

The Humiliation and Degradation of Women in Jyotirmoyee Devi's Epar Ganga Opar Ganga: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT:

The Partition of India in 1947 was not merely a political event; it was a profound humanitarian tragedy that reshaped the lives of millions. While Partition literature has extensively documented the violence, displacement, and communal conflicts that accompanied this historical moment, the gendered experiences of women have often remained marginalized. This paper examines the humiliation, degradation, and social exclusion experienced by women in Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel Epar Ganga Opar Ganga. Adopting a feminist literary perspective, the study explores how communal violence and forced migration deprived women of their families, social identity, dignity, and bodily autonomy. Through the character of Sutara, the novel reveals that women endured not only physical violence but also lifelong psychological trauma and social ostracism. The study argues that Jyotirmoyee Devi challenges patriarchal notions of honour, purity, and caste by exposing the hypocrisy of a society that victimizes women while holding them responsible for the violence inflicted upon them. Ultimately, the novel foregrounds women's resilience and their struggle for identity and survival in the aftermath of Partition. By highlighting the intersection of gender, caste, religion, and nationalism, this paper demonstrates that Epar Ganga Opar Ganga is a significant feminist intervention in Partition literature and an enduring critique of patriarchal social structures.

Keywords: Partition of India, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Epar Ganga Opar Ganga, women, humiliation, gender, feminist literary criticism, communal violence, identity, Partition literature.

Introduction

The nineteenth century marked a turning point in Bengali literature, bringing about a revolutionary change. Because the horrors of World War II, the August Movement, the Famine, riots, partition, food movement, Sino-Indian conflict, the Defence of India Act etc. have continued to be written by Bengalis. However, among all these, the bloody pain of riots and partition has brought

a different dimension to Bengali literature. The great Bengali literature has acquired the form of art of the diverse experiences of the people. The backdrop has emerged as religious and social movements along with the political chaos of that time. If we review the ever-familiar history of India, we can see that immediately after the end of World War II, the British government decided

to withdraw its empire from India. In December 1945, Viceroy Wavell hinted at the transfer of power. Within three months, the British Cabinet Mission came and proposed the method of transfer of power and the constitution, but neither the Congress nor the Muslim League agreed to it. Rather, the conflict between the Congress and the Muslim League became stubborn. The terrible communal riots that broke out on 16th August 1946 and its impact led to the partition of India on 15th August 1947. India and Pakistan were declared independent countries. But the partition of the country could not stop the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. Rather, the killings, looting, rape, occupation and displacement all created a terrible humanitarian disaster.

Countless stories and novels have been written in both Bengali and Bengali on sensitive issues like riots and partition. Among the writers of the western border, the mention of the western border has been mentioned in literature such as Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan", (1956) Amrita Pritam's "Pinjar" etc. (1950) Saadat Hossain Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" (1955), etc., while the mention of the eastern border has been mentioned in Prafulla Roy's "Keyapatar Nooka", Atin Bandyopadhyay's "Neelkanth Pakhir Khoye" and "Manusher Gharbari", Jiban Sarkar's "Vitemati", Devi Prasad Singh's Border, Manoj Basu's "Epar Opar" etc.

Although many have highlighted the history of this great disaster of partition in literature, how did this riot and the horror of partition consume the lives of women individually? There is rarely a detailed discussion on that. However, Jyotirmayee Devi is an exception in this regard. She has written in a completely different way in her "In the novel "Apar Ganga Opar Ganga", she presents the unbearable life of women. Basically, the novel in question describes how difficult the struggle of women to survive, losing their family, social status and honor, is during the riots and partition. In this regard, Yashodhara Bagchi's comment is worth mentioning.

"The subjugation of the country and the subjugation of women present a similar image to

Jyotirmayee Devi. Her feminist consciousness is born from the struggles of her life, which become the main element of her literary works."1

The novel 'Epar Ganga Opar Ganga' was published in 1373 Bangabda in the Prabashi Shardiya issue under the title 'Tihase Stri Parva'. A year later, at the request of the publisher, its name was changed to 'Epar Ganga Opar Ganga'. The novel is divided into several chapters, such as - Sutara Datta, Adi Parva (16), Anushasan Parva (17), Stri Parva (22).

How the pre-independence riots broke into a happy Hindu family and ruined the life of a simple, beautiful girl is the subject of the novel. In this case, the dedication letter of the novel clearly indicates its subject matter. Jyotirmayi Devi writes-"The Degradation and humiliation of women in all ages and countries."2

Also, in the 'My Words' section of the novel, she clearly states - "I do not know if there is any chapter or section called 'Stri Parva' in the history of any country after the Mahabharata.

