

OCCASIONAL PAPER

2

***EPAR GANGA OPAR GANGA —
A CREATIVE STATEMENT ON
DISPLACEMENT AND VIOLENCE***

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July 2004



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Abstract

*This paper is divided into two parts. In the first, the importance of Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel on the Partition of India, **Epar Ganga Opar Ganga (1967 and 1991)**, is explained in the broader context of the Literature of Partition, a genre whose focus has been on the related themes of dislocation and violence. The corrective accent of this literature is emphasized by drawing parallels with the Literature of Holocaust. In the second part, the remarkable novel **Epar Ganga Opar Ganga** is analysed to demonstrate how the subject of dislocation and violence has been explored with insight and sensitivity. What links the two parts is the theoretical conviction that the Literature of Exile and Rupture is not only a record of nightmare and agony but also a depiction of the indomitable struggle of the victims who often emerge triumphant after the dark night of trauma. In fact, it narrates the 'human' history of Partition and strives to fill the gaps created by the conventional nationalist historiography of our freedom movement. The conclusion highlights the relevance of such creative literature in a milieu which has still to overcome the mindset of Partition.*

Epar Ganga Opar Ganga and the Literature of Partition

In his well-researched monograph on the Partition of the subcontinent, *Deshbhag-Deshtyag*, published in January 1994, Sandip Bandyopadhyay observed, not without a feeling of regret, "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, Bhisham Sahni or Sadat Hasan Manto." (1) (Bandyopadhyay, 1994, P 7) Akhtaruzzaman Elias' classic novel on Partition and Tebhaga, *Khowabnama* published in 1996, followed Sandip Bandyopadhyay's monograph. Had it preceded the latter, the researcher would have certainly revised his statement because many regard *Khowabnama*, and rightly so, as one of the best Bengali novels written in the last century. In fact, on the basis of *Khowabnama* and a short story like *Khoanri* (Elias, 1982, Pp 9-39), I would certainly place Elias far above Krishan Chander and Bhisham Sahni precisely because Elias was not in a position to draw upon any personal experience of that trauma and tragedy. In other words, his literarisation of 'Displacement and Violence' caused by Partition, not directly substantiated by the actuality around him, was far more autonomous in character, and hence far more difficult to achieve.

Sandip Bandyopadhyay, however, had Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (1967 and 1991) to guide his verdict. He refers to this memorable text in terms of praise but for some reason is not prepared to consider it as valuable as Bhisham Sahni's Hindi novel, *Tamas* (Sahni, 1974). Why this bias? Is it because *Tamas* received the full glare of televised publicity which was denied to *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*? Again, why should this critic accuse Sandip Bandyopadhyay of a lapse which he himself committed? In an article on the literature of Partition I wrote some years ago (Samaddar ed. 1997, Pp 162-175), I used the texts of many – Sadat Hasan Manto, Samaresh Bose, Krishan Chander etc etc – but I failed to make use of this classic which explored the complex layers of displacement and violence with remarkable sensitivity. Though *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, as a literary text, is not as dazzling as *Khowabnama*, the two together are perhaps the best novels on Partition in Bengali Literature. Both of them have, on the one hand, that epic sweep

which transfixes the violated moment in the flow of time and, on the other, that careful concentration on the moment itself which is indispensable for literary actualisation. Yet, not even a fraction of the celebratory accolade that was and is still being showered on *Khowabnama* has blessed *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*. Why? The possible answer to this question is perhaps rooted in a peculiar type of partiality dictated by male chauvinism of which we males are not even aware.

Before attempting a textual examination of *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, another basic query associated with the literature of Partition as a genre should be considered. The query reads: is it at all possible to represent the intensity and magnitude of the devastation caused by Partition in adequate creative terms, not only in Bengali but also in other languages – Urdu, Hindi, Sindhi, Punjabi - whose speakers were also severely affected by the rupture? Let us recall the depth and extent of that displacement and violence summarized by Urvashi Butalia in the first page of her book *The Other Side of Silence*.

