose the authentic "Stree-Parva", as pointed out by Jyotirmoyee Devi. One needs enough courage and strength to write history, so all cannot be historians. No great poets have ever been female, and even if there were, they would never have dared to write about the deprivation they had suffered.

The entire process of our country building is resonant with the concept that female sexuality violates collective honour. The way her story is structured reveals that the wrath is directed against both the appropriation of a woman's body as a symbol of a community's dominance and intimidation and its subsequent use as a barrier to exclude outsiders and maintain the purity of the woman's caste and class. The primary reason behind penning down *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* was to shed light on a dark chapter in Indian history–the tumultuous, blood-stained past of modern, supposedly secular India. The narrative begins in one of Jyotirmoyee Devi's "modern" Indian history classes since the author has given her character Sutara the status of a lecturer of history in the nation's capital. Towards the end of the book, Sutara addresses her class: "Does history remain confined to the written page? The victors blacken the vanquished on the pages of history and which history has ever talked about the weak and the suffering?" (Bagchi 22)

Sutara suffers from selective amnesia caused by the traumatic events of 1947, leading to the loss of her memories related to the trauma she experienced. Despite her utmost efforts, she is unable to recollect the events that transpired on the day her whole family was brutally murdered. She acknowledges the absence in her background, but she lacks knowledge about the specifics of her past. The narrative of *The River Churning* incorporates the absence of appropriate vocabulary to express the trauma. Due to the inadequacy of language in capturing the essence of violence and the female experience, the narrator and writer often interrupt the story with pauses. The narrative is fragmented, with several omissions, highlighting the narrator's fragmented state of mind. Jyotirmoyee Devi portrays the protagonist as more than simply a symbol of the "partition rape victim" in history. The author also depicts the protagonist as someone who wants to be a part of the upper-class society, while emphasising their vulnerability and lack of voice. The author depicts Sutara's silence as a means to achieve social advancement and acceptability in the middle-class community, rather than as a result of pain.

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The prevailing narrative voice that conveys a "politics of sentiment" beneath the surface of feminism is unable to break free from predictable stereotypes that portray a female riot victim as a rape victim, and a rape victim as someone who constantly seeks to regain the approval of the hetero-normative upper-class society by preserving their "honour" status. The silence in the uncertain chapter of the riot implies a theory of rape, in order to address Sutara's emotions without seeing them as a violation based on gender. Consequently, it appears that there are no methods available to address the whole loss experienced by Sutara. The work employs an omniscient narrative voice that assumes the protagonist's inability to communicate and assumes, without question, that Sutara has really experienced sexual assault. The adult Sutara has persistent emotions of shame, inferiority, and inadequacy throughout the tale due to the author's unequivocal tone, particularly since Sutara lacks any recollection of her past and as the latter gain dominance over Sutara's mental state. Sutara always struggles to restore her middle-class and upper-caste amenities that were devastated by Partition. As a result, the narrative may be analysed by exploring overlooked topics, such as Sutara's slavery in India, despite her possessing the same level of education, social skills, and independence as her male counterpart.

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