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[www.thevedicpath.in](http://www.thevedicpath.in)

[thevedicpath@gkv.ac.in](mailto:thevedicpath@gkv.ac.in)

**+91-9412074666**

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**Breaking The Silence: A New-Historical  
Study of Gender and Partition in  
Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning***

**Basundhara Chakraborty**

Research Scholar, School of Women's Studies  
Jadavpur University  
email: basundhara.chakraborty@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

The paper focuses on Jyotirmoyee Devi's celebrated partition narrative *The River Churning* to initiate a new-historical study of partition from the perspective of gender. The questions addressed in this paper are: (a) how by placing the subjective experiences of the doubly marginalized figure of the refugee woman at the center of the narrative, Jyotirmoyee Devi subverted the dominant patriarchal narrative of female chastity and criticized the hypocritical nature of nationalist patriarchy that do not recognize sexually violated women as subjective agents; (b) how she subverted the myth of purity associated with women's body and expose the politics of silence subversively associated with it; (c) And how she presented a new-historical reading of the episode of partition and rewrite the history of 'modern' 'secular' India that maintain a queer silence over the woman episode through the mythic references of gendered violence. The critical approach of the study combines textual analysis, socio-historical reading and feminist theory.

**Key words**

Partition, gender perspective, refugee woman, nationalist patriarchy, purity, new-historical reading.

What is partition? An event in the history of modern India? A close chapter in it? Or a living memory for the people of the two nations concerned? Enough ink has been spilled over these debates, still the issue invites serious intellectual endeavors from humanist intellectuals even after the seventieth anniversary of the holocaust. But the event seems most intriguing in the context of gender and feminism as women were the worst sufferer of this calamity. Their bodies became the site of violence where the various ethnic groups sought to establish their dominance over each other. Abduction, rape, social exclusion became the common lot of women. Yet, their pangs of crisis has never been a part of the dominant discourse. But, though limited in number, few men and women have endeavored to break the silence. Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* is one such narrative. Originally written as *Epar Bangla Opar Bangla* (1968) this novel is a rare specimen of its kind written in Bengali by a woman. The present paper focuses on this groundbreaking work to initiate a new-historical study of partition from the gender perspective. The questions addressed in this paper are: (a) how by placing the subjective experiences of the doubly marginalized figure of the refugee woman at the center of the narrative, Jyotirmoyee Devi subverted the dominant patriarchal narrative of female chastity and criticized the hypocritical nature of nationalist patriarchy that do not recognize sexually violated women as subjective agents; (b) how she subverted the myth of purity associated with women's body and expose the politics of silence subversively associated with it; (c) And how she presented a new-historical reading of the episode of partition and rewrite the history of 'modern' 'secular' India that maintain a queer

silence over the woman episode through the mythic references of gendered violence. The critical approach of the study combines textual analysis, socio-historical reading and feminist theory.

The narrative starts with adult Sutara recollecting the trauma of her adolescent- self in the backdrop of the infamous communal riot in Noakhali in East Bengal in 1946. Whether she was violated sexually is a great matter of dispute as the text never provides a testimony to the fact. But what makes Sutara's experience a special one is her violated status and subsequent marginalization at the hand of her own community that observe her as a great violation to her class-caste entente. Bagchi and Dasgupta remind us 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). In Sutara's case it was the possibility of rape that made her a refugee in her own extended family and larger community. This possibility of contamination was redoubled by the fact of her being rescued and nursed back to life by a neighboring Muslim family. The second section of the novel has been named "Sutara Problem" in the original Bengali text echoing the "women's problem" during the cultural awakening of Nineteenth century Bengal (Chakraborty 142). The greatest fear of the mother in-law of her elder brother is to save her household from Sutara's "pollute"[d] touch" (Jyotirmoyee Devi 32). Finally the family finds a solution to this 'problem' by excluding her from its domain – by dispatching Sutara to a missionary school that gives shelter to girls and women who shared her similar fate. Sutara's life as an outcast continues further in the next section. In spite of attaining higher education and climbing the social ladder high by working as a professor in a college, Sutara has never been able to achieve acceptability from her family.

