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Sudip Kumar Das

Research Scholar

Allahabad University

Allahabad, UP, India

sudipdas448@gmail.com

Memory, Identity and Resistance: An Analogical Reading of *The Skeleton* and *The River Churning: A Partition Novel*

Abstract

This paper has looked back and taken two contemporary texts written on the context of Partition to fathom the parity of themes and familiarities. The two novels *The Skeleton* and *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* are evaluated objectively to find out the thematic similarity. The parallel worlds of two dislocated girls and their struggle against the odds have merged together. The saga of carnage, revulsion, and trauma do not have any particular language, the authors portrayed a rendition which shows that violence has no language nor boundaries. The woman characters and their narrative of the separation, their experiences of holocaust is captured through feminist perspective.

Key Words: partition, memory, identity and triumph

The term 'Partition' has become hackneyed and vapid in Indian context for its presence in literature over a long time and secondly it appears almost fictitious to the later generations who hardly connect to the distant past. But it is never a closed chapter as even today any religious intolerance or disharmony traces back to partition, 'the psyche of Partition still stalks and assaults'. Separation of Indian subcontinent has left a prodigious dent on the lives of people and this historical event quite naturally gave rise to a new literary canon. Although a great deal of writings came up from both Punjab and Bengal fronts within India whether in English or regional languages; the works focusing the violence and horror of Punjab partition has been the cynosure of all eyes. As Sandip Bandyopadhyay remarks:

The imprint of the great destruction caused by Partition is not strikingly present in the art and literature of Bengal. What we get in Punjabi Literature is to be found only in Ritwik Ghatak's films and one or two novels. Bengali Literature is still waiting for a Krishan Chander, Bisham Sahni or Sadat Hasan Manto. (Bandyopadhyay, 1994, P 7)

Partition literature produced in Bengal may be slender in volume but that does not put it back on the periphery in terms of value and importance. Here, this paper will focus on Amrita Pritam's *The Skeleton* and Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* as partition texts delineating similar attributes of agony, dejection, love, resistance and triumph.

Both these novels are coeval and share similar tune of dislocation, violence and trauma. Pooro, the protagonist of *The Skeleton* and Sutara of *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* are two representatives of innumerable victims whose voices are lost in 'nationalist narratives'. Their journey through this tumultuous time and fate are oddly parallel, from the comfort of home to the state of commotion, from rejection to resistance. Religion plays a pivotal role in changing their ordinary life to a frenzied uncertainty which deprive them of security and home. Unlike many other who face atrocious behaviour in the hands of men of different religion, they find home in the most unexpected places. The hatred and hostility of Muslims rioters took lives of Sutara's mother, father and sister. But a family from the same Muslim community gives her shelter in concurrent turmoil. As Subhoranjan Dasgupta accurately gauges Sutara's condition in his article:

She is rescued by a Muslim family, whose head was a close friend and colleague of Sutara's father. The act of rescue does not end with the usual despatch of the Hindu girl to a rehabilitation centre. On the contrary, TamijSaheb, head of the family whom Sutara addresses as 'Tamijkaka', his wife, their two sons Aziz and Moin and their daughter Sakina, school friend of Sutara, heap love and affection on her till she recovers. This sensitive portrait of a Muslim family's love for a Hindu girl, even dangerous love at that point of time, enriched with minute details of affection, demolishes the deep-rooted opposition. (Dasgupta 9)

Pooro, if not ditto, faces a similar predicament where she is abducted by Rashida, a Muslim man. The abduction was perpetrated to avenge the rape of Rashida's aunt by Pooro's uncle. Rashida was picked under an oath on the Koran that he would even the score by abducting Sahukar's daughter before marriage. Apart from picking her up on horse Rashida 'did not even look lecherously at her'. His confession to Pooro does not justify the act of abduction but dispels his initial impression as rowdy bully: "Allah is my witness that on the very first day I cast my eyes on you, I fell in love with you. It was my love and the prodding of the Shaikh clan that made me do this. But I cannot bear to see you so sad." (Pritam 18) Rashida's constant support made her sufferings partly bearable when her family disowns her. The orphan child of the mad woman is taken forcefully from Pooro, it was Rashida who

implored the Hindu members for her happiness; his true compassionate nature is reflected when he furtively rescues Lajo, whose husband once set their crops ablaze.

