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**Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*: A study of Trauma**

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**Abstract**

In the year 1947 getting independence from British colonial rule India witnessed the greatest as well as toughest migration in the name of religion. The horrible consequences were faced by everyone irrespective of class, caste, and religion. The most suffered portion of this quantity was none but women whose stories were politically not given importance rather deletion from history was done silently. Jyotirmoyee Devi's Bengali novel *EparGanga Opar Ganga*, translated in English as *The RiverChurning* should not be read-only focusing on the gendered trauma and emotional suffering faced by the female protagonist, but also criticizes the victimized situation of the lady where the caste and class-oriented social standards are filled with hypocrisy. The eye of feminism is not fully capable of analyzing the crisis of a female victim due to having experiences of a riot based on religion in the post-partition era. To not get a sentimentalized point of view the communal identity of Sutara, the protagonist, needs to be evaluated. Subjected to an uncertain present within the four walls of the household and an insecure future with the borders drawn in the name of partition as well as

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for political and national interest, Sutara like many women was compelled to get a bond among themselves of collective wounded memory, and trauma. This paper will be analyzed how the partition describes the violence faced by the homeless or refugees in the name of politicised and nationalised identities.

**Keywords:** Partition, Female subjugation, Trauma, and collective wounded memory.

'PARTITION'- The word does not need any definition but the consequences it focuses on elaborating the concept of division and trauma. In the year 1947 more specifically in August of that year the hegemonic structure of the British colonial rule in India came to an end after three hundred years of domination. The subcontinent was partitioned based on religion into two parts: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan which resulted in the toughest and greatest migrations in human history. A large number of Muslims decided to find their security in West Pakistan, and East Pakistan (which is now known as Bangladesh), and on the other hand, millions of Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction towards Independent India. The communities which used to live together gracefully for a prolonged period started to attack each other violently and as a cause and effect of it Hindus and Sikhs collaborated whereas Muslims took the opposite side. In Punjab and Bengal of India savage sexual violence, massacres, and forced conversions had taken place and as a result of it, almost seventy to seventy-five thousand women were brutally raped and disfigured as well. In short, Independence in 1947 was parcelled along with partition and migration. Mohammad Ali Jinnah was in favour of the concept of a separate nation for the Muslims which he started to endorse in the year 1940 without naming 'Pakistan'. Jawaharlal Nehru acting as the de-facto Prime Minister from the Congress party was against the division, rather so-called 'Partition' when the first Partition scheme was proposed in April 1947, but on June 4 the revised scheme of partition was approved as well as announced by Lord Mountbatten, and was mentioned by Nehru and Jinnah as well in their speeches. It should be mentioned that the final geographical outline was still not decided then, but the drawing of the boundary established the cause of fear, pain, insecurity, nightmare and death in the mind of the thousands of families who became uprooted all over a sudden. As there is no authenticated

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proof of how many persons have been affected because of partition we can say that a large number of people lost their lives, many houses were set on fire, a huge number of children were lost, and countless women were raped. An eminent poet and author of India, Sampooran Singh Kalra popularly known as Gulzar, in his *Raavi Paar* mentioned an incident where a Punjabi man along with his wife and twin baby boarded a train as refugees towards India to make their life secured for the time being, but at night he noticed that one baby is dead. Then he listened to a whispering voice who said, *Sardarji, throw the dead baby into the Raavi. He will be blessed* (Gulzar, *Raavi Paar*) and the helpless father followed it but in reality, the traumatized man threw the baby who was still alive instead of the dead baby. When he looked at his wife terrified, she was holding the dead baby tightly close to her chest. At this point, the famous line was uttered by a storm of voices: *Wagah, Wagah...Hindustan Zindabad* (Gulzar, *Raavi Paar*). Those who experienced the violence of Partition were unable to make themselves free from the grief and trauma, and these experiences sometimes make people silent and impure in the eyes of others which become their legacy. Almost the same thing happened in Jyotirmoyee Devi's (1894-1988) *The River Churning* (originally written and published in Bengali as *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* in 1968) which specifically focuses on the experiences of a Hindu woman after being rehabilitated. Jyotirmoyee Devi, an Indian writer in the early twentieth century, was engaged as the vice-chairperson of the 'All India Women's Conference' for a short period and was acknowledged by many to be quite ahead of her time. She has mercilessly worked on the issue of Partition and the costs paid by women in their mental and psychological solitude afterwards. She wanted to draw the kind attention of the public to the fact that a patriarchal outlook towards women's bodies will suppress them to point out their marginalized identities in the name of independence. She wrote about women in Rajasthan during her childhood and in what is now West Bengal at the time of Partition. Her works are: "*Beti ka baap*" (*Daughter's father*), "*Shei Cheleta*" (*That Little Boy*), '*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (*The River Churning*), *Sona Rupa Noy* (*Not Gold and Silver*), and so on. Mahasweta Devi, one of the most socially conscious women writers from Bengal, depicts Jyotirmoyee Devi as an "*extremely alert and conscious writer, whose writing was mainly cerebral*" in *Jyotirmoyee Devi* (1994) - a Doordarshan titled documentary drama