Anne McClintock has referred all nationalisms as “gendered”, “invented” and “dangerous” as “they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence” (352). This truth can be extended to the nationalist patriarchy at the time of partition as well. Though imagined as the epitome of the nation-goddess in the collective unconscious of the inhabitants and the makers of nation, women have never been part of the “imagined community”. Women’s chastity and bodily purity became a hallmark of the community’s claim to superiority and the most articulated form of asserting power over other community was to inflict sexual violence over the women folk of the other community: “The defilement of communal honor through the violation of female sexuality is a thesis that resonates the entire process of our nation building” (Baghchi 21). Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *The River Churning* can be read as a critique of this ‘thesis’ of nation formation. The figure of the sexually violated woman has always been a part of the canon of partition-texts. But *The River Churning* deserves special mention as it narrates the whole scenario of violence from the subjected perspective of the violated woman, and thus subverts the meta-narrative of patriarchal honor that tends to reduce the violated figure into a mere sign of patriarchal concerns and robs her of her subjectivity thus. Paulomi Chakraborty has read *The River Churning* as a radical version of the dominant rape narrative and comments:

In *The River Churning*, the experience of Sutara, the refugee woman, a possible victim of rape during the Partition, brings the critical scrutiny on rape not only as an extraordinary violence of the Partition, but also an ordinary patriarchal violence belonging to the everyday world. The novel shows that the normative patriarchal understanding and definition of rape during both times remain incommensurable with the female experience of rape (152).

The novel at the same time addresses the issue of unavailability of a competent language that can address the gendered experience of women. But the silence generated from this lack can get more vocal than words at times. *The River Churning* itself is a fine example of this kind of ‘vocal silence’. The narrative is interrupted by silence almost after every few lines. Paulomi Chakraborty adds:

*The River Churning* is a text saturated with silence. Even though all the moments of silence in the plot can be psychologically accounted for, and in many cases, imaginatively filled-in, the end result is that the novel itself is constantly interrupted by silences. The narrative pauses every few lines where words fail and in many instances the somatic excess of tears intervene. *The River Churning* thus reads like a sentence where periods have been inserted excessively and at places where a reader does not expect them, so much so, that there is always a sinister looming quality where speech (of the narrator as well as of characters) is constantly on the verge of breakdown (146).

After the fateful night of riot, Sutara’s life is surrounded by silence. Sometimes it is the silence of grief, sometimes it is the silence generated from the trauma that engulfed her life after so many years of the incident. Not only at the textual level, *The River Churning* is a narrative engulfed by silence at the meta-text level also. The author has not specified the nature of violence that was inflicted upon Sutara. There is a possibility of sexual violence, but it is never explicit. The fateful night is described thus:

Sutara stared after her [mother] when suddenly she heard her sister scream and fall to the ground. From near the shed where Mother was wrenching the flap door open she heard a shrill cry. “I’m coming,” she called. But she could not make it. Dark shadowy figures

surrounded her, some tried to grab her by the hand. Breaking free, she rushed to the pond at the back and jumped into the water. In the light of the spreading fire everything was now visible. One of the ruffians went after Mother but another stopped him, “leave her, it’s their mother, let her go.” But Didi did not stir. Was she dead? What happened to Didi? Sutara couldn’t tell. She wanted to reach mother and began to run, but stumbled and fell. Then everything went blank. (Jyotirmoyee Devi 8).

Next we encounter Sutara at the house of her rescuers when she was gaining her consciousness after lying unconscious for several days. The narrator briefly contends “she was so shattered physically and psychologically that she couldn’t get up from her bed” (Jyotirmoyee Devi 10). After regaining consciousness, Sutara herself get confused: “Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that? (Jyotirmoyee Devi 16) The only detail comes from Moinu, the small child of Tamij Shaheb as he is too innocent to understand the stigma associated with this topic:

Sutaradi, did they thrash you badly? he asked, it was a good thing Fakir came and told father. That is how Baba and Aziz bhaisaheb took our Habibullah and some other farm hands armed with cudgels and spears and carried you home. You were lying half-dead. Aziz bhai and others lifted you on their shoulders and brought you here. Fakir told us that they had beaten you badly (Jyotirmoyee Devi 17)

But soon he is cut short by his mother who gives Sutara an apparently innocent account of this incident: “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” (Jyotirmoyee Devi 17).

Much later in the narrative, Aziz, one of her adult rescuers speaks of finding Sutara as “a bundle of clothes[...] lying in a pool of blood” (Jyotirmoyee Devi 100).