And even though the story of Stri Parva, which is also in the Mahabharata, is called Stri Parva, it is actually a story of grief, loss, death, separation, and pain for both men and women.

In short, even Ved Vyas himself could not write the original Stri Parva. "3 She also explained why Ved Vyas could not write this Stri Parva: "Cravens do not write history! Even if there were no great female poets, they could not write about the loss of their own honor, shame, dignity, and respect. So there is no history of the Stri-parava."4

Jyotirmayi Devi wanted to write that history. That history is not the history of the triumphant cry of a man's bravery. Jyotirmayi Devi wanted to express the history of the terrible stain that independence brought on the lives of women, such as humiliation, disrespect, dishonor, etc.

The novel begins with the rural life of Noakhali, Bangladesh. There are two communities living there - Hindu and Muslim. A sincere relationship and bond has developed between them. Sakina-Sofia-Hasina-Meher-Roshan and Sutara-Usha-

Bina-Alka-Durga all play together in the village, catch fish in the pond, swim and eat fruits from the trees. In addition, Sutara's father Gopal Datta and Sakina's father Tamiz Uddin are teachers in the same school. Although they are not related by blood, they are each other's companions in happiness and sorrow.

The novel's central character, the heroine Sutara, brings to life the identity of the village of Noakhali and the identity of the two communities. The novelist paints a picture of the sincere bond between the two communities and the two families in this way:

"Shakeela's father, Sutara's father, was the headmaster of the school, Tamizuddin Sahib. Sutara called him Kaka Sahib. Sakina and she were the same girl, they studied at the same school, so they lived closer together, there was a lot of coming and going, there was a lot of thinking."⁵

Also, the description of the Sutara family's house suggests that there was no religious difference between the two communities. The author writes about this - "There were two servants in the house, one who worked with the cows, the other who worked in the house. One was named Rahim, the other was named Karim. They had been working for a long time. They had started working at the age of twelve. They would be around 23-24 now."⁶

Whenever there was a clash between people, men killed each other but did not spare women.

Women were the victims of that clash.

The recent riots of 1946 are a clear example of this. In the novel 'Epar Ganga Opar Ganga', the writer Jyotirmoyee Devi did not spare any effort to paint a horrific picture of it. We see in the novel, the Sutaras are victims of the Noakhali riots. Moreover, there is a perfect description of how a beautiful family was destroyed in an instant. We see that one day, suddenly, Sutara's son-in-law writes a letter and informs us that there is a riot in Kolkata. The two groups of rioters - Hindus and Muslims. And the Kolkata riots do not delay in entering Noakhali. The clash between the two groups enters Sutara's family as

well. A fire breaks out in the Hindu neighborhood, Sutara's father goes to see the fire in fear. Rahim and Karim, who have been long-time residents of the Sutara family, become traitors. Rahim-Karim, in the company of some selfish people who are religiously prejudiced and divisive, do not hesitate to kill their master. On the other hand, the fire of the village reaches the garden-goat-house of the Sutaras. In the darkness, the shadows of Rahim and Karim keep laughing. Sutara's sister's screams are heard, she disappeared before Sutara's eyes. Sutara's mother jumps into the pond to save her honor. Sutara is humiliated helplessly. The author describes Sutara's mental state as follows - "She does not know what disaster has happened to her body and mind. A strange, intense fear or something else has crushed her existence, crushing her body and mind."⁷

Here, we can basically say that the pain of the girl Sutara, who lost her home, family, loved ones, and property in the riots, has become the pain of all girls of all time and forever.

The riot-ravaged Sutara found shelter in a Muslim family. Sakina's mother, Tamiz Saheb's wife, took care of the raped Sutara and made her well. After that, Sutara's life became more difficult. It was not easy for Sutara to find a place in the land of divided independent India. The riots had not left her behind, but rather they had come to her life in a more terrifying form. Tamiz Saheb and his eldest son Aziz, taking great risks in the heated atmosphere of the riots, arranged to send Sutara to her relative's house.

But the Hindu society and family were reluctant to accept the girl who had been kidnapped and tortured in the riots. So there she had to hear various ugly gossip - "You should know your place and stand aside like a Hari-Bagdi woman, instead of trying to obliterate all caste distinctions. Nothing remains as it once was. Who knows what you have eaten, what you have done, or what you have not done?"⁸ In other words, none of them could accept Sutara's arrival at that house, nor could they drive her away for fear of public shame. As a result, she had to endure humiliation and dishonourment in every

corner of the house. In the riots of the subjugated countries and the victories of the independent countries, countless women of Bengal had to become the eyesore of society like Sutara.

Then, during the disciplinary period, Sutara had to struggle just to survive. The contempt of society and family hit her hard. The riots in the country also took away her blood relations. Also, Sutara is an outcast in her own society due to the fault of taking shelter in a Muslim house. All her relatives, including her elder brother, are upset with her. Sutara's elder brother's father-in-law, Amulya Babu, sees the picture of Sutara's humiliated life. With the help of his brother-in-law, he arranges for Sutara to be kept in a boarding house. Although Sutara escapes the humiliation of her relatives, the struggle of loneliness begins in her life. She is admitted to the Scottish Church. Although the boarding school students go home during the Puja vacation, Sutara's family does not want to take her home. This life of loneliness has taught Sutara to face difficult realities step by step.

Thousands of girls in Bengal have gone through such terrible pain like Sutara's, many women have lost their families and have been ostracized from society and are fighting alone to survive. The author uses an old context to portray the society - "The heart of this steadfast society has never wavered in the sorrow of a kidnapped, humiliated, and degraded girl. It could have been that Sutara's parents could not have taken her home. This has been going on since the time of Amba of the Mahabharata and Sita of the Ramayana."⁹

A girl devastated by the riots loses her own land and family, and the partition takes away her own country and her own existence. The same thing happened in Sutara's life. Sutara becomes a scoundrel of the so-called society. She survives in society only with the identity of a girl who touches Muslims in Pakistan and eats Muslim food. Then, a historic invitation episode occurs in Sutara's life.

Sutara receives an invitation to the wedding of her aunt's sister. There too, her fate is only

humiliation and insult. Society does not forget to look back, there too she has to hear the story of the dark life that happened to her. For the crime of living in a Muslim house in Pakistan, she is not allowed to sit with the invited guests. A separate dining area is arranged for her.

The riots took away not only Sutara's childhood or adolescence, but also her youth. Even though Sutara became educated and educated society did not want to accept this educated, raped, and profane girl. It did not allow her to enter her normal life. She did not have the right to lead a married life. Sutara's brothers did not show any interest in her marriage, but no matter how hard she tried, the people on the boy's side said - "That girl who had been living alone in a Muslim house for so long. Her brothers did not bring her. They have not kept her close yet. She was in boarding school. She lives alone. Now she has taken a job abroad. That girl!"¹⁰

Sutara's marriage broke down. Sutara became a disgrace to the family. Sanat's mother-in-law commented - "If you try to get that girl married again, your daughter will not get married either. The family will get a bad name."¹¹ In other words, we can clearly see that society has considered Sutara to be a disgrace and marriage to this disgraced woman is not possible. So, to save the family's honor, Sutara has to remain unmarried abroad.

The writer also highlights the psychological aspect of how society despises and belittles women like Sutara and the Sutaras, thus - "What was the need to bring a girl who lived in an unruly and unfaithful house? Whatever happened to her was already happening to her. She would have stayed there. How many such girls are there in that country?"¹²

After completing her studies, Sutara started her career as a history teacher at Yajnaseni College in Delhi. Despite becoming financially independent, Sutara met her colleague Kaushalavati, who was also a victim of the riots. Through her work and acquaintance with colleagues from other provinces, Sutara learned how the horrors of the riots had spread to different parts of India. Bihar

and Punjab were not left out. Despite her colleagues' sympathy for her grief, Sutara could never forget that dark night in her life. No woman can forget that. Although she looked upon the Muslim family of Tamiz Saheb with respect and affection, the burning anger towards the Muslim community did not diminish even a little. So when Sakina, the daughter of Tamiz Sahib, proposes to Sutara to become their housewife, she is stunned and replies - "Sister, how can I forget that day, my parents, my sisters and brothers?"¹³

Sutara's past was mentally exhausting her little by little, so Sutara sets out for a pilgrimage. But even there, she does not find peace. Throughout the novel, we see pictures of Sutara's life and suffering. However, at the end, the author hints at a new chapter in Sutara's life. Sutara's sister-in-law's brother Pramod suddenly comes into her life and promises to build a house with her. But there are obstacles there too. Pramod's mother is not in favor of this marriage. However, Sutara

agrees to the marriage proposal. But the question remains whether Sutara has really been accepted by society? Or will she be subjected to various kinds of torture again? She will have to endure unbearable pain like insults and harsh words from society for the rest of her life.

Coming to the end of the discussion, we can say that Sutara is a representative of a woman who suffered from the riots. Who only suffered the pain of partition, did not get any benefits from it. In fact, the humiliation and deprivation of a girl Sutara was not just the pain of a single person for the writer Jyotirmayi Devi. She has mixed it with the sorrow, humiliation, anger of thousands of people in the country. Thus, through Sutara's life story, we understand that the future of Sutara and girls like Sutara will remain tied to the rope of uncertainty. One of the writer's comments can be supported and said - "This has been going on forever. I understand it will continue for a long time."¹⁴

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