

Partition and its Gender Consequences: Representation of Women Refugees in Selected Bengali Literature and Films

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Abstract: *The foremost cost that the Indians had to bear in exchange for their freedom, was partition. And womenfolk belong to the gender, that had to pay the highest cost of independence when they turned into refugees, unfortunately. Their lives changed abruptly and 'the honour of the house' became the easy target of the opponents both physically and mentally. Abductions, unabated rapes, molestation, physical torture, sexual abuse, forced marriages, intimidation became everyday occasions of their lives. So, it became difficult for them to recognize their birthplace after partition. Even inside the new land, their new life was not easy according to their expectations and the chapters of their sufferings continued. In later days, their stories inspired many creative minds and, as a result, Bengali literature, fiction, movies and short stories abounded with the stories of partition. Those were mostly based on the tales of the uprooted people and represented their never-ending fights against all obstacles to adjust themselves in the new land. Through their precious creations, the writers represented living pictures of the hard realities of partition sagas, that in the long run assist in obtaining a right knowledge of the situations of women refugees for the duration of those days of partition. This paper attempts to spotlight those pathetic individual stories of women's sufferings in different forms, their experiences and survivals during the partition period through the lights of selected Bengali literature and films.*

Keywords: Bengali literature, Films, Partition, Refugee, sufferings, Survival, Women

The event of Partition is like a moon-stain in the glorious history of Indian Independence. Independence celebrations turned traumatic as the entire social structure was challenged. People's lives became miserable and it was more times harder for the female gender. Their chastity and security were in danger. Along with the fear of death, the fear of disgrace became their greatest fear. Actually, they were affected in both ways, physically and psychologically. These tragedies of their lives in later periods have inspired several creative minds, resulted in

an extensive collection of Bengali fictions, movies and short stories. Those were principally based on the tales of the uprooted individuals and portrayed their never ending fights against all obstacles to adjust themselves within the new land. And these creativities contributed immensely to enrich Bengali literature to its highest peak in later days.

Women occupy an important place in the partition literature of Bengal. Contemporary Bengali novels, poems, short stories and films, all revolve around women's sufferings, their struggle for existence and adaption to new circumstances. Many untold stories and severe incidents, like mass abduction, pathos, genocide, intense rape cases, molestation, physical torture, sexual abuse and also the helpless conditions of displaced persons, especially the womenfolk, have been vividly delineated by those literary personalities that were clearly and elaborately presented, and revealed through their valuable creations. They not only concentrated on showing the victimized side of women, but also tried to highlight their struggle for survival through different characters. In later days, the depiction of women's journey before and after partition by the filmmakers played a vital role seeking the attention towards women's history of partition.

Representation of Women Refugees in Bengali Literature:

Literature has been considered as an important part of history by numerous scholars. It provides moral guidance regarding a particular community and its activities. It is a reenactment of the status quo. Although historians have questioned its trustworthiness, but they have also considered it as an important source material to understand a situation, particularly where historical documents are lacking. This is also true in the matter of women's history of partition. As historical archives are full of sources about partition history, its nature and facts, but they showed less interest in highlighting the history of women in partition. Therefore, while writing women's history of partition, literature becomes a major source. A careful scanning of the partition narratives focusing on women refugees effectively helps in understanding their sufferings and anguish of women as victims of partition. Many writers through their novels, short stories, poems have contributed to partition historiography. Besides, there are a number of memoirs which are considered as primary sources of partition history.

A great number of Bengali novels were composed delineating the wretched occasions of partition and its impact on the female gender of society. Printed in 1967, Jyotirmoyee Devi's '*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*'¹ was a reputed Bengali novel, centered around the heroine Sutara Dutta, and threw light on all aspects of women's life as a result of partition through the character of Sutara. It has been picturized that, how the members of Sutara's family were tortured and killed by the Muslim community in Noakhali, and she became an orphan. After being displaced, she was proposed by her close friend Sakina, to become a member of Sakina's family through the bondage of marriage, but Sutara rejects the proposal

with a plea that it was Sakina's community, who was responsible for the deaths of her parents and abduction of her elder sister. Thus, she was not mentally convinced to accept Sakina's proposal. This was a sort of protest that a woman made, against all the tortures she had gone through. Jyotirmoyee Devi further added the pathetic story of Sutara when she met her extended family members in India with the help of Tamijuddin, she was not accepted wholeheartedly by them and in the name of education she was sent to a boarding school. In this way, through this fiction, Jyotirmoyee Devi represented women's experience of social hostility and oppression after being displaced due to religious agitation. Here the author showed both sides of a woman, when she (Sutara) was weak and victimized, and also when she vehemently objected to any unjust treatment she had received. On the one hand, Jyotirmoyee Devi narrated the grief of Sutara due to the loss of her family and non-acceptance by her relatives, on the other, she highlights a small protest made by a woman through Sutara. Here Sutara's story also portrays the caste rigidity of an orthodox Hindu family, who denied to accept their girl because she was sheltered in a house of a Muslim family for a few days. Actually, she was ostracized by her own family first, and then by society as well. It is not just a story of turmoil, but also a story of survival against the odds created by partition, where Sutara rebuilt her life and created a future for herself.