The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan. By far the largest proportion of these refugees – more than ten million of them – crossed the western border which divided the historic state of Punjab, Muslims travelling west to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs east to India. Slaughter sometimes accompanied and sometimes prompted their movement; many others died from malnutrition and contagious disease. Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a

million people died is now widely accepted. As always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion). People travelled in buses, in cars, by train, but mostly on foot in great columns called *kafilas*, which could stretch for dozens of miles. The longest of them, said to comprise nearly 400,000 people, refugees travelling east to India from western Punjab, took as many as eight days to pass any given spot on its route. (Butalia, 1998, P3)

No literature of a single language or even a combination of literatures of several languages can adequately recapture *this* displacement and violence perpetrated on such a gigantic scale. A hundred Sadat Hasan Mantos and a hundred Akhtaruzzaman Eliases are needed to portray this helllike landscape. Indeed, what we receive in our creativity on Partition is the essence of this nightmare, this holocaust. And that is what creativity is all about – it crystallizes the agony of the innumerable into the reverberating lament of the Representative One, and that One could be Manto's Toba Tek Singh (Manto, 1997, Pp 147-156) or Jyotirmoyee Devi's Sutara. It humanizes the figures, structures and movements of history. Such a crystallization, which is far more important than mere abundance in terms of quantum, occurs at the level of the lyric when the long endless *kafilas* are condensed into the following lines of Adil Mansuri :

Now there are neither doors nor walls in between
And no place on earth to keep your feet on
Fill up the mirages with tears
Irrigate the wilderness of migration
When the injured sun opened his eyes (Nandy ed. 1974,
P 27)

Hence, the very demand for an adequate representation, primarily in terms of quantum, is unrealistic. What we have

already received from writers and artists, from Quarratulain Haider's epic-like *River of Fire* (Haider, 1998) to Sankha Ghosh's evocative fragment, *Supuribaner Sari* (Ghosh, 1990), with so many other texts and films coming in between, have raised a canon which we can certainly cherish. Literature has done its bit and is still doing it, though it is left to us to extract the all-important message. Interestingly, it was Gunter Grass who clarified the nature and role of creativity trying to represent any Holocaust, Jewish or Indian. The author of *The Tin Drum* was asked: "Do you think that your masterpiece, honoured as the most compelling creative indictment of German Fascism, has laid bare that historic horror? Is the exposure complete?" In reply, Gunter Grass articulated a candid confession. He said, "I tried my very best to come near to that horror but how can I transcribe it. All the stories of Heinrich Boell, plays of Peter Weiss, poems of Paul Celan – I have a profound respect for all these authors – along with my *Danziger Trilogy* cannot recollect that orgy, that rupture. We have offered a distillation of that Apocalypse. I must confess, often I had to grope for words to recreate that barbaric phase. I had to depend on literary devices to strike the message home. Recall the role of the gasman in *The Tin Drum*, the waltz which disrupts a Nazi rally, the inversion of the Christian virtues of Hope, Faith, Love in a particular chapter. Frankly speaking, words failed at times." (2) However, Grass was emphatic on one obligation – the obligation to carve the message in imperishable letters. That is why even to this day he never tires of describing Auschwitz as the apex of human cruelty which his people dare not forget (Grass, 1990, Pp 41-42). Their Auschwitz is our Patiala or Noakhali and the life and trial of Sutara, a refugee from Noakhali who is the protagonist in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, is an intrinsic part of our corrective memory. This remembrance, as the carnages in Bhagalpur and Gujarat amply demonstrate, gets blurred from time to time in spite of our declared loyalty to humane secularism.

While re-reading *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, one feels that

Jyotirmoyee Devi, like Gunter Grass, also struggled for words when she tried to describe the emotional torment of Sutara and the other characters. Her prose is crystal clear but even this well-crafted restraint in her expression, somehow, could not accommodate the turmoil frozen inside. It melted and spilled over, prompting the author to write:

"She could not say any more, *tears welled up in her eyes* (P 140)."

"Wiping her eyes, she embraced Sutara with her left arm. *Tears rained down from her eyes* (P 138)."

"At the end, her *tears* dropped on my hand (P 213)."

"*Tears stream down Pramod's hand ... tears brook no end* (P 244)."