This ambiguity over the nature of violence inflicted upon Sutara, what Baghchi has referred as “unspoken”, has caused a great dispute in the academic arena (20). Debali Mookerjea-Leonard has observed that Sutara’s possible experience of the “trauma of the sexual assault” is registered in the text “mostly as a confused, nebulous memory, with scattered references to her torn and dirty clothes, her friends’ suicides, drownings, and abductions” (41). Meenakshi Mukherjee on the other hand, writes that the novel “conjures up the claustrophobic ethos of stigma without ever mentioning the word ‘rape’ which lay at the core of the plot (16). Similarly, Andrew Whitehead also argues that the text is “deliberately ambiguous about the extent of the assault on Sutara” (19). But Mookerjea – Leonard has forbidden the reader to read this deliberate ambiguity on the part of the writer as an instance of her prudishness and by a critical scrutiny of the whole corpus of writing by Jyotirmoyee Devi, she points to the recurrence of the Bengali equivalent of the word ‘rape’ there and comments “veiling of a bodily trauma through language constitutes a counter-discourse to the economy of display of woman” (41). Jashodhara Baghchi is also of the same opinion and describes Sutara’s assault at the hand of her own community, the proverbial “second rape,” as “a prolonged and unbearable panoptical gaze by the community over Sutara’s body and mind” (xxxii). Paulomi Chakraborty has also read the novel as a critique of this ‘panoptical gaze’(150) and Jill Didur has read the novel as an attempt by Jyotirmoyee Devi to “redirect the gaze of the reader/researcher away from women’s bodies and sexuality” (13). She also demanded a sensitive reading on the part of the reader that would “understand [the silences] as women’s

inability to subsume their experience within projects of patriarchal modernity that has produced them in the first place” (11). In line with Paulomi Chakraborty it can be said that Jyotirmoyee Devi’s refusal to give the details of Sutara’s assault should be read as a comment on and critique of the social Brahminical norms in treating their ‘soiled’ (raped or not) women (157). Didur has also argued, that “by refusing to fill the gap in Sutara’s story, Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel denies the reader ‘the evidence’ he or she needs to assess whether or not Sutara was sexually polluted and instead redirects ‘our’ attention to the patriarchal rationale that informs the construction of women’s sexuality as polluted or pure” (155).

Before its publication in the book form in 1968, the novel was published in the annual autumn issue of the Bengali periodical *Prabashi* with the title *Itihashe Stree-Parva* (The Women Chapter in History). The novel can be read as the writer’s attempt to rewrite the history by inclusion of the women’s chapter, that has traditionally been under erasure. Jill Didur observes that “partition literature has often been read as a kind of ‘record’, or, conversely, rather than a literary representation of the historical period” (10). Jyotirmoyee Devi seems to be a conscious practitioner of this inclusive project as she situates her text with the *Stree-Parva* of *Mahabharata* in her prefatory note to the text: “The crux of the matter is that even the great Vedavyash could not write what is implied by the title. Only once, in some *slokas*, has he skimmed over the heartrending tale of the chapter” (xxiv). The said chapter of *Mahabharata* records the happenings in *Dwarka* after the demise of Lord Krishna and Balarama, when women were disgraced in a state of anarchy. Jyotirmoyee continues:

the chronicler has not been able to give us a complete account. But what happened afterwards? Vyasdev is

silent about that. Which male poet could dare to write about that, and with what ink? No, such a pen, such ink and paper has not been produced in the world. [...]

History is not written by cowards, and there are no female epic poets. Even if there were, they could hardly write the stories of their own dishonor and shame. The language for it has yet to be fashioned, so naturally *Stree Parva* does not figure anywhere. [...]

The world resounds in praise of male bravery, acts of heroism — but has nothing to say about the eternal *Stree Parva*, the humiliation of women, the endless exploitation of helpless women, which continues through the combined efforts of savage men, and lurks behind all heroic deeds. 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[“jati”]. (xxxiv-xxxv).

The choice of profession for her protagonist seems to be a conscious act on the part of the writer. The novel opens at a history class where Sutara with her students of the modern history of India are discussing over the fictive nature of history that excludes more than it includes. There Sutara’s remembrance of Tagore’s lines “Stop your long narrative and endless tales/You spinner of falsehood” throws light on the process of history making (Jyotirmoyee Devi 3). This disdainful attitude towards the gendered quality of history get resonance in other literary works of Jyotirmoyee Devi as well. Her poem “Spinx” ends with these following lines:

Hence kind God has made us liars, chaste

Like the Sphinx of Egypt

Silent Spectators of the world’s history (qtd. in Baghchi xxv).