The intricate politics of patriarchal hegemony has been showcased in these novels where the post partition trauma and dilemma of women were much more intriguing as they were often left behind by their families for losing their honour. Their lives became uncertain and the mental agony they had to go through was ineffable. In *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* Sutara comes to India to live with her sister-in-law where her presence is undesirable. The mother of her sister-in-law sees her with contempt as she has spent a considerable time in a Muslim household. This short proximity with a Muslim family renders her to be 'refugee' and her position in this house is immediately understood. She is considered a 'defiled' woman who lost her purity to stay in a Hindu family with honour and respect: 'She rejects Sutara as a fallen Hindu defiled by the poisonous Muslim contact. This 'mother' is etched in clear opposition to the Muslim mother...' (Dasgupta 11) In a family wedding Sutara eats alone and is kept segregated from other guests, she is treated as if a low born servant or untouchable. Her brother also expresses his loathe and inability to keep her in his house. He arranges boarding college for her and a safe way to keep her away from his residency. Patriarchy is not limited to male members of a society and quite ironically, it is often the women who act as an extension of patriarchal dominance. Sexual purity and honor have time and again been associated with women body to confine women in a domestic circle. The apparent glorification of womanhood is to keep them in shackles where they are made to feel guilty for things they have not even responsible for. Honour is not something so fragile that would be tarnished in cohabitation:

I hear women have this objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel that this is a matter of great shame. That woman is as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. (Menon and Bhasin 1948, P 99)

The fate of Sutara echoes in Pooro's life in a harsher way as she is rejected in her own house by her mother and father unlike detached relatives. The young girl with undaunted spirit and hope flees from abduction only to find dejection. She thought her parents would embrace her and protect from all the imminent evil but that was only the beginning of her misery. Pooro's mother 'stuffed her mouth with the hem of her shirt' to suppress her voice in fear of making the neighbours aware. Her value is reduced to naught for spending a fortnight with a Muslim man. Patriarchy's obsession with female sexuality is poignantly evoked in the following lines:

“Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of our fate.”

“Then destroy me with your own hands.”

“Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth! If the Shaikhs find you here they will kill your father and your brothers. ...” (Pritam 22 – 23)

One’s identity is commonly associated with birthplace and the condition of being oneself, and not another. The changing identities of women as a result of dislocation and trauma finds its echo in the microcosm of Pooro and Sutara. Pooro, a young girl of fourteen, was betrothed to Ram Chand as per the village custom. Unfortunately, Rashida abducts her and changes her name to ‘Hamida’ from Pooro; and this name is tattooed on her forearm. The permanent inking signifies the imposed identity which she has to bear. The phonetic similarity between the name Hamida and Rashida indicates her relation to her husband. Pooro’s crisis is evident in the following lines:

In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parent’s home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other, she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name. (Pritam 25)

Even the names of her ilk - Lajo, Taro, Kammo – suggest lack of individual identity rather a class of women who are always pushed to the lower strata of the society. From the very beginning her own identity is nullified, she is a daughter of parents and then her life is already promised to a man and later, she is a mother and a wife.

Sutara achieves her own identity through a series of displacement, she is compelled to leave her homeland and comes to Calcutta where her identity as a human being is denigrated. The stigma of refugee, a woman who has shared Muslim household further exacerbates her predicament. She is treated as a marginalized immigrant whose life and identity is lost in the crossfire of partition, her relatives ostracize her from the house. Her search for identity materializes after she goes to Delhi taking a job as a lecturer. She finds thousands of women like her working and colonies of refugees where everyone was trying to create new identity for themselves wiping out the past. This new independent life gave her a sense of freedom and respect which was strongly denied earlier. But her dilemma of ‘double exile’ is reflected: ‘While she reflects on her existential condition, she begins to regard herself as the abiding symbol of the persecuted and rejected woman who had to bear the cross in the past, bears it at present and will have to in the future.’ (Dasgupta 13)

Memory and forgetting are the part of healing unpleasant experiences. Past incidents, trauma and uncomfortable memories have dictated the present lives of Sutara and Pooro. It is quite impossible for them to bury, even if it is done for the time being it will always haunt the present. Urvashi Butalia highlights this in her book:

Krishna Sobti, a writer and a partition refugee, once said that Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember. But does this mean then that we must not remember it? Over the years, despite many uncertainties, I have become increasingly convinced that while it may be dangerous to remember, it is also essential to do so – not only so that we can come to terms with it, but also because unlocking memory and remembering is an essential part of beginning the process of resolving, perhaps even of forgetting. (Butalia 357 -58)

Throughout the narrative of the novels the past have always popped up and determined the course of their present lives, both Pooro and Sutara are trapped in their memory. Memories have become an indispensable part of their existence which transformed the characters from their former selves to almost stoical disposition. Sutara cannot accept the proposal of marrying Aziz from Sakina because of her 'tormented past' but at the same time feels profound gratitude for her Muslim aunt who thought she might not be accepted in a Hindu family as a 'defiled' woman. She recollects that only through Sakina and her family she can remember her motherland, her mother, father and sister. Later, with her suitor Pramod and she becomes nostalgic and 'the acquisition of love, faith and hope' seems quite ethereal in fear of losing everything again.

Pooro the former girl often cross the busy life of Hamida, she has accepted new domestic life knowing there is none awaiting her return. But even after many days passed when she hears the name Rattoval, past hurled into her mind. She retrospectively recollects her betrothed groom Ram Chand and yearning of going back becomes strong: 'A mist rose before Hamida's eyes; her mind was full of unfulfilled desires. Could she not visit his village just once?' (Pritam 72) The intriguing memory and the presence of lost love somewhere shakes her present life which can be destructive: 'There was a spark somewhere deep down within her which also refused to go out; on the contrary, it too seemed to set others about it on fire.' (Pritam79) But she resolutely accepts her new role of helping other women from abduction and trauma to send them home. Her own memory in present context is described in her own words:

"... then I was the only one. My parents did not have the courage to face the taunts of their neighbours and relations. They had to stifle their instincts. Now, it's not just one

or two, but hundreds of thousands that have been taken away from their kindred.”
(Pritam 118-119)

Both the protagonists quite remarkably do not succumb to unsurmountable agony and torment rather created resistance within their boundaries. Pooro did not surrender to melancholy after her marriage, instead she chose to stand beside women who are oppressed, abducted and traumatized. She nourished a young girl Kammo to health with love. She met Taro whose husband has another wife and she is now left. Pooro gives Taro the much needed mental support to live who is at the threshold of committing suicide. After partition, when she came to know about Lajo who is abducted from the refugee procession, she takes every possible steps to rescue Lajo putting her family into jeopardy. She made sure that Lajo does not have to face the same fate which she has undergone. The acceptance of Lajo in her family will be her victory, her resistance to the unbending society. Sutara, on the other hand, in spite of segregation and dislocation knew that only education can provide her a foothold for survival. She secures a job of lecturer in Delhi against all the odds. She does not invoke sympathy towards end but the readers feel admiration for an iron willed woman who does not surrender to fate or contemplate about death even after breaking down many times; she did not take recourse to Pramod rather cemented her own future.

Borders and regions are mere territories demarcated by fictional lines, the experiences irrespective of Punjab or Bengal unequivocally points at the horror and the dreadfulness. *The Skeleton* and *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* are two novels which are almost identical in their elegiac tune. Within the ambit of simple language the authors portrayed the intricate love; Pooro once detested Rashida for ruining her life but she also understands that he is only person who stood beside her through everything. Similarly, Pramod accepts Sutara knowing her past without any hesitation in mind. The hyped binary of Hindu- Muslim gets a new dimension where humanity prevails over hostility. The novels are more than mere partition novels, these are the infallible documents of submissive narratives coming to the fore and ultimately proves ‘triumphant’.

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