In fact, the expression 'eyes filled with tears' forms the refrain of this text. It is repeated to highlight the tragedy of Sutara and thousands like her. Shorn of its sentimental association, it acts as the most eloquent though wordless comment on the displacement and violence caused by Partition. At another level, this silent signature of agony attests to the writer's predicament. We realize why a poet like Paul Celan, who at one point of time could write such expansive laments like

He plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as
a master from Germany

Your golden hair Margarethe

Your ashen hair Shulamith

Fugue of Death (Celan, 1977, Pp 33-34)

gradually lost words and had to break syllables later in order to depict the destruction of the same Margarethes and Shulamiths. Or, why Sylvia Plath, who was numbed by the anthropology of fear, wrote in *Mary's Song* :

It is a heart,

This holocaust I walk in,

O golden child the world will kill and eat. (3)

An indivisible bond of agony binds the following together – Sutara who had to leave devastated Noakhali to survive in Kolkata; Margarethe who was uprooted from Dresden and had to wait for her death at Belsen; a Croatian Granny from Sarengrad who recalled the evacuation and the devastation of her town; Bibi, a Muslim girl, who was abducted and forced into marriage as portrayed in Jamila Hashmi's story *Exile*. (Bhalla ed. 1994, Pp 34-53) Jyotirmoyee Devi dedicated her novel to all of them "To the humiliated and persecuted women of all ages" ('Dedication' in the novel). Moreover, the anthropology of fear experienced by them all received its appropriate literary expression in Sutara's terror-struck state of mind:

Her hands and feet even now tremble in fear. Her body chills. As though a calamity has struck her body and mind, she does not know its nature. A strange and overwhelming terror or something else has crushed her existence, her body and soul. She cannot recall the nightmare in its entirety. Like confronting a ghost, she thinks of that inhuman, terrifying night. (P 142)

Like Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Jyotirmoyee Devi also heard, read, reflected and then created this graphic prose. She did not actually experience the carnage which many other writers did. But this distance did not impair the construction of the actual environment. There is, on the one hand, an intense relationship between what Sutara, as the symbol of rupture, experienced and Jyotirmoyee Devi transcreated, and, on the other, between her narrative of mediated memory and the actual reminiscences recorded and compiled by Urvashi Butalia, Dakshinaranjan Basu, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and Sandip Bandyopadhyay. When, for example, Sutara recollects in the novel :

Yes, that small village: not too many neighbours. A river on one side, a small daughter of the Padma. Small tributary. Two ponds behind the house. A middle-sized garden. Filled with trees bearing fruits and flowers.

Ancestral land. Layered with the footprints of so many generations. (P 132)

She echoes those poignant memories compiled by Dakshinaranjan Basu:

I recall the days of autumn. Everyone waits for that season throughout the year. And what lively preparations. Those who live far away are returning home. Every day in the Dhaleswari, new boats drop anchor. (Basu, 1975, P 12)

And in both the cases the 'hymnic' aspect of remembrance merges into the 'elegiac'. Both the hymnic and the elegiac together constitute that structure of feeling which at specific points seeks identical expressions in life as well as in literature. Perhaps, in consonance with Walter Benjamin's thesis, the creative text comes to evoke the exact emotion of existence under the redemptive pressure of remembrance (Benjamin, 1973). This contiguity between life and literature does not contradict the earlier hypothesis of the author searching desperately for words to depict life. When the hymnic, the elevating, the redemptive and the reassuring is eliminated forcibly by the pernicious and the merciless, the elegiac itself is transformed into the terrible. The pressure of the latter is so stifling that it blocks the flow of expression. Out of this struggle emerges a tormented idiom, different from the rest. As Theodor Adorno said in his famous statement, "Poetry after Auschwitz cannot be conceived as something joyous ... in place of laughter, dried up lament has stepped in." (Adorno, 1974, Pp 147-157)

Displacement and Violence in *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*