These lines point out how women are relegated into a ‘silent spectator’[ship] in the domain of history. The problematic relation of women with history is reflected upon further in her short story “Ahalya Draupadi Tara”:

Whatever it may be called. May be its History. Because all over the world stories of such people are strewn about. If we add year, date, family history, we may be able to pass it off as History. Especially if the subjects of the stories are kings-emperors or just rich men, it would become History. And if such grandeur were lacking, if the narrative belongs to simple folks, people would think this is just a story. Any how, let it be presumed that this is a secret, unspoken, heart-rendering, eternal tale of women’s happiness (where is happiness for women?) and sorrows, rise and fall. Not stylish enough to be lifestyle, but the fragmented history of life’s struggles. In any case, even I don’t know all the histories associated with the tale. Thus, it would be better to presume this as just a story. (quoted in Chakraborty 174).

In line with Joan Kelly’s agenda of “restore[ing] women to history and to restore history to women to fulfill this agenda of her, Jyotirmoyee Devi has manipulated another tool at the hand of hegemonic patriarchy to serve her purpose – myths (Chakraborty 176). Chakraborty put it as:

[The River Churning] use myths to register the loss and go further to probe alternative narrative practices. In absence of a history of women, the novel turn to the mythic to add the collective—both spatial and temporal—dimension to what are individual women’s stories. This is how it constructs its feminist resistance (176).

By dedicating her novel “to the tortured and exploited women of all ages and lands”, Jyotirmoyee Devi has been able to construct the holocaust of partition as “an extension of the ordinary and everyday—the historical—violence of patriarchy” (Chakraborty 177). The novel is saturated with mythical allusions. Allusions to the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* is central to the narrative – the very initial page of the narrative alludes the partitioned geo-body of India to the “truncated *Maha-Bharatā*”; Delhi is referred as “*Hastinapur*”, the capital of the *Pandavas* (Jyotirmoyee Devi 1). The three sections of the English translation of *The River Churning* are named after three episodes of the *Mahabharata* – the initial section is called “*Adi Parva: the Beginning*” after the first book of the epic, “The Book of the Beginning”, the next section is called “*Anusasan Parva: The Imposition*” after the thirteenth book “The Book of Instructions” and the concluding section is called “*Stree Parva: The Women*,” after the eleventh book of the epic, which is usually translated as “The Book of the Women.” By drawing attention to this pervasive presence of epic in the novel, Paulomi Chakraborty further adds: “The narrative is crisscrossed with allusions to Hindu-mythic women who were violated in different ways and were never redressed within an essentially patriarchal understanding of justice” (178). The humiliating fate of the mythical women is also alluded to by the offenders of gendered violence to justify their wrong deeds - when confronted by Tamiz babu, one of them asks him to point out “a single instance when women have not been molested, pushed about? Look at the stories in their Puranas – what about the abduction of Sita? What about Draupadi?” (Jyotirmoyee Devi 14). By naming her protagonist Sutara, Jyotirmoyee Devi makes her readers remind the fate of all her mythical namesakes – the wife of Brihaspati who was abducted and raped by Moon, and the other Tara is the wife of Bali. There are several references to Sita and Ahalya also. But the dominant presence is of

Draupadi .The women's college where Sutara works is named "Yagyaseni College", in allusion to Draupadi's name Yagyaseni, leading Cynthia Leenert to specify the women at the college as "an army sacrificed on the altar of communal violence," like the sacrificial figure of Draupadi and argue further : "these women, who have faced humiliation, who have had multiple sexual partners forced upon them in an obscene parody of Draupadi's multiple marriage, literally come together as Yajnaseni" (97).The omniscient narrator put the gendered violence of partition as "numerous Draupadis were disrobed and humiliated. After all the easiest way to show off one's manhood is at the cost of helpless women like Sita, Draupadi and the others" (Jyotirmoyee Devi 68). By adding a collective dimension to the individual stories of gendered violence, the mythic allusions "enables the text to recreate an alternate site of narrative continuity of a collective dimension in the face of what is denied by history"(Chakraborty 188).

*The River Churning* has been praised by Jasodhara Baghchi as "a rare example of a Partition novel in Bengali written by a woman"(20). This novel can be read as a fictional account of how the constellation of thrice-fold agents of domination- patriarchy, state and community intersect with each other during the partition and relegated women into a sphere of humiliation and silence. At the same time the novel can be seen as a successful attempt of feminist historiography that "allow private experiences of pain [of a victim of violence] to move out into the realm of publicly articulated experiences of pain"(Didur 193). John Barrington, the famous new-historicist has drawn attention to the potentiality of partition narratives in reshaping the partition history. *The River Churning* is one such literary text that filled the great 'aporia' in the history of 'modern' nation and unveils the 'women chapter' in it.

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