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by Raja Sen. Both her cultural aspects of life in Bengal and Rajasthan had made a strong influence on her thinking process by expanding her mindset to that extent where she can question the status of women's rights in her writings.

Trauma means serious long-term negative effects related to a single experience or collective wounded memory. Childhood experiences along with domestic violence and sexual abuse cause traumatic effects in the mind of a woman. Trauma is not always related to negative meaning, rather it sometimes is a journey from suffering to understanding. Cathy Caruth utters:

*"The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time."*(Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*). Paulomi Chakraborty in her thesis *"The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and Political"* has focused on Jyotirmoyee Devi's *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*, translated as *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* by Enakshi Chatterjee, published in 1995. This is the first example of a textual intervention in the discursive process of metaphor formation. The novel interrupts the patriarchal citing of women as a sign, a symbol, and a metaphor for the nation. It attempts to alter the codes of representation that are dominant in the regime of the metaphor by introducing the refugee woman as an embodied subject to the centre of the narrative. Based on Noakhali in 1946, this novel provides a realistic commentary on Partition and tries to indicate the conventional process of erasing women from history. In the wake of the first of the pre-Partition communal riots, a young Hindu girl took shelter in the house of her Muslim neighbours for several months. She had lost her parents as a part of the cause-and-effect process of partition and hadn't any idea where her sister was then. Young Sutara eventually reunited with her brothers in Calcutta and faced the taboos of orthodox Brahmanism by facing traumatic experiences and having the pathetic title of 'polluted' forever. Though the novel is all about Sutara, a young Hindu girl and her experiences along with realization, it also focuses on the chauvinism of Patriarchy where women are judged based on women's sexual purity. Two eminent Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* glorify this hegemonic tradition of an objectifying woman (Sita, and Amba) considering her chastity, so

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it should be analyzed and realized that subjugation of women in the patriarchal society is one of the universal truths where the context is only disguised, and diversified. In her partition novel, *The River Churning*, the chastity of a woman has been linked to her identity which denotes the absurd concept of purity. To be a survivor of sexual violence connects to a life-long tragedy for women accompanied by communal and religious identities.

In *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* Devi indicates how chauvinism forces women to pay for the crime of which they are victimized dimensions. Sutara epitomized in herself an entire age of darkness where the scarcity of humanity is pungently visible. The novel indicates a possible rape of a Hindu girl in East Pakistan and as a result of it her state of marginalisation has taken place because of her community. From the ancient era more precisely from the Vedic ages, women's bodies used to be portrayed concerning the concept of torture, physical abuse, rape, suppression, and humiliation but when it crosses the boundary of physicality by affecting the psyche of a woman then it is beyond the reach of a woman. The pain of Sutara could be visible in her tears which are 'invisible' to Patriarchy and the Nation: *She could not say anymore, and tears welled up in her eyes*(Devi 140). In our patriarchal society the conventional method for a woman to prove her guiltlessness and dignity was to preserve her sexual chastity for her husband until she gets married, but if she is touched and enjoyed by other men before her marriage with her consent and without her consent she is never taken back. The words of Amulyababu resemblances the concept when he told about Sutara:

A lost girl was never taken back, even her parents would shut their doors on her. Society had a rigid stand, it was never moved by tales of woe of abducted and displaced women. Perhaps Sutara's parents would have disowned her. This had been going on since the time of Amba of The Mahabharata and Sita of the *Ramayana*.(Devi 47).

Sutara was the moving specimen of an ordinary innocent girl who became the victim of partition, and on the other hand, she was doubly marginalised because of her gender. In her book, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* Urvashi Butalia highlights the reason for the long silence around the hands-on experiences of the victims during the

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Indian Partition and why there is a return to it after a gap. According to Butalia, this silence is about what one might call the ‘underside’ of the history of Partition that is, its human dimensions, its many hidden histories, is not a silence of simple historiographical neglect. Rather, it is a trauma of such deep dimensions, that it has needed nearly half a century for Indians to acquire some distance and begin the process of coming to terms with it.