The related aspects of displacement and violence, which provoke the resurgence of memory as a counterpoint, have been explored in varying situational contexts in this novel. Strictly speaking, there are three situations in the text: first, a village in Noakhali; second, Calcutta; and third, Delhi. All three reveal the different facets of displacement as well as the changing

nature of violence which together challenge the conventional and off-stressed 'they' / 'we' or 'ora' / 'amra' dichotomy. This 'we' versus 'they' rupture acted as the moving spirit behind Partition and is still very much present in us, in the partition of our minds. Jyotirmoyee Devi blasted the false legitimacy of this binary opposition which posits Hindus and Muslims as implacable enemies, in the very first situation in Noakhali. It is true that members of the majority Muslim community attack and kill Sutara's father, mother and elder sister. The depiction of this violence is also one of the most moving passages in the entire oeuvre of Partition Literature where the intensity is communicated in a prose marvellously restrained:

Mother could not come. Many black shadows have gathered behind mother. Trying to grab her hand. Freeing her hand, mother rushed towards the backdoor and then plunged into the pond What happened to my elder sister (*didi*). She could not see her *didi* any more. She also tried to rush to her mother, her feet struck something. Then? (Pp 135-136)

But what happens after this is a displacement of a different kind. Neither is Sutara raped and killed nor abducted and forced into marriage following conversion. 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, Tamij Saheb, 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. While reading this part of the novel, we come to question the rationale of Partition itself, and the more we question the more we are made conscious of the corrective role of such creativity. Consider the following words uttered by

Sutara's rescuers at different points of time. Sutara's Muslim *kakima* or aunt says:

'Dear one, please eat well. You have to regain strength. Or else, you will not be able to recover. Later, you can perhaps perform a penance'. She said and smiled slightly. But her eyes were filled with tears. (P 137)

Sutara's uncle, Tamijkaka, ponders:

She has been living for a long time in a Muslim household. Will she be accepted by her community? You know the Hindu society. How will they accept her? If they do not, where will the girl go? (P 151)

In the midst of this grim uncertainty, forsaken Sutara clings to her Muslim uncle when awkward questions are asked by members of a rehabilitation committee:

All sorts of questions asked by unknown groups terrorize her, she feels like crying. Yet, standing beside Tamijsaheb she utters just one sentence, "Kakasaheb, take me along with you. I shall not go with them." (P 150)

Members of the rehabilitation committee happen to be Hindus, but they appear completely unknown or *achena* to Sutara. There are several such dialogues in the text which expose the hollowness of hidebound attitudes. In point of fact, the latter taken to the extreme, condone the violence of one's own community as unavoidable and applaud the displacement imposed on the other community as righteous. In the critical words of Gyanendra Pandey, "What violence seems to do in such narrations is to mark the boundaries of 'community'. One might suggest indeed that violence and community are constitutive of each other. Violence marks the limits of the community, that is to say, violence can occur only at or beyond that limit. By the same token, what occurs within the boundaries of the community is, by definition, not violence." (Pandey, 1997, P 2037) In other words, violence is always 'out there', but never in us. Dismissing this one-sided

definition which in the everyday world fuels violence on both sides, Sutara's Muslim aunt says:

You want partition, fight if you want. But why this humiliating assault on women, on their respect, honour, body? Does your religion sanction this? You, all of you, educated people of the village – lawyers, teachers – why aren't you raising your voices? (P 140)

The redemptive accent of the novel rings clear in such statements where the carnage committed by one's own community is condemned in explicit terms; where the 'we against they' aberration is replaced by the real division between desecrators and protectors, irrespective of the communities involved; and where women, rejecting communities, declare that their only religion is the right to live with honour. The Muslim mother's accusation in Noakhali in the east is echoed in the confirmation of a Hindu refugee of the west who tells Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, "A woman has no religion ... her only religion is womanhood. She gives birth, she is a creator, she is god, she is mother. Mothers have no religion, their religion is motherhood. It makes no difference whether they are Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims or Christians." (Menon and Bhasin, 1998, P 243)