Atin Bandopadhyay's celebrated novel '*Nilkantha pakhir khonje*'² is a renowned historical document in which pang and pathos, sorrows and sufferings, frustration and humiliation have perfectly been depicted by the author. In the novel, the three female characters, Joton bibi, Jalali and Malati, are the representatives of two countries. Joton bibi and Jalali are the symbols of Pakistan and Malati and her elder daughter-in-law are characterized as symbols of India. Jalali's life was filled with battles, ups and downs. But after her demise, she got a bit of land and became terribly happy and gave the impression getting rebirth through the Kash flowers on the land of her graveyard. On the contrary, Malati, the Indian character, is shown as abducted and raped by Muslims and after that, is thrown into jungle. The tragedy did not end here. Returning home, one more disappointment was waiting for her as her family members considered her dirty and impure. In this way, it depicts the attitude of the then society to the victimized women of partition. The whole novel is arranged by the author in a sequence of events, where a harmonious relationship between the Hindu-Muslim community can be seen in the beginning, which gradually turns into hatred due to partition of the country, and various problems came down in everyone's life, especially in the lives of women.

Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh, occupies a novel position in the field of Bengali literature as well as in the literature of Bangladesh. She protested against the oppression of innocent female counterparts in society by the male members. Her humanitarian endeavours and altruistic views brought her censure and even exclusion from her own community and country. She even lost her

citizenship in her native Bangladesh. They even banned her few books. She is a true representative and mouthpiece of the oppressed and deprived women of the world. In most of her novels she dwelt with the large number of the population, who migrated to the alien land where they were constrained to live the lives of refugees. The lady members especially were not geographically isolated and refugees, but from a social and emotional view, they continue to be refugees. In her well celebrated '*Phera*'³, Taslima Nasrin underlines the problems associated with spiritual intolerance and focuses on the very fact of how interpersonal relations were affected just because of communalism. In '*Phera*', a female character, Kalyani is depicted as being uprooted from her birthplace. In spite of being a girl of a magistrate, she was forced to migrate due to the fear of communal violence. They shifted to Calcutta to save their dignity and honor. But in spite of living in Kolkata physically, Kalyani's heart and soul could not forget her old days in her place of birth. Before migration, she promised her dear friend Sharifa to return back and after thirty years, she got an opportunity to keep her promise and revisit her own place. She was excited to meet Sharifa. However, a completely different scenario was looking forward to her. Sharifa's family was suspicious to meet her. Their property was possessed illegally by their neighbours. Kalyani felt a totally different atmosphere in her own place. The above incidents indicate that, despite belonging to a well-to-do family, she could not escape from the fear of communal violence or the fear of dis-honour. In this novel Nasrin also narrated her life in India after migration, where another battle was waiting for her. Here the author narrated the orthodox Hindu mentality which put more psychological pressure on her. Kalyani's husband and his family used to cast an eye of aspersion on her until she was blessed with a male child, which was happened long after 12 years of her marriage. In this way, the writer smoothly showed two different effects of partition; the threatened life of Hindu women in East Pakistan or Bangladesh and their migration, its psychological effects on women and secondly, their later life in India after migration. The whole story of Kalyani points out the question that, was the opponent community was only responsible for women's sufferings after partition? Because in the post partition situation, it was her own community, her own family, that affected her psychologically.

In Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel '*Purbo Paschim*', Pratap's sister Supriti is characterized as a casualty of outcast exercises. Her husband was killed while attempting to free his land from the refugees who had forcibly occupied it. Actually, these refugees were from Supriti's own family, her in-laws. She was then forced to lead a life of frugality; restricted to just one single room in the house. Later, being unable to tolerate this kind of treatment anymore, and to ensure a better future for her daughter, she moved out with very little she could be able to bring from her in-law's home, and shifted to her brother's house. Eventually, her daughter also started giving private tuitions to share the burden of her mother for her education. Their sufferings ultimately got a fruit when

Supriti's daughter became a successful doctor and settled in London.⁴ Similar motifs of education and to work for living were visible in alternative cases of the West Bengal refugee women after partition. Here, Mr. Gangopadhyay mentioned about another woman named Shanti, whose husband was killed in communal violence and his family members denied to accept her in their family, as because after partition, her identity has been changed to a 'refugee' in West Bengal. Through these two female characters, a clear picture of women sufferings could be seen during life restoration in post partition era. But it is also evident from Supriti's story that how women tried to overcome their traumas, and managed their survival.

