

A Critical Reading of Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: A Partition Novel* in the context of a Modern Approach to 'Religion'

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Abstract--- Like the Reformation, Renaissance and Restoration in western world, the Partition of Indian subcontinent (1947) also bears as an event of great magnitude in South East Asia. The holocaust of Partition as an action-packed event still continues to haunt many direct or indirect victims of it and to many historians, authors, poets, novelists, short story writers, research scholars etc. and even many common people not only in India and Pakistan but also in abroad even after more than seven decades of the event. Along with the historical facts and records, the literary representation in the works of remarkable authors like Sadaat Hasan Manto, Amrita Pritam, Khuswant Singh, Jyotirmoyee Devi, Bhisham Sahni, Nisid Hajari etc., draw noteworthy attention to review the event more intelligibly which is found pertinent today. The socio-political-cultural and religious space of the cataclysmic event tends to heal the wounds of the traumatic Partition by offering a new literary paradigm called Partition Literature. The present paper seeks to deal with the ancient notion of "religion" from a modern approach and to discuss Partition of India as a thought-provoking outcome of the prevailing anachronistic approach to 'religion' instead of modern through Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning: a Partition novel*.

Keywords--- Indian subcontinent, modern, Partition, religion

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of Indian subcontinent is not a simple geographical Partition. It includes millions of massive migration, lakhs of deaths, murders, loots etc. Many houses were burnt, thousands of women were raped and lost their identity getting homeless due to serious outcomes of communal violence and religious antagonism. The furies, suspicions, and hatreds spread everywhere among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Nisid Hajari aptly sums up about its legacy at present context, "Nearly seventy years later, *Partition* has become a byword for horror. Instead of joining hands at their twinned births, India and Pakistan would be engulfed by some of the worst sectarian massacres the modern world has ever seen" (Hajari, xvi). Thus, the Partition of the subcontinent is very often considered as a great 'holocaust'. Many notable scholars- Beverly Milton Edward, Salman Rushdie, Gurpreet Mahajan, Paul R. Brass etc. agree with a basic concept - religion, ethnicity, clan and tribe etc stand at the foundation of ancient hatreds that symbolize the sacrificial behavior of modern secular ideals. Analyzing the rising conflicts and violence in this regard, Beverly Milton Edwards points out, "... the politics of ancient blood and nation, religion and ethnicity ... are a challenging and uncomfortable reminder that perhaps all is not well with the modern age. Perhaps the liberalization or abandonment of old taboos, norms and values and rites and

rituals does not necessarily bring us to a better place where violence is reduced or increasingly absent" (Edwards, 20-21).

In fact, there is no need of liberalization of old taboos, rites and rituals if everybody will be provided proper education in understanding the old taboos such as - "the existence of god", "creation of universe" etc. with the special help of scientific experiment and Darwin's theory of evolution. Due to lack of democratization of science and knowledge, the concept of "religion" still is being used in *less informed way* but *more in anachronistic sense*. Critiquing 'religion' as a problematic category, Brent Nongbri justifiably highlights one of the most crucial point:

The problem with using "religion" to talk about the ancient world is not anachronism. All of our concepts are modern and hence anachronistic when applied to the ancient world. The problem is that we so often suffer from a lack of awareness that we are being anachronistic. Informed and strategic deployment of anachronism, on the other hand, can have unexpected and thought-provoking results (Nongbri, 158).

As per Nongbri's analysis, the cataclysmic event, Partition of India in 1947 is also an appropriate example of unexpected, thought-provoking result of "informed and strategic deployment of anachronism" instead of modern intelligence. Jyotirmoyee Devi points out some crucial questions foregrounding Partition which seems much relevant even today while the world of intelligentsia as well

as common men engage themselves actively to study and discuss partition.