But it does make a difference to a 'mother' who is a Hindu, like the mother of Sutara's sister-in-law in Calcutta. She rejects Sutara as a fallen Hindu defiled by the poisonous Muslim contact. This 'mother' is etched in clear opposition to the Muslim mother whom we have seen in the earlier phase. In the second situation in Calcutta, she goes out of her way to prove that we do not have to seek persecutors in the 'other' camp, for they are hyperactive in the 'We' enclosure. Each and every word said by this lady who sees a Devil in every Muslim, each and every act done by her displaces Sutara from her new 'Hindu' shelter, emotionally. This is a new form of displacement which could be labelled 'psychic dislocation'. It does not leave the sufferer uprooted in the obvious physical sense, but it leaves her soul and mind battered and, above all, an exile in her own

community. As Sutara continues to languish in her own camp, the Hindu-mother-aggressor partitions her own mind to discover in the victim the shadow of the *other* Muslim violator. Gandhi's words, pronounced in this phase of our history, are addressed directly to this mother portrayed by Jyotirmoyee Devi, "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) Gandhi must have overheard some of the invectives hurled at Sutara, 'refugee' Sutara, by her *masima* (aunt)! Here are some specimens. Immediately after Sutara's entry into the Calcutta house, the mother screams:

You embraced her in one go. She is dressed in clothes belonging to a Muslim household. All touched and tainted. What indulgence, what nuisance. (P 156)

After a few pages we read again:

I am shocked by your senseless conduct. She was living in a Muslim household all these months. Not one or two days, for more than six months. After this can a woman retain her caste, her religion? You have brought her, good. Well, then let her stand and sit like a *Hadi*, *Bagdi* in one corner ... God knows what she has eaten, what she has done and not done! (P 160)

The climax is reached during a wedding ceremony when Sutara, as if she is the low-caste servant-girl of the house, is segregated from other guests and made to eat in a corner, all alone.

The head of the family is affectionate towards Sutara, he is pained by what transpires, he protests but all these prove futile. Even the girls in the family who have a soft corner for her fail to curb the mother. The attitude of Sutara's brother, who lives and works in Calcutta and is not prepared to accept her in his household, is also contemptible. He manages to send the 'defiled' Sutara to a residential college and makes it clear that she is not

welcome in his house. Thus, in the Hindu city of Calcutta, Hindu Sutara who was first displaced and then saved by Muslims experiences another form of exile, rupture and violence. This is not a direct stab-wound from which the blood gushes out but a kind of internal haemorrhage leaving the person lonely and agonized. Compared to this state, her refuge in Tamijkaka's house was better because there she was at least a part of a web of human ties. She was not (to quote the author): "A nuisance, a Pakistani refugee- nuisance." The moment Sutara passes her MA Examination in History, her relatives become doubly scared. For they do not know, what would or could happen next. She can no longer live in that distant and safe boarding house nor can she be offered as a bride because she has been already 'desecrated'. She is fast approaching the blind alley of multiple displacement.

The second situation in Calcutta ends on an ambivalent note. At one level, Sutara looks forward to being financially independent, after securing a college lecturer's job in Delhi. At another level, she wonders if this new life would bring real freedom. Would it be powerful enough to neutralize, if not negate, the painful burden of her double exile? The first exile took place in Noakhali during the riots, and the second, of another kind, occurred in Calcutta. 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:

Elder brothers will not have to give money any more. They won't need to even think about her. Does this mean that she has become independent? Can women be independent? Does anyone think about her? Had they at all thought about her, what would have been their attitude? But this Sutara has aged ... this age has merged in the history-writing of all times and aeons – Satya, Treta, Dwapar, Kali. She has become, in her heart and mind, the representative of all women of all

ages – disgraced, persecuted, neglected, discarded for no reason. (P 190)

The third and last situation in Delhi is interwoven with this reflective strain. Sutara, living with other employed women in a city full of refugees, and at a distance from the two previous stages of displacement, has the time to ponder over what happened and could possibly happen. She is not at ease with the way history is taught to students. She almost predicts the condemnation of the celebratory narrative of nationalist history which cleverly bypassed the trauma of Partition. Her Punjabi friends and colleagues enlighten her on the vengeful destruction that rocked the western part, on how Muslim women were made to suffer in the very same way Hindu women had to suffer. In this phase of growing awareness, past invades when Sakina visits her. This past is an integral part of her existence, she cannot wipe it out. While, on the one hand, Sutara's past prompts her to acknowledge with deep gratitude what her Muslim *kakima* did for her, on the other, her sense of displacement is so deep and tormented that she cannot think of accepting Aziz, Sakina's brother, as her life-partner. In fact, Sakina, in all good faith, visited Sutara to voice this proposal of marriage because she and her family feared that the 'defiled' Sutara will not find a partner in the Hindu society.