The novel '*Neel Agun*'⁵ by Sarojkumar Roychowdhury uncovers the struggle and survival of the refugee women during partition. It delineated three female characters of different families, Anjana, Khanjana and Ranjana, who were mentioned as the victims of the Partition and came to Sealdah railway station. They were ready to go to any extent for their survival and throwing the young girls into the dark world was a trend of that period.⁶ So, with the passage of time due to the repressive milieu of adverse circumstances, and for the maintenance of their livelihood, they were convinced or forced to involve themselves in the business of the flesh trade and ultimately became professionals. Though at the initial stage, the sufferings of those three ladies were different in nature, but at the end, all of them became professional prostitutes for the means of their livelihood.

A horrifying image of partition is sketched in another novel '*Bindu Bindu Jal*'⁷, authored by Shekhar Das. The novel centered round a lady who was mentally retarded, named Basumoti. She is a fiery example of a pathetic partition saga. The miserable story of her life shows that how the panic indirectly led her to make a big mistake. To save her life during the political turmoil and communal riots, she runs away from her house. But unfortunately, by mistake, she carried away the side pillow in place of her 11-month-old baby son. When she realized her mistake and returned back to rescue her son, her house was already burning. She lost her husband and little son. This elegiac incident badly hearted the helpless mother and left her in shock. She became furious about searching for her son and this madness made her the prey of some miscreants. She started pelting stones and this gave her a new identity in the society as '*Dhilani*' (stone thrower). Her pathetic condition took a new turn when she met an orphan boy and felt her own son Ratul within him. Over time, Basumoti's former consciousness would sometimes return and sometimes disappear. And, at the end of her story, she is seen reminiscing about her son Ratul, where she yells at the newly-acquainted boy: "*Ratul jore chhot re baba*" (Ratul, run fast my son!). Tapadhri Bhattacharya commented that, here the character Basumoti is nothing but the representative of all the disheartened women who lost their children due to partition.⁸ In this novel, through the character of Basumoti the writer tried to show the tragic story of partition from women perspectives, where a woman had to lost everything; her husband, her son and even her chastity.

In the novel '*Bidisha*' by Narayan Gangopadhyay, a melancholy and dull picture of partition is displayed. The story is centered around the character of Bidisha and her two younger sisters. Gangopadhyay narrated the troubles that were faced by them on the way to India from Dhaka. These three sisters were accompanied by their guardian, Suprakash. But due to the unfortunate violent attack at the airport, Suprakash was badly injured. But the three sisters were not even fortunate to cast a last glance at Suprakash.⁹ Nurjahan Bose's '*Agunmukhar Meye*' also contains a picture of the post-1950 riots. Here she recollected her own experiences of partition. Here she described her pathetic life as well as her story of survival by getting jobs, taking up responsibilities of educating her siblings, joining politics etc.¹⁰ Sabitri Roy's novel named '*Swaralipi*' represented the brutal conditions of refugee women during partition. Composed in 1952, '*Swaralipi*' holds a brief discussion about the condition from 1947 to 1951. It stressed more upon the changing scenario of socio-economic and socio-political institutions.¹¹

Every sphere of Bengali literature is enriched with partition stories and short stories are not exceptional. A good number of short stories were written in depicting the then condition of ordinary people as a result of partition. Composed by Ramapada Chowdhury, two Bengali short stories i.e. '*Angapali*' and '*Karun Kanya*' are completely based on women sufferings during partition. The central characters of these stories are two abducted women personalities, named Sabita and Arundhuti, who were found along with their illegitimate babies coincidentally. Though their stories are being narrated in two different stories, but both they experienced the partition tragedy and are the victims of it. Their family members were not ready to accept their babies. In the story '*Angapali*', Sabita became completely speechless and disheartened when she noticed her mother who was taking a bath after touching the baby just because the baby does not belong to their family. When Sabita's brother reprehended her mother, she replied '*Just because she (Shabita) has raised him in her lap, it does not make him a child of her family*'.¹² On the other side, Arundhuti's story is more pathetic in '*Karun kanya*', as she was advised by her mother to send her baby to the orphanage. Arundhuti's former fiancé, Subimal, was also not in favor of accepting the baby. Later it came to be known that, Subimal and his family did not even accept his abducted sister Madhuri. Finding no other alternative, keeping a stone in her heart, Arundhuti decided to return back to her abductor husband, who has no objection to accept Arundhuti.¹³ These two stories are nothing but the living examples of the hard realities of orthodox Hindu families of that particular time. And the story of Arundhuti also expresses the reason that why the women, in later period, when the recovery operations started, have denied to return back to their families.

Another story by Hasan Azizul Haq named '*Atmaja O Ekti Korabi Gachh*'¹⁴ throws light on the horrible picture of partition. It shows the story of a proletariat aged father, who has to depend on the income from the flesh trade

of his daughter for a livelihood. Here the dependent old father is seen to have carried poisonous seeds of the *Karabi* flower with him, thinking in mind that, when his pangs and pain will cross the limit of tolerance, then he will consume them. The dream to live a trouble-free life in the new abode of East Pakistan has become a nightmare. So, it is noticed that, troubles were faced in both sides of the border and even by both the Hindu and Muslim communities.

A notable short story on partition by Pratibha Basu, which was published in the weekly magazine *Desh* under the title 'Dukulhara'¹⁵ depicts the helpless situation of internally displaced women, molestation, sex trafficking and brutal death during partition. Here the main character, Bindubasini migrated to India along with her widowed daughter-in-law and two granddaughters. They entered the soil of India after losing all their money, gold and grain. They came to India with the hope of getting a better life, but after spending nights in an open field, begging for milk and food, little by little the dignity they had hoped for, was lost. But the worst was yet to come. They fell into the hands of Keshvananda, a pretentious saint. Bindubasani's one granddaughter was already dead from fever and another was taken by Keshavananda to become an actor in a film named '*Vastuhara Bedona*.' He also took their mother to sacrifice her life in the name of job. Later, the same person threw out Bindubasini from his jeep at a secluded place on the outskirts of the city. In this way, the brutal scars of partition can be seen in this story. It shows how the partitioned mobs harassed people and destroyed their lives.

Narendranath Mitra, in a short story named '*Jaiba*' (the biological), depicted a story of a Hindu woman, who was raped just before partition and was not allowed to abort due to the objection of her husband, who was a scientist by profession and wanted to make experiment with the baby as a guinea pig, that how the environment leave its impact upon him/her. Jasodhara Bagchi denounced, "*The bourgeois freedom that the woman is supposed to enjoy in the newly liberated India turns into a nightmare for her – raped, restored and then made an object of a scientific experiment.*"¹⁶

Various poems written by the authors of both sides of Bengal are a great source to understand the women's condition during partition. Sunil Gangapadhyay, a creative writer and poet, who migrated from East Pakistan and narrated his memory of partition in his poems. His creation '*Dhatri*' (Nurse), is one of his saddest poems on the event of partition. He described an old refugee woman of 72-years-old, sitting on the Sealdah railway station, stretching her hands for alms.¹⁷ Other poems like Poet Birendra Chattapadhyay's '*Visa officerer samne*' and '*Mahadever Duar*' also depict the stories of partition sufferings.

Representation of Women Refugees in Bengali Films:

Partition stories seek the attention of various moviemakers in later period and various movies like Nemai Ghosh's '*Chhinnamul*', Ritwik Ghatak's '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*', '*Komol Gandhar*', '*Nagarik*', '*Subarnerekha*,' '*Jukti, Takko ar Goppo*',

'*Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*'; Srijit Mukherjee's '*Rajkahini*', Zahir Raihan '*Jibon Theke Neoya*' etc., became very popular among the audiences. These movies are liberal enough to show the part of women in partition. The cinematic depiction of partition helps to understand the sufferings of women as refugees and their struggle for survival. Other than appearing the women's life in terror and trouble after partition, these movies significantly displayed gender relations which considered women's body as the genesis of conflict between distinctive communities.

Directed by Nemai Ghosh and based on the story of Swarnakamal Bhattacharya, the movie '*Chinnamul*'¹⁸ is considered as the first Indian film that dealt with the partition of India. It had picturized a moment where a lady was shown who was not ready to leave her home and, by grabbing a bamboo tree, shouted '*jamu na- jamu na*' (I will not go- I will not go). In later period, it came to be known that the lady who played the role was actually a refugee. Director Nemai Ghosh had brought her from a refugee camp and when he tried to make her understand the concept of the character, she replied, '*Amake bojhanor dorkar nei, desh charar jantrona ki ami jani*' (you don't need to make me understand, I know the pain of leaving own country).¹⁹

Ritwik Ghatak's film '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*' also depicts the trauma and tragedy of the Bengal partition. It is a masterpiece and classic creation by Ritwik, based on the sad story of an uprooted, young refugee girl, Nita, who became the victim of partition and was shadowed over by poverty, uncertainty and insecurity. She was struggling for the survival of her displaced parents. She sacrificed a lot for the wellbeing of her family and also took the responsibility of the bread earner. Although apparently partition is never mentioned in the film, but the plot was set in a refugee camp in the outskirts of Calcutta and concerns the problems, that were faced by an impoverished Hindu *Bhadralok* family because of partition. Here the central character Nita, has been presented as a deathless symbol of Partition. Her puncturing cry and dying accentuation '*Dada Ami Banchte Chai*'²⁰ (Brother I want to live) is nothing but the expression of her concealed pain. On 13/04/2010 an editorial in *Anandabazar patrika* mentioned, "*In meghe dhaka tara, a few torn strings of Bengali life came alive on celluloid.*"²¹ Apart from '*Meghe Dhaka Tara*' Mr. Ghatak has made tremendous contributions in the film industry through his other creations, like '*Subarnarekha*', '*Komol Gandhar*', '*Titas Ekti Nadir Num*' etc.

Directed by Pinaki Mukhopadhyay, '*Alo amar Alo*'²² is a popular film, based on the background of partition and refugee evacuation. The film was made during the unpleasant days of the Bangladesh war of liberation and after the war of liberation it was released. The commoditization of women during that time is cinematized through '*Alo amar alo*'. '*Naba Rag*'²³ is another woman-centric film, directed by Bijoy Basu, deals with the frustration and mental anguish of Narayani who entered in Calcutta from East Pakistan and got married to an industrialist. But the marriage proved to be unfortunate for her and they got

separated. However, in later period, she became united with her husband through her son. The most salient feature of this film is the dejection of Narayani due to her partition experiences.

A very recent and popular movie '*Raj Kahini*'²⁴ by Srijit Mukhopadhyay showed the hazardous situation that occurred after the drawing of the Radcliff line. The story is centered around a brothel house, where eleven women used to live under the supervision *Begamjan* (the lady head). Out from the contemporary politics, their world revolves round the brothel house. In 1947, when the country India attained freedom, the areas of Debiganj and Haldibari became separate entity for the resettlements of borders. But during the border demarcation by Radcliff committee, the half portion of *Begamjan*'s brothel was remained within India and other half went under the territory of Pakistan. So, it was very natural that, when the boundary between the two countries was started to be constructed, the brothel house became a barrier and the authorities decided to demolish it and thus ordered them to vacate it. *Begamjan* and the other girls could not accept the destruction of their house and staged a massive resistance against the authorities.

The communal riots and slaughters annihilated the lives of women in many ways during partition. They faced molestation, abduction, even murder in some cases. They were forced to marry Muslim men and convert into Islamism. Pradip Dutta's work, "*Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal*" has brought out that, "*The fear of 'abduction' or 'rape' by the 'other' community had been played up in the communal divide of the Hindus and Muslims and had prepared the ground for the 'two-nation' theory.*"²⁵ However, a major portion of refugee migrated women prefer to remain silent in matter of physical tortures (if they faced any). Even today, after so many years of independence, the living eyewitnesses of partition hesitate much to share their experiences due to a variety of social and political fears. In this connection, the treasury of Bengali literary works and movies helps a lot in gleaning information and to get an idea regarding those traumatic days. Writing about Bengal partition stories Joyjit Ghosh commented, "*The stories are representative of Bengal partition fiction in their poignant depictions of various forms of violence, agony and anxiety at the 'border' which is porous and bleeds still.*"²⁶ These literary works not only portrayed all the sufferings of women, but also put a light on the story of their survival by fighting against all obstacles. In Jyotirmoyee Devi's '*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*', Sutara was found to protest against marrying into a Muslim family and later, after facing several obstacles, she was found to rebuild her life. In the movie *Begamjan* the other girls were found to conduct a massive resistance against the authorities. In this way, Bengali literature and films not only showed the pathetic side of partition, but also depicted their courage to fight against the situation. Not all of them were lucky, but these cannot diminish the stories of their success. They not only took care of themselves, but also were a great support for their families at times. In the movie '*Mahanagar*',²⁷ a woman named Arati (homemaker) is

depicted who takes a job as a saleswoman to meet the financial pressure of her husband. In this way, Bengali literature and films have represented women from different perspectives and provides information regarding the social, economic and political condition during that time, that were highly affected by the geographical division and thus played a crucial part as a source material of partition historiography.

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