II. THE RIVER CHURNING: A PARTITION NOVEL

Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* as a post-trauma growth novel, it provides sufficient grounds to its readers to rethink and re-evaluate the historical, socio-political, religious and cultural aspect of Indian society prior to, during and after the Partition holocaust. Sutara, the protagonist got appointment as a lecturer in History at Hastinapur, Jajnyaseni Womens' college, Delhi almost after a decade of the holocaust. In her flashback memory, Sutara recalls that night in 1946 which shattered her familial world and transformed her identity from a simple, innocent teen aged, matriculate village girl to a sensible personality, a lecturer through massive pain and struggle designating her as a social outcaste. Her continuous migration from a neighboring village of Bamunpara of East Bengal to her brother's custody in Calcutta (West Bengal) and subsequently to a missionary school hostel and then to a college hostel and finally her appointment in Delhi portrays her tragic struggle as a survivor of Partition. The author describes, "The more Sutara studied, the more she wondered- why did things happen the way they did?" (Devi, 77) She could imagine the bitter truth that being socially ostracized twice by "the other community" as well as by her own community, she would never have a home of her own. She lived in an unfamiliar environment accommodating herself among the people of mixed identity, the partition survivors in Delhi. Devi as an early modern feminist writer championing the concept of modern 'New Woman' shares her opinion in the context of Partition thus: "Women these days were educated. Since, there was nobody to support them, these Yajnasenis were forced to fend for themselves. Molested, without shelter, money or power, they were victims of Partition. Some of the teachers and professors too, belonged to that category. Some were from Punjab, some from the South... a few Bengalis" (Devi, 69). As the days passed by, the matured Sutara becomes more submissive in expressing the extreme painful story rather she tries to find out more victims like her as ammunitions for her existence. In course of her post-traumatic growth in an unfamiliar environment among other victims, the grown up Sutara wanted to discover some answers, "Had they experienced the same kind of humiliation? Did they also leave their own people behind including the abducted, helpless women?" (Devi, 74). The author critically points out, the Hindus worship women as some kind of "devi" (goddess), so how could they get indulge in collective torture of women in reality. Is it only because of their attitude of hatred towards "otherness" or they might have done so getting influenced by their so-called holy

scriptures? Devi assures her readers that of course there is no doubt that Hindu mythologies contain many instances of barbarism of patriarchal society about humiliation of women since ages. The sensible Sutara focuses her attention in finding out answers of many core questions related to the barbarous event that include - "Whose fault was it? Who was actually to blame? Why did it happen? And for what? . . . Were the Hindus at fault or the Muslims? What was the use of all this now? After all, each side had received a share of the spoils so why rake up the past?" (Devi, 68)

Through all such questions, the author tries to make a brief assessment of the cataclysmic event Partition and prepares her readers to rethink about the past and somehow intends to guide the next generations not to rake up the past which is all about many more sorts of losses- lives, properties, language, culture and above all humanity in inhumane way.

III. BURDEN OF PARTITION IN SUTARA'S LIFE:

The River Churning seems auto- biographical to many extent as the widowhood makes Jyotirmoyee Devi alone, so also Sutara as a victim of violence of Partition, experiences the burden of 'solitude'. Although Sutara finally came across an eligible candidate, Promode for her marriage but it remains a suspense in the novel whether she got married or not. The institution of marriage is found as a burden for Partition victims like Sutara, Pramod, Sailen, Ajoy in *The River Churning* and many others like Damayanti in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*. Butalia says besides religious discriminations, acute gender discrimination prevails there in the name of protecting honour of family and community. Untimely pilgrimage in Sutara's life is another burden of Partition.

Devi concentrates on the future of violent Partition. Promode in course of their discussion raised the point, "I wonder, what ideal would this nation live by?" (Devi, 119). Samar although was not a direct victim of Partition, but he put a relevant point referring to King Solomon's story from Hebrew Bible. Highlighting the misery of millions, Samar said, "This reminds me of the story of Solomon who ordered a child to be cut in two" (Devi, 119). Ajoy responded immediately, "Yes, but the real mother did not agree to this. She couldn't. In this case the butchered people had no parents" (Devi, 119). Sailen reacted sensibly, "But Gandhiji didn't want Partition". Samar responded to Sailen with a smile, "But he accepted it" (Devi, 119). However, in spite of his strong opposition of vivisection of the land, it was made possible. By that time, no way was left for him to check it. In fact Gandhi himself was subjected to a victim of the long process of violence agenda relating to Partition and was targeted for killing four times in pre-partitioned India and twice in post-partitioned India. According to S. R.

Praveen's data, out of those six attempts, the final assassin, Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic was involved in three including his last attempts on 31st January, 1948.

It is observed that there seems no boundary to check the communal violence because it lives in the very distorted psychology of human mind. For example: Jonathan D. Greenberg writes, "echoing Godse in word and deed"(Greenberg,93) Yigal Amir, a Jewish religious militant, a law student assassinated Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli Prime Minister on 4 November, 1995 in order to prevent Rabin's Labor government's peace initiative through Oslo accords between govt. of Israel and Palestine.

