

Partition and Violence: Through Changing Political Scenarios Women Remain the Target

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The British colonizers left India in 1947, after almost two hundred years of exploitation and oppression. But before they left the country, they did a permanent damage to the geographical as well as emotional mappings of the nation. They divided former India into two parts on the basis of religion. As a consequence, the Hindus who were the residents of East Pakistan had to forcefully migrate to India. On their way of exodus, they had to undergo severe physical and emotional tortures at the hands of the rioters. These are the issues that have been discussed so many times on so many occasions. In this paper I intend to focus on a particular aspect of the offspring of the partition—the tortures done to women and the attitude of the society regarding those rape victims. Prafulla Roy's novels *Keyapatar Nouko (The Boat of Keya Leaves)* and its sequel *Satodharay Boye Jay (Flowing in Hundred Streams)* mostly focus on the sufferings that a girl had to endure both from her relatives and the society after she was raped by some brutal rioters. This paper also intends to probe into the parameters that led to such ruthless behavior by otherwise affectionate and loving elders of the families.

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Before the British left their almost two hundred years old colony India, communal riots spread here. The age-old relation between Hindus and Muslims, who were till then neighbors, was undergoing a drastic change. Now there was lying disbelief, hatred, and severe enmity between the two communities. Under such situation partition of India into India and Pakistan took place. As a result the Hindus residing in East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) had to undergo forceful migration to India. And that migration too was not a safe and peaceful one—the migrants had to make their passage secretly to save their lives from the rioters. Now if we are talking about the partition of the former India into India and East and West Pakistan, in my opinion, the major portion of the concerned literature belongs to the books written in Bengali. And I have chosen two of them, *Keyapatar Nouko* or *The Boat of Keya Leaves* and its sequel *Satodharay Boye Jay* or *Flows in Hundred Streams* (translations mine) written by Prafulla Roy for my paper. The first book of the series, *The Boat of KeyaLeaves*, consists of three parts.

The first part depicts the picture of Purba Bangla before the partition when it was an enchanting landscape of nature. The relation among people living here was friendly. Hindus and Musllims were living together peacefully, like the neighbours where there were quarrels and differences of opinions, but no bitter feeling or intensified hatred entered into the minds of the two communities. This is the backdrop in which Binu, the

leading character of the novel, grows up in a village of Purba Bangla called Rajdia. And then comes the Second World War to change everything.

The second part of the novel relates the aftereffect of the British leaving their colony of almost two hundred years. But before they left, the communal riot between the Hindus and Muslims broke out. The long-cherished love-hate relation between the two communities was torn apart rapidly. What existed between them now were only hatred, disbelief, and sere enmity. And the result was enormous bloodshed, endless killing and brutal rapes.

In the third part the riot ultimately comes to affect the lives of the major characters of the novel, especially Binu and his beloved girl Jhinuk. Jhinuk goes to Dhaka and falls a victim of the riot there. The rioters keep her captive for 14 days with repeated rape until Hemnath rescues the extremely terrified girl. She does not want to stay at East Pakistan anymore. So Binu starts his exodus along with Jhinuk from Rajdia to Kolkata, which is not at all a smooth one. The novelist gives a vivid description of the dangers and the like of him had to undergo during their journey. And the most interesting thing is that, the struggle does not end with their reaching Kolkata safely. Now a new fight begins. The unequal fight of a raped girl with the society in the form of their own near and dear ones who think that a raped girl can never regain her former places among them. After repeated rejection and insult, Jhinuk silently flees away from the life of Binu as well as of others. The sequel, *Flows in Hundred Streams*, is the depiction of Binu's search for Jhinuk and the consequent findings which are equally, and sometimes even more heart-wrenching. Within the sphere of this paper I intend to concentrate upon the tortures done on women during the riot and the migration and the role the society played to make the lives of such women even more miserable. So I am going into the details of the pictures of the effects of the riot in general as has been depicted within the novels.

