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CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 26 – ACCOUNTS OF THE SURVIVOR

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The River Churning(Epar Ganga Opar Ganga) by Jyotirmoyee Devi

- *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967 and 1991) is an epoch making novel explained in the broader context of the Literature of Partition, a genre whose focus has been on the related themes of dislocation and violence.
- *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* was first published in 1967 in Bengali as ‘Itihashe Stree Parva’ (Women’s Chapter in History) in the annual issue of the prestigious Bengali periodical Prabashi.
- *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* is analysed to demonstrate how the subject of dislocation and violence has been explored with insight and sensitivity.
- *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* narrates the ‘human’ history of Partition and strives to fill the gaps created by the conventional nationalist historiography of freedom movement.

Epar Ganga Opar Ganga (The River Churning)

- *The River Churning* disrupts the representative economy of ‘female chastity’ and honour’, the patriarchal values that lie at the bottom of such an economy (Chakraborty).
- *The River Churning*’s female protagonist is an embodied subject for whom victimization registers at multiple levels of the body, mind, and sociality.
- The stronger emphasis on the gendered refugee is created in the novel by gendering the category of the refugee itself: all refugees in this story and the surviving members of the Partition violence in this novel are women.

The River Churning

- *The River Churning* constructs a critique that applied not only to refugee women but the historical condition of being women in its given social context; that is to say, its critique targets not only the violence of the Partition but also patriarchal violence at large.
- It speaks to the contradictory demands of a representation by both the historical and the traumatic.

The River Churning

- *The River Churning* relates women's marginality within a linguistic community to the absence of the women's chapter within collective memory and institutional history.
- *The River Churning* also have used Hindu myths to launch a critique of the lack of gender dimension in the public memory of the Partition.
- The novel portrayed the standpoint of the marginal refugee woman, and how the possibility and permissibility of available language is sharply gendered and intersects both the extraordinary trauma of the Partition and the historical ordinary of the 'everyday world.'

The River Churning

- Jyotirmoyee Devi based *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* on the historical riots in 1946 in Noakhali in pre-Partition East Bengal and the post-Partition life for a ‘polluted’ refugee woman in Calcutta and Delhi.
- Bagchi and Dasgupta - ‘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’ (2003: 4).

The River Churning – Storyline

- *The River Churning* centres on the life of Sutara Dutta, daughter of a *bhadralok* school-master in a village located in the Noakhali district of East Bengal. During the pre-Partition communal riots of 1946, the local Muslim subalterns, mainly from the Dalit peasant groups who also work as domestics in her house, kill her father, most probably rape and abduct her mother and sister (as is implied but never directly mentioned in the text) and burn down the ancestral homestead.
- The village school's headmaster Tamijuddin *saheb* rescues her and after the subsiding of riots, consigns her to her brother's custody in Calcutta. At her brother's in-laws' house in Calcutta (where her brother's family has to temporarily move because of communal unrests at his own locality), Sutara faces discrimination and is treated as an "Untouchable," because she is an East Bengali refugee orphan, who has allegedly lost her "caste" by living at her Muslim rescuer's house.
- Her brother's relatives send her to a boarding school, and in the course of time, she grows up to become a history teacher at a women's college in Delhi. Her post-Partition presence in Calcutta and Delhi is marked by a silence on her part about the Noakhali episode, and an unexpressed pain persistently choking her spontaneous Self. Not able to overcome the past, and not accepted by her Calcutta kin, she leads a sequestered life, until Promode, her sister-in-law's brother, proposes to marry her.

The River Churning – Storyline

- The first part of The River Churning, set as a flashback, narrates the onslaught on the family by Muslim peasants. There are several details about the physical violence done to Sutara, but the narrative does not specify whether the violence done to her is sexual. One does not know if she is raped. She is rescued and nursed back to life by Tamij Saheb and his family.
- Having regained her health, Sutara wants to be connected with the surviving members of her family—her two brothers, who live in Calcutta in West Bengal. Tamij Saheb writes to Sutara's brothers. However, they do not show much interest in taking their sister back.
- Unable to ignore Sutara's pleas to be united with the surviving members of her family, and disregarding the considerable danger to their own persons while accompanying the Hindu girl to Calcutta, Tamij Saheb and his sons return Sutara to her brothers.



The River Churning – Storyline

- The second part, also appearing as a flashback, tells the story of Sutara from the time of coming to Calcutta as a family-less refugee woman until the present moment.
- In her brother's in-laws' joint middle-class family in Calcutta, she is never accepted into the family fold because she is now 'pollute[d]' (Jyotirmoyee Devi 1995: 32, 44).
- Although not made explicit, the stigma of a possible rape also remains part of her 'pollution'. She is especially excluded from the kitchen and stopped from touching drinking water.
- From the moment Sutara arrives and especially as she grows up, the most pressing threat felt by the sheltering family, especially its women, is her sexuality—the sexuality of an outcast, unmarried and unmarriageable, family-less single woman.

The River Churning – Storyline

- The obsessive discussions of Sutara's problems in the family soon slip into the 'problem of Sutara' (47). In the Bengali original, the text actually uses the phrase 'Sutara problem' ('Sutara samasya'; Raychaudhuri and Sen 2001a [1991]: 127).
- Like the 'women's question' in the late nineteenth century, Sutara is perceived as a predicament and a nuisance.
- 'Sutara problem' also echoes the rhetoric of the 'refugee problem' posed by the East Bengali refugees to Calcutta and West Bengal.

The River Churning – Storyline

- In the third part, Sutara moves to Delhi as a lecturer of history and lives as an outcast from her larger community in Calcutta. She befriends her colleagues, who also have a close relationship to the Partition.
- Sutara's trip to Calcutta to attend a wedding at Amulya Babu's house ends in her utter humiliation; that she is not wanted is made clear to her.
- Towards the end of the novel, Sakina's mother proposes a match between her son Aziz and Sutara, which Sutara rejects. At the end of the book, Promode proposes marriage to her. Though not stated, it is strongly indicated that Sutara accepts that proposal.



The River Churning

- Poulami Chakraborty argued that “**The River Churning**” critiques the gendered limitations of the socially possible language. While this critique is formulated from the standpoint of the refugee woman, it is not directed only at the extraordinarily violent times of the Partition. It is equally directed at the violence that is integral to the regime of ‘the everyday’ under patriarchy.

The River Churning

- Jyotirmoyee Debi portrays **the silence of the surviving victims**. Even the ones who survive the trauma are engulfed by silence that we associate with the traumatized.
- At the hostel run by missionaries, where Sutara first lives after her stay with the in-laws of her brother, we see that there is an institutional prohibition on the survivors about talking about their experiences. Even later in life, when such prohibition is lifted, silence continues to surround Sutara, who cannot put into words the pain she feels or the violence that is raw in her mind, even to other female survivors of the Partition violence.

Memory, consciousness and The River Churning

- Sutara herself remembers nothing between this moment of blackout and her regaining consciousness several days later in the household of her rescuer, Tamij Saheb. As a young girl deep in shock, she is revisited by the nightmarish fragmented memories, part of which cannot be retrieved.
- What ‘actually’ happens to Sutara is cognitively unavailable not only to the readers and other characters, but even to Sutara herself.

The notion of rape in The River Churning

- The notion of rape is never established by the novel. There is a brief mention by the narrator that Sutara ‘was so shattered physically and psychologically that she couldn’t get up from her bed’(1995: 10). After regaining consciousness, she herself keeps asking: ‘Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that?’ (16).
- According to Tamij Saheb’s wife’s explanation to Sutara - ‘The sight of the fire and all those ruffians was too much for you. You fainted. Then you had an attack of fever just from shock. But you are going to be all right now’ (17).
- An adult Aziz, Tamij’s elder son, later remembers this night and speaks of finding Sutara as ‘a bundle of clothes ... lying in a pool of blood’(100). Beyond these fragmentary, somewhat contradictory details, no other specifics of the assault on Suatra are disclosed.

Critical Comments regarding ‘The River Churning’

- Debali Mookerjea-Leonard - there is no scope for reading the ‘**unspoken**’ by the author/narrator as an act of uncritical shame or as a ‘**residual prudery of a post-Victorian novelist**’: the Bengali equivalent of the word rape occurs quite often in Jyotirmoyee Devi’s writing, especially in her essays (2003: para 41). Mookerjea-Leonard’s argues that the details of the assault on Sutara are omitted because the ‘**veiling of a bodily trauma through language constitutes a counter-discourse to the economy of display of woman**’ (41).
- Jasodhara Bagchi - Sutara’s experience was ‘**hit twice by patriarchy**’: a ‘**physical assault on a woman’s body and sexuality**’ by a ‘**male of one community who establishes his own “identity” by exercising his territoriality over her body**’, followed by affliction caused by ‘her “own” community’, which ‘exclude her’ and subject her to ‘**a prolonged and unbearable panoptical gaze by the community over Sutara’s body and mind**’ (1995: xxxii). For the latter reason, the narrative itself disallows the readers’ gaze to dwell on Sutara’s body.

Critical Comments

- Jill Didur – the writing sought to **‘redirect the gaze of the reader/researcher away from women’s bodies and sexuality’**, that are sites always under surveillance of community and state anyway (2006: 13).
- Mookerjea-Leonard has argued that by keeping silent on the details of the assault, the novel **‘recovers something of the private pain that women suffered’** (2003: para 41).
- Didur interrupts this attempted recovery project: **‘these silences and ambiguities in women’s stories,’** she argues, **‘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’** (2006: 11). She critiques any imperative to ‘recover’, and sees the silence in *The River Churning* as precisely the refusal to do so. She suggests treating **‘loss as loss’**, as Spivak has suggested (Spivak 1999: 198n1; cited in Didur 2006:136).

Concept of Rape in “The River Churning”

- Poulami Chakraborty - The legal definition of rape, which bases itself on the centrality of the phallus (literally), makes it not only difficult to prove rape in a court of law but constructs a basic incommensurability between female understanding of rape and the legal definition of it.
- Rape is, in this regard, incommensurable to patriarchal rules of representation unless those rules are radically altered.

Critical Comments

- *The River Churning* - the rape is not at the ‘climax’ of the plot as in the classical masculinist rape narratives (as, for example, in *Clarissa* and *A Passage to India*). *The River Churning* makes ‘the structural location of the rape incident at the beginning of a woman’s story’, which **Sunder Rajan** reads as a way to get to a liberated narrative structure:

[T]he 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. (1993:73)

The notion of silence in “The River Churning”

- According to critics, the departure of The River Churning from its narrative conventions to be silent on the details of the assault on Sutara, thus, both offers a critique of the linguistic community—within which a language to tell Sutara’s story without participating in the violence against her is not possible—and participates in a retelling of that we can call feminist.
- It puts the responsibility of receiving a difficult narrative on the hearer as much as on the speaker to tell such a tale, demanding a different form of listening. By remaining silent at a critical moment, the novel essentially matches Sutara’s silence with its own silence; it agrees to be quiet so that ‘we’ can hear the inability of a marginalized character such as Sutara to speak.
- Didur - ‘the silence in women’s accounts of sectarian violence that accompanied partition’ is a ‘sign of their inability to find a language to articulate their experience without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution’ (2006: 11).

Thank you