IV. GANDHI'S UNCRITICAL ROLE IN 'POLITICIZING' RELIGION

By the time of Partition, communal tension had already reached at its peak on Direct Action Day on 16th August, 1946 and the seeds of communal poison were already sown in many ways much before the decision of Partition. On the one hand, many Hindu political leaders like Gandhi, Savarkar and some Hindu fundamentalists organizations (Hindu Maha Sabha, RSS etc.) and their very strategies of works to attract huge masses; on the other, many Muslim political leaders like Shaikat Ali, Mohammad Ali Jauhar, Mahammad Ali Jinnah etc., and their respective strategies to attract many Muslims and others played a significant role in politicizing 'religion'. According to Gail Minault, the Ali brothers too prepared the ground to blend religion with politics, getting influenced by Gandhi's speech, "Politics cannot be divorced from religion" (Minault, 56). The Ali brothers got ammunition in the same line to attract Muslim masses like Gandhi who could attract Hindu as well as Muslim masses using 'religion' as a major tool of organizing masses. Dilip Hero writes in his seminal work, *The Longest August: The Unflinching rivalry between India and Pakistan* that Gandhi drew much of his nationalist inspiration from the traditional myths, beliefs, and symbols of Hinduism. Moreover, Hero claims in his work *The Timeline History of India*, Gandhi once explained, "My bent is not political but religious. And I take part in politics because I feel there is no department of life that can be divorced from religion"(Hero,256).

However, Gandhi's religious bent of mind was not communal as it was in the part of other leaders like Savarkar and Patel etc. According to Jaswant Singh, when Jinnah advised Gandhi "not to encourage fanaticism of Muslim religious leaders and their followers" especially for his way of encouragement for the leaders of Khilafat movement, Gandhi spurned his advice. It was due to his lack of critical thinking on the aftereffects of politicization of 'religion' and due to his religious biasness towards Hinduism, his strategy of non-violence made some

frontline political leaders (like Jinnah and Subhas Chandra Bose) dissatisfied. Jinnah who once called by Gopal Krishna Gokhale as an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity in 1920s in his early political career turned into a communalist by 1940s and hence remained far away from his advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity and Subhas Chandra Bose started his journey as per his own heroic method.

V. SHIBDAS GHOSH'S PERCEPTION OF GANDHI

Shibdas Ghosh, an Indian communist politician, compares Gandhi in the chapter, "Cultural Movements in India and our Task" with an affectionate, superstitious mother indulged in rigorous fasting, worshipping god to cure her sick child, 'colonial India'. According to Ghosh, Gandhi was not class conscious, as a result, his activities supported massively to Indian capitalist class to grow massively and hence he was supported by them in every way. Moreover, his ideology was a fusion of religion, Indian traditionalism, the bourgeoisie humanist thoughts and ideas that couldn't help Gandhi to understand the flow of 'religious nationalism' trend in pre-partitioned India.

However, irrespective of any class approach, Gandhi was considered more a humane human being than a politician. Moreover, it is truly observed that without pressure of WWII on British and without the absence of Indian extremists' movement, it would not have been so easier to gain independence from British only through the 'non-violence' principle of Gandhi. Shibdas Ghosh critiques rightly on Gandhi, despite of all his efforts to do good to the people of the country, the mission of a people's democracy seems a failure project in India without a strong secular root. As a result the world's largest democracy struggles a lot to exist in a dignified way and thus seems fragile in many ways.

VI. CONCLUSION

The turbulent chapter of Partition of India still remains as a curious topic for many. There is still found a huge gap in filling up the reasonableness of the event if it is not considered as an event happened in the background of *anachronistic* approach to 'religion' instead of *modern* in modern context. The way Partition and its terrible consequences took place was due to the simultaneous antagonism among three sects- the colonial power(Christian) and their subjects (Hindus and Muslims). It seems true to many extent, when political, economic and emotional exploitation coincide, grieves become immeasurable. Recalling Omar Khayyam (a Persian philosopher and poet), Jyotirmoyee Devi states human desires through the innocent child character, Moinu, the silent observer of Partition as:

Fools! What you want is no where to be found

What does man crave? What is his desire? (Devi,105)

Devi intends to point out a crucial question-What is the ultimate outcome of Partition at the cost of valuable human lives, love, trust, and honor ? Partition of a land is possible but partition of humanity in order to preserve some kinds of traditional privileges on the basis of some taboo subjects-race, religion, gender, politics, culture, language etc. should be viewed seriously and sensibly as avoidable. The influence of such peculiar thoughts have already been proved as failure in many ways in order to provide strenuous support for the lasting impact of modern cosmopolitan society from a modern, secular, humanitarian point of view.

However, in order to avoid any thought-provoking results and wars related to religion - Partition of India in 1947, 9/11 attack in USA and recent Palestinian-Israeli violence of 11days in May, 2021 etc., the complete abolition of *ancient influence of religion* both in *thought* and *practice* can be imagined as the only possible way for a better living and better creative possibilities in modern heterogeneous society on which Karl Marx too emphasizes, "The abolition of religion as illusory happiness[. . .] is a demand for their real happiness"(Edwards,29).

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