The talk about the women tortured and raped during the partition, as has been depicted within these two novels, must begin with the story of Jhinuk. It took two years after the partition for Rajdia to be affected by the ongoing violence. Under such circumstances Bhabatosh, Jhinuk's father, took her to Dhaka to meet her dying mother where the violence broke out much earlier and was still continuing in its full fledge. He promised to return within three to four days. But when 16 to 17 days passed and they did not return, Hemnath, Binu's grandfather, went to Dhaka to find them out. When he returned along with Jhinuk, the others in the family were shocked to see her in such condition. Each part of her body was bearing the signs of the brutal torture done upon her. She was looking bewildered. In Dhaka they fell within an ongoing violence/riot. Bhabatosh was killed. Jhinuk was captivated in a house and repeatedly raped mercilessly for 14 days until Hemnath rescued her with the help of the police. The worst effect of the incident was that Jhinuk was completely mentally shattered. She was extremely terrified. She was neither eating nor sleeping for a couple of days. She was not even uttering a single word. When she came in a condition to speak, she said that she did not want to stay in EastPakistan anymore. She was feeling insecure all the time there. So Hemnath decided to send her to Kolkata with Binu.

The next incident that deserves mention is that of Neelam. Neelam is a rape victim during the communal riot at the west part of the country, i.e., West Pakistan. Binu finds the story in a newspaper published from Delhi. Neelam lived in a colony in Lahore where people from different communities lived side by side. In 1947 a few days before the independence, one night the violent/furious murderers broke through the colony. Along with killing people and setting fire to the houses of especially Hindus and Sikhs, they took away 25 to 30 young

women with them. Neelam was one of them. The other members of her family somehow managed to escape. Later, when the riot was under control by the militaries, her family tried hard to find her out, but with no result. The family was shattered in grief of their lost daughter. Not only her family, there was another young man who was extremely depressed at her missing—Suresh. Suresh and Neelam lived in the same colony and were in love with each other. After the mishap Neelam's family along with Suresh and so many other families of the colony came to Delhi as refugees and were given shelter in relief camps and later shifted to a refugee colony. However, later Neelam was rescued from Lahore and was sent to Delhi. But when the news of her rescue was received by the family, her family denied to accept her. The reason was very clear—if they accepted their raped daughter into the family, what the society would say? It was the question of the honour of the family. But Neelam's fate was different from that of the others like her. She had Suresh in her life. He went to the home where Neelam was staying and released her from there. He had the courage to go against the red eyes of the society and marry the girl he loved, no matter she was raped or what. This particular part of the story, Suresh's marrying Neelam, is very relevant for the argument of the present paper to which I would come back later.

Another story of torture on women that has been related into the novel is that of Dipali. She was living with her family in Kumilla, East Pakistan. One night she was looted by the loompen son of the local Muslim League leader. Their colony was attacked. The rioters set fire on the houses and the people of the colony were scattered. Later, after much effort Madhusudan, Dipali's father, could find his wife and son. But no trace of Dipali was found. Then the family moved to India leaving her untraced in East Pakistan. But the bereaved parents could never forget their lost daughter. Her mother has gone almost mad after crying for Dipali.

Last of all there is another group of refugee women who were not raped during the riot, but had to end up in brothels because of circumstances. One such woman is Chhaya, the daughter of the old Ramratan Ganguly whose family was travelling with Binu in the same steamer and then in the same train. The old man died on the way. The family consisting of four ladies reached India in a completely helpless condition. One of their relatives gave shelter to them, but that was not a lasting one. Finding no other way to support the family, Chhaya had to end up in a brothel.

Now I would like to present before you the picture of how the migrant ladies were harassed even by some of the Pakistani officers at the border. According to rules, the people who intended to migrate from East Pakistan to India could carry no money or any other valuable things. So they had to undergo a thorough searching both of their belongings as well as their body by the officers at the border, be it man or woman. Taking the advantage of the rule, some of the dirty-minded Pakistani officers molested the young women publicly. They did not pay any heed to the requests of the lady herself or of her family. One such incident has been mentioned within the novel that happened right before the eyes of Binu and he could do nothing except watching helplessly.

Now let's have a look at the approach of the society towards the surviving rape victims of the riot that made their life more miserable, as has been portrayed by the novelist. After reaching Sealdah, Binu and Jhinuk come to Suniti's (Binu's eldest sister) in-law's house. On their arrival Hemnolini, Suniti's mother-in-law and the all-in-all of the house, welcomes them but refuses the *pronam* from Jhinuk. Actