



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XI, Issue-IV, July 2023, Page No.196-203

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Scrutinizing the Spotlight: A Socio-Feminist Study of the Partition Fictions of Barak Valley, Assam

Afrida Masooma

Former research Scholar, Centre for North East and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Abstract:

The partition of India in 1947 though has been studied from multiple prisms; women have never been a subject of discussion in the dominant discourses of the partition. Women were considered mute objects and commodities only to be possessed in all partition historiographies whether they are nationalist or social. The experiences of the women and their voices in the discourse of partition have been ignored and overlooked. Not only did the political historiography ignore the women's experiences of the partition, the literary historiography too overlooked the women's plight while representing the partition in the literary productions. These unattended women questions in the partition historiography have recently been identified as a major blind spot to be recovered for scholarly inquiry. The partition fictions of Barak Valley, Assam, being no exception, also made no effort to accommodate the women in their representation of the partition. Rather women in those fictions are presented as symbols of male possessions. This paper is aimed at analysing two representative partition fictions of Barak Valley, Assam, visibilizing women characters and their representation in them. The selected fictions are Bindu Bindu Jol (2019) by Sekhar Das and Wakeup Call (2012) by Amitabh Dev Choudhury.

Keywords: Partition, Fiction, Women, Representation, Visibilization, Barak Valley, Assam,

Introduction: The partition of India in 1947 was a tragic moment that changed the course of Indian history and cast a long shadow on its future unfolding. Although every layer and section of society experienced its horror, marginalized classes, including women, faced greater physical and psychological violence and their sufferings were unequalled. However, political historiography remained adamantly indifferent towards the individual experiences of the partition by focusing only on the political happenings of the same. Such historiography jotted down the experiences of the partition in mere figures and numbers, ignoring the intensity of ground-level atrocities and horror experienced by the people.

Besides the political historiographers, the creative writers, poets, and artists, moved by the horrors of the partition, tried to capture the intense atrocities and the emotive side of the partition through their creative productions, which later on came to be known as 'partition

literature' in Indian subcontinent. Partition literature, through various genres, vividly captures the nuanced individual experiences of the partition, the horrors, and atrocities that were often fixated by the political historiography in mere facts and figures. Partition which is, for political historiography, a turbulent political split of India and Pakistan, to literary historiography it is emotional partition, cultural partition along with multiple regional and geographical partitions. In this way the literary historiography also provides regional circumstantiality of the partition. Thus, when political history fails to provide nuanced details about peripheral partition affected areas, partition literature comes to fill up such gaps. This paper aims to study the partition in such a peripheral area that is the Barak Valley region of Assam by focusing on yet another marginalised social group that is women.

Barak Valley of Assam, a historical and cultural part of East Bengal (now Bangladesh), got dissected during the partition of 1947 from its cultural twin Surma Valley and Sylhet through the famous yet controversial 'Sylhet Memorandum'. However, unlike the other partition-affected parts of India, it took decades for Barak Valley to produce any literature dealing with the partition. The beginning of the 1980s witnessed the appearance of short stories, but minimal in quantity and not quintessentially representative of the partition. With the unfolding of the 21st century, a handful of writers like Sekhar Das, Ranabir Purkayastha, Imad Uddin Bulbul, and Atin Das among others started writing about the partition. But in those millennial and post-millennial fictions, the locus mainly remained on the post-partition identity dilemma and urge for home-building rather than the actual horrors of the tragic incident. These fictions, thus, are more concerned with the post-partitioned life and the struggles of the refugee people. However, a major lacuna in these fictions comes off as being indifferent toward representing women and their agency. Besides, these fictions objectify women, symbolize them as patriarchal commodities, and present them as mute objects.

It is pertinent to note that until the early 1990s, women did not receive the deserved scholarly attention in the political historiography of the Partition of India, either just as a topic of discussion or a category of analysis. The early attempt of inquiry into the partition from feminist perspective began at the end of 20th century when feminist scholars like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon ventured to dive in to the wreckage of the partition to understand what Partition did to women and what it meant for them. Literary historiography tried to fill up those gaps; however, these attempts could not cross the limits of patriarchy and the women remained 'unrepresented' against the catastrophe of partition. Since the emergence of feminist perspective of the partition, women's experiences of violence, molestations, conversions, uprootedness, the crisis of belongingness, and processes of post-partition rehabilitation programs came to be the subject of scholarly inquiry. The question still remains that how and who has been represented in these literary writings. This prompts us to revisit and re-examine the partition writings to understand the nature of their presentation. The paper also aims to analyse the representation of the women characters in the partition fiction of Barak Valley by focusing on their (in)visibilization in those fictions.

Visibilization: An integral aspect of representation is (in) visibilization of the subject. With the sociological questions of ‘social inclusion and exclusion’ and ‘discrimination’ in the 1970s, the question of visibilization and invisibilization of suffering was also highlighted by sociologists. Axel Honneth in his ‘theory of recognition’ considered ‘invisibility’, as ‘looking through’ someone where one does not take notice of the other even though in his or her presence. He differentiated between mere ‘cognition’ and ‘recognition’ where the former stands for just seeing a person and later for ‘the social validity’ of a person through the ‘expression of an evaluative perception’ and the ‘expressive demonstration of an individual de-centering’ oneself ‘in response to the worth’ of the other (Honneth 2001, p. 115). In this light, invisibility implies the absence of such a gesture of recognition where a person is viewed by another person as if he/she is absent even in his presence. Extending this idea of invisibility, Benno Herzog observed that “excluded or marginalized social groups frequently face problems of representation in the public sphere...exclusion and marginalization might therefore be understood as a process of silencing or invisibilizing important social group” (Herzog, 2017 p.1) which exacerbate the sufferings of those social groups. His implication of ‘invisibilization’ and ‘silencing’ also goes parallel with Honneth’s ‘looking through’ (Honneth, 2001) which, according to him, ‘occurs mostly with the people of lower social status’. (Herzog, 2017, p. 5) While differentiating between the individual or physical side and the socially constructed side of invisibilization and silencing, Herzog observes that in the former case, some social mechanism obstructs the society from understanding the “normative language of suffering, binding and deafening its members through a social process related to marginalization and devaluation of the other”. In other words, physical invisibilization and silencing operate by preventing the presence of a social group or their sufferings in the public sphere. On the other hand, the socially constructed side of invisibilization and silencing ‘guide our attention away from certain social groups’ which is similar to ‘looking through’ a physically present person (Herzog, 2017).

These sociological observations could be extended to cultural studies to analyze how the social mechanism of invisibilization and silencing occurs to impede the social sufferings of some social groups from coming into discursive expression and how they ‘guide our attention away from certain social groups’. In fact, Herzog himself writes in his methodological advice that “one method of penetrating the veil of obfuscation of social suffering is to turn towards the highly sensitive social actors, such as artists and the analysis of the aesthetic products” (Herzog 2017, p. 10). As cultural products are better in expressing the social processes and a good tool to decipher the social normativity, the mechanism of visibilization and silencing in them is a potential field of analysis in this juncture. Fictional representation being one of the key components of the aesthetic production, visibilization and invisibilization of the characters of a fiction, on that ground, can be brought under interrogation. The following part of this paper aims to analyze the visibilization and invisibilization of the women characters of the representative partition fictions of Barak Valley. For this matter, two representative partition fictions of Barak Valley namely Bindu

Bindu Jol (Das, 2019), and Wake Up Call (Choudhury, 2012) has been taken in to consideration.

The storylines: Sekhar Das's Bindu Bindu Jol (2019) is an account of two partition victim families of East Bengal and their life journey after crossing the border to India. Set approximately in the time period of 1947 to 1970, the novella tells the story of Dr. Nalini's Family and Boshumoti's who had to flee from East Bengal during the Sylhet Referendum causing communal riots in the area. On the one hand Dr. Nalini and his family reach safely (though their daughter Paru dies of cholera in the refugee camp) in India with the help of their Muslim friends, Boshumoti, on the other, lost her husband, son, home and sanity to the rampage. Losing her group of the refugees, she fell victim to molesters and rapists from both Hindu and Muslim communities and lives in a perpetual state of sexual violation, in a name and identity less place.

Amitabh Dev Choudhury's short story Wake Up Call (2012) is yet another side of the partition that curved the lot of the refugee community. It narrates the story of Masi, an insane and destitute old lady, who probably (her past stories are muddled up due to her old age memory loss) came to Silchar from Sylhet years before the partition and now wants to go back to her home, which now falls in Bangladesh. Masi's desperation to go back leads to her many failed attempts to slip through the border which only adds to her desperation. On learning that she now needs a 'passport paper' to visit her own home, laymen Masi starts collecting papers from streets, dump yards and everywhere possible, and pleads to the passport officer if it is enough for her to go back.

It is evident in the storylines that Women, in the partition fictions of Barak Valley, have been heavily employed. However, a detailed look proves that women were stripped off their agency, either only to support the male characters as subordinate, or to move the story forward as instrument, while male characters occupy central spaces, reflecting male domination of patriarchal society. Female characters merely represent any sufferings that they had to endure due to the partition, except for the sexual violence. Sufferings of women characters are though not completely omitted, rather they are hinted upon in passing or left unattended or considered secondary to the plots of the stories.

For instance, Surabala and her husband Dr. Nalini, in the novella Bindu Bindu Jol (Das, 2019), both carry the wound of the partition deep in their hearts. Both of them suffer rootlessness, alienation, and homelessness and feel betrayed by the upcoming modern lifestyle but it is Dr. Nalini's sufferings around which the story mostly revolves. The memory of the partition equally dismantled Surabala's self but her grief finds no expression rather she suffers in silence. She is described to be the one "who endures all the pain in silence just like the earth endures a tremendous thunderstorm" (Das, 2019, p.64) or "the human who doesn't react easily to anything" (Das, 2019, p.60). While talking about a cosmetic hawker who reminded her of Paru, their deceased daughter, Surabala says, "I remember her (childish) demands like the sound of the wind coming from very far. I often hear the voice of the hawker too. But what is the use" (p.76). Her sentimental affirmation to

the futility of her memory and suffering actually points to the fact that neither the society nor her husband is concerned about her sufferings. Therefore, her pain is of 'no use' and it is better to ignore them. As the novella (or in the larger context it is society and the social discourses) is solely concerned with the sufferings and pain of men, Surabala finds it is useless to count on her pain and memories against that of Dr. Nalini's.

It is also noteworthy that despite having a troublesome mental condition like her husband, Surabala's condition does not gain prominence in the storyline, rather, the course of the novella focuses on the troubling mental condition of Dr. Nalini in the post-partitioned days, who is now said to be 'childish' and completely dependent upon his wife Surabala. Dr. Nalini sometimes asks Surabala to cut her hair 'like Indira Gandhi', sometimes asks her to watch stars with him, and sometimes does not allow her to leave him for a second. His troubles and sufferings become so prominent that Surabala always prays that 'both of them should die together' for she cannot leave 'the child' (childish Dr. Nalini) in such chaos, but to emphasize on his suffering, Surabala dies at the end of the story leaving her 'child' behind.

In order to infer about Surabala's sufferings, one has to look in to the abbreviations attached to her. Her smiles are recurrently mentioned as "smitho hashi" or "gentle smile" for Surabala never laughs aloud, her voice is referred as "soft" and "tender", and her presence as "the thread of integration for the family". Worth mentioning here is that Surabala is not only a "thread of integration" for the family but also a mere tool of integration for the plot who never actively participates in storyline. Furthermore, the "sighs" and "silent tears" of Surabala only serves as a vehicle to express the post-partition gloominess of the canvas where as Surabala as a character or her sufferings are not at all salient to the narration.

Moreover, there is an attempt in the novel to juxtapose the sources of both Surabala's and Dr. Nalini's sufferings. While the sufferings of Dr. Nalini arise from the larger socio-political turbulences international issues, the sufferings of Surabala arise due to the petty domestic chores. Surabala's insecurity comes from her 'uncultured' and 'rude' daughters-in-law and the grandchildren who according to her are 'spoiled' by the new time. Contrary to that, Dr. Nalini is insecure against the greater political issues like the partition, missile replacing motor cars as war ammunition, the rising religious nationalism in India after partition, the Camp Devid Accord, the civil war in South Africa etc. Dr. Nalini in his utmost disgust for the incident of partition is unable to consider Gandhiji as the 'father of the nation' and he mentions him as "just Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, nothing more than that" (p.65). These juxtapositions not only invisibilize Surabala's sufferings but also justify the visibilization of Dr. Nalini's sufferings. The troubles of Dr. Nalini are so much lighted upon, due to which, not only the sufferings of Surabala remains in the backdrop but also the story of Boshumoti remains as a mere fragment of the novella. For the character of Boshumoti, nothing other than her sexual violation and pain of her motherhood could come in to consideration. Sanity less women like her could not be good for anything else other

than being a victim to rape and molestation. She is used as a mere tool to represent the refugee community who are exploited by political parties for their own benefit.

In Amitabha Dev Choudhury's story *Wake Up Call* (Choudhury, 2012, pp. 139-148), the invisibilization of the women happens in rather different manner. Unlike the other fictions where the attentions of the reader were deviated from women to men, the attention in this story is elevated from women to a generalized cause of the refugee community. From the very beginning of the story it is mentioned that Masi, the central character, is just 'a human figure' and 'it is hard to figure out whether it is a male or a female figure' for she is 'beyond such attributes' of masculinity or femininity. She is said to be just 'Homo sapiens' (p.139). The repeated stress on Masi's ambiguous body shape emphasises on the concern of the story being a generalized refugee community of the partition, just represented by a woman. Even though the central character of the plot is actually a woman, the story does not consider women to be the central concern of the story. Such general refugee concern is further substantiated, in the end of the story, by the sharp contrast made between the first-generation migrants and the second-generation migrants represented by Masi and the narrator respectively. The narrator refers to the migrated land as 'his own hometown' and 'nest of tranquillity' which he 'never had the opportunity to look at properly' but Masi's love for homeland 'has shown him the way' to connect to his own.

The character of Masi upholds the plights of the refugee community who are considered as 'the rejected population' everywhere, and not the plights of the 'refugee women' who are not even present in the discussion of such population. Moreover, Masi's visit in the dream of the narrator amidst millions of "testimonials of a whole rejected population from all the places, who are bereft of any identity or lineage" reiterates on invisibilization of Masi from being a 'refugee woman' to a 'refugee human being' (Choudhury, 2012, p. 147). This foregrounds the concern of refugee community in general, pushing aside the concern for women within such refugee group.

Conclusion: It is fathomable in the above discussion that women in the partition fictions of Baraka Valley are amply employed but kept aside in the background of the canvas, making them unimportant to the narration. The male characters of these fictions are so extensively foregrounded and visibilized that women characters, in the process, innately and unconsciously got invisibilized and backgrounded. Therefore, despite the fact that women in the partition fictions of Barak Valley were not barred from being physically present in the discourse, they were not given adequate attention they deserved. Rather the attention of the readers is guided away from the women characters to the male or the 'non-women' characters. Hence, the presence of the women characters, their trauma of partition, their social suffering during and after the partition do not stand pivotal in the narrations of the stories rather the social sufferings of the male characters remain as the key concern. In this way, the women characters in these fictions were 'looked through' despite their physical presence. It is important here to mention that the invisibilization of the women characters in the partition fictions of Barak Valley not just merely marginalized them but also impeded the experiences of the women of Barak Valley from getting depicted in to the discourse of

partition. This results in the representation of only as passive victims, with no agency over their own life, the situation around, in the society and in the narration. The women characters were just physically present, but they were ignored and 'looked through' and our attentions are 'guided away' from the female characters to the male characters of those fictions.

Partition and its implication continue to haunt the socio-political scenario of the Indian subcontinent. Though on the surface level every section of society faced the dark consequences, women were one among the other marginalised group who endured worst implications of the partition. However, they are the one who remained in the backdrop of the socio-political discourses about the partition. Compelled by the sense of an urgent need to examine such blind spot of such discourses about the partition, this paper came up to explore an unexplored partition affected area that is the Barak Valley region of Assam. With an aspiration to locate the individual selves of women and to understand their representation in the literary writings, this paper tried to highlight the discursive gaps in the socio-political discourses of the partition. To mitigate this, women need to take up active role both in speaking and writing about the women against the catastrophe of partition.

References:

1. Baishya, S. (2012). "Our Home". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 2011)
2. Barman. P, (2021). *Deshbhag- Deshtyag: Prasanga Uttarpurba Bharat*. Kolkata: Gangchil.
3. Bhattacharjee, N. K., & Das, D. (Ed.) (2005). *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books.
4. Bhattacharya, A. (2012). "The Chronicle of Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 2012)
5. Chakravorty, S. (2012). "Of Human Bonding". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 2007)
6. Choudhury, A. (2012). "Fire". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 1994)
7. Choudhury, A.D. (2012). "Wake Up Call". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 2011)
8. Choudhury, B. (2012). "Food Giver". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 2003)
9. Dey, M. K. (2012). "Ashraf Ali's Homeland". In N.K. Bhattacharjee. & D. Das, (Ed.), *Barbed Wire Fence; Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. (Original work published 1987)
10. Herzog, B. (2018). "Invisibilization and silencing as an ethical and sociological challenge". *Social Epistemology*, 32(1), 13-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1383529>
11. Honneth, A., & Margalit, A. (2001). "Recognition". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 75, 111-139. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4107035>
12. Jejeebhoy, S. J., & Sather, Z. A. (2001). "Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region". *Population and Development Review*, 27(4), 687-712
13. Mehra, R. (1997). "Women, Empowerment, and Economic Development". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 554, 136-149. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1049571>
14. Mishra, N.K., Tripathi, T. (2011). "Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(11). Retrieved From <https://www.epw.in/journal/2011/11/special-articles/conceptualising-womens-agency-autonomy-and-empowerment.html> (Accessed on 10 December 2021)