Jyotirmoyee Devi has chronological her *The River Churning* by dividing it into three sections which were highly influenced by *The Mahabharata*. In the ‘Adi Parva’ or ‘The Beginning’ of the epic Draupadi, the queen appears for the first time whereas, in this novel, the first part deals with the starting point of Sutara’s very unpleasant memory during the riots. The title of the 13th book of *The Mahabharata* prepares the graph for the second part of the novel entitled ‘Anushasan Parva’ or ‘The Imposition’ which is also known as the Book of Precepts. This section of the novel is a documentation of social oppression that the protagonist has to face as if she has to face a courtroom trial as in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* or in the Sanskrit text of *Mrichchhakatika* written by Sudraka. The third and final section of the novel is ‘Stri Parva’ or ‘The Woman Chapter’ influenced by the 11th book of *The Mahabharata* in which the women characters lament the death of their kith and kin in the Kurukshetra battle. In the epic, though the section is called the *Stri Parva*, it does not tell the story of the women. This section describes that after the death of Sri Krishna, Arjuna fails to protect the women of the Yadhu clan. The women being humiliated by the attackers are left to their mercy of them. According to Devi, this was an intentional attempt of the male writer to make women’s stories silent, a tradition which all male poets have followed. In her own words, *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.* (Devi 35). The novel does not focus on the imperfection of history, but also raises questions related to the deficiencies of a variety of codes, customs and beliefs coming down from myth to reality, from the past to the present. Sutara faced communal violence that gripped parts of Bengal in the run-up to the Partition, but simultaneously Tamijuddin, Sutara’s Muslim neighbour, rescued her. The mystery of the disappearance of her mother and sister was a prolonged question to Sutara, the answer to which was a lifelong puzzle for her. Their sudden disappearance from her life

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symbolizes the gap between consciousness and unconsciousness of historical memory which has been subjected to women. Her residence in a Muslim family was doubtful in Tamij's wife whether Sutara's 'Hindu brothers' would accept her. This doubt becomes an ironic prophecy. The concept of women's impurity and unholiness continue to exist among the Hindus even in the post-Partition era, but this kind of social taboo was almost absent in the Muslim community. In reality, Sutara started to face the emotional and social consequences of the cursed night of her rape when the societal standard of disguised morality took the initiative to re-examine the incident.

Sutara Bagansees the incident again and again in her flashbacks and nightmares which also explains the phenomenon of trauma. Crauth describes trauma as "*the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return*", and that the *traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs*. (Crauth, *Unclaimed Experience Trauma Narrative, and History*). According to Crauth, a person who has experienced a catastrophic event does not experience trauma with an immediate effect. Traumatic memories are a belated manifestation of the event reappearing in the sufferer's mind. For Sutara, "...there were the invisible scenes in her mind which she could not get rid of" (Devi 19). Sutara's traumatic experience was related to various expressions – physical, psychological, and social. The violent events of the night were the reasons for her unconsciousness, *she felt so shattered physically and psychologically that she couldn't get up from her bed* (Devi 10). She had lost the sense of time as she asked, "*How long have I been here?*" (Devi 10). She is not a representative of the low caste but having come in contact with pollutants she is now considered a polluting agent. The nature of these transgressions – religious and sexual – prohibits Sutara from inclusion within the caste Hindu fold. Sutara throughout the entire text had experienced various traumatic situations until they came to an end. At the end of the novel, the cousin of Sutara, Promode was willing to marry her. The romantic elements in the ending made the tightness of the plot quite loose and the impact of the novel got scattered.

Trauma is an effect of a devastating incident in a person's life which prevents him/her to recognise his/her own identity and causes helplessness to cope with the person's original feelings. *Trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent*

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*contradiction of experience and language.* (Balaev, Michelle. *Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered*). Contemporary approaches to literary Trauma theory focuses on traumatic experience which damage and destroys the psyche of a person, and more importantly creates an obstacle to making a clear linguistic representation. Trauma can be personal experiences or collective experiences, and in this context geographical cultural and economic dimensions of a person's community have to be prioritized. In the novel *The River Churning* by Jyotirmoyee Devi, the traumatic events in the life of Sutara from the very beginning of the novel denote devastating consequences which were capable of making the text a noteworthy example of trauma theory, but at the end of the novel, a kind of *deus-ex-machina* of providing a happy ending had somehow tried to pour water on the wounded soul of women.

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