Sutara's new status, engagement and reflection make her even more lonely. Her refuge is her memory and when she recollects, she reminds us of one tragic sentence uttered by a Croatian refugee which could serve as the epigraph to this novel: "All we had, all we are, reduced to memories." Almost philosophic in character, this new form of displacement, sustained by the hymnic and the elegiac aspects of remembrance, prompts the author to say:

Sakina and her family have sustained the memory of her motherland, her loving mother, father and elder sister in her mind till today. (P 211)

The depth of this inner displacement permeates the third situation. We realize that Sutara is trapped in a desolate state though she is struggling to free herself. In order to experience a temporary relief, she decides to go to the pilgrim spots in the Himalayas with her friends:

Only the unknown, unfamiliar yearning for company of an escapist mind, of an anxious, lonely mind beckoned her to the path of pilgrimage. As if it is some repulsion, some desire to run away from some one. (P 215)

But, here too, the past haunts when she is requested to perform the obligatory *pindadaan* or ritual to honour her dead parents. This section of the novel is perhaps the most poignant. With the help of a few simple sentences Jyotirmoyee Devi creates that essential tragic aura enveloping Sutara's life:

Mother? Father? Her eyes were swept away by tears. And that terrifying night came back on the waters of that sea. (P 231)

The displacement and violence of the past are refracted here through the prism of the present, the personal tragedy of Sutara is given a timeless dimension and the unstressed-unspoken sufferings of many are highlighted as a counterpoint to the vanity and vainglory of conventional historiography. Sutara's reflection on the unjust scheme of things is etched in unforgettable words:

Invisible fire will burn the land and home of the people of many ages; nests of happiness, mudhuts of memory, dreams, hopes will be burnt out. Will be destroyed. Kings are changed, kings change. But common people get crushed under the regal victory-chariot's wheels. Like insects, like ants. (P 251)

Indeed, these words are echoed in the cogitations of historians like Gyanendra Pandey much later when they challenge the 'celebratory narrative' of the nation-state and divert our attention from Jinnahs and Nehrus to "the rape, the killing, the uprooting

and the looting on a scale that is quite unimaginable" and conclude, "There is, necessarily, an enormous suppression, a wiping out of memories that must take place in the making of the nationalist narrative." (Pandey, 1996)

The same narrative is also indifferent to the valiant struggle waged by Sutara and many others who defied the trauma of dislocation and violence and emerged, ultimately, triumphant. It is this dialectic of trauma and triumph that distinguishes the lives of countless women struck by Partition. Bibi Inder Kaur, a victim of Partition in the west, described her victory to Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in the following words: "There are millions of women like me who want to do something but cannot. I managed because Partition gave me a chance. My husband feared that this would happen, that when I became independent I would be free and he was right....I gained much more than I lost. He only lost. I feel sorry for him but I never wanted to go back, back to that life. I had spread my wings." (Menon and Bhasin, 1998, P 215) I think that some present-day historians while highlighting "the rape, killing, the uprooting" fail to pay the required attention to this experience of struggle and triumph. To that extent, their confrontation with the memory and paradigm of Partition remains fragmented and misleading. In fact, while confronting the many-layered reality and remembrance of Partition, we need to depend on what Sumit Sarkar proposed as 'many histories' (4) which together try to capture the complexities of the total experience. We need to expose the obvious limits of the nationalist narrative which concentrates on the primarily political at the expense of the existentially human. But, simultaneously, instead of clamouring for its outright rejection we have to complete it with the other histories which are true to the kindred points of loss and recovery, trauma and triumph. Sutara, and through her Jyotirmoyee Devi, appealed for this completion in the novel by saying, "History is not a small matter. Only a single person does not write it. ... Further, history is not preserved merely in written pages ... which history has recorded the experiences of the weak and the suffering?". (P 131)

But even ‘the spreading of wings’ so eloquently described by Bibi Inder Kaur, or the determined entry into the sphere of economic freedom and self assertion was woven with a sense of sadness, with the scarred memory of the past mellowing the present achievement. That is why in actual life we find Somavanti telling Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, “Even today there is no peace, no peace outside, no peace inside...there is a feeling of being unsettled. My daughters are also not at peace. There is no wellbeing.”(Menon and Bhasin, 1998, P 219), and in literature we find Sutara wrapped in a poignant uncertainty even after hearing the crucial promise of love and marriage from Pramod, her suitor. The last three pages of the novel are suffused with this sense of melancholy stirred by memory though these also record Sutara’s journey towards the final reconciliation which is the acquisition of love, faith and hope. As the elegiac enters the joyous and vice versa in Sutara’s structure of feeling, Jyotirmoyee Devi writes,

“Again and again a fear assails the heart.—if this dream crumbles?Tears well up in her eyes. She suddenly feels that the quiet, pleasant darkness filling her room is perhaps the deep observation of someone’s eyes. This observation says, “I accept your responsibility. I care for you.”(P 254)

In a language remarkably unadorned yet heartfelt, the novelist—to use Paul Celan’s words—describes “ life as the only refuge” (Celan, 1972, P 106) in this closing phase.

The nightmare of the past—dislocation, torture, loss, violence—gains a sharper edge when juxtaposed with this conclusion of tremulous joy, tranquil and restless, in the same breath. Both together reveal the essential dialectic of Partition. While the cruelty and the rupture (to quote Prof Jaidev) “show what we were, are and can be and not what we in our thick hypocrisy like to think what we are”(Jaidev, 1996, P 4), the ultimate attainment of love, life and harmony points to the

triumph of the human spirit whose depth cannot be captured in explicit words. Sutara’s haunting syllables try to suggest its ineffable worth :

Faith, trust, love, companionship, love, affection...she does not know? Nevertheless, it is a marvellous, indescribable treasure of the world. (P 254)

A creative text like *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* is indispensable for the present moment. Like the other classics on Partition (the plays and films of Ritwik Ghatak, novels of Amrita Pritam and Bhisham Sahni, short stories of Rajinder Singh Bedi and Sadat Hasan Manto), it prompts us to recall the past and, more importantly, provokes us to link it with our turbulent present. As we reflect over what we read, we realize that the adamant virus is still within us. Based on the “we-they opposition”, the psyche of Partition still stalks and assaults. In our fight against this enemy within, Jyotirmoyee Devi is our unerring guide.

[**Acknowledgement** : Amiya Kumar Bagchi and Jasodhara Bagchi read this paper and gave valuable suggestions. I am grateful to them.]

Notes

- (1) Not only Sandip Bandyopadhyay but also novelist Debesh Roy and critics like Ashis Nandy and Achinta Biswas have claimed that Bengali Literature has not treated the tragedy of Partition in the way it should have. In fact, Ashis Nandy, in his foreword to *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from 2 Bengals* (2003- Srishti, New Delhi), asked in a sarcastic tone, “Why have even the garrulous Bengalis been, for once, silenced?” It is time to challenge this opinion and assert that Bengali writers, both in West Bengal and Bangladesh, have rejected silence. The bibliography to the book *The Trauma and The Triumph* (eds. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta , 2003 , Stree, Kolkata) clearly indicates that the creative response to this traumatic division has not at all been sparse and sketchy. Moreover, it is excellent and many-layered in quality.
- (2) Gunter Grass made this observation in an interview given to the author in 1994.
- (3) Sylvia Plath was deeply affected by the Holocaust. James E. Young has analysed her creative response to this tragedy in his book *Writing and*

Rewriting in the Holocaust (1988, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, Pp 117 to 133).

- (4) Sumit Sarkar stressed the importance of ‘many histories’ in an interview given to the author in 2004.

Quoted excerpts from the novel have been translated by the author.

The author has followed the text published in 1991(see reference).The novel was first published in the Autumn issue of the magazine *Probasi* in 1967 and then as a book by Rupa (Kolkata) in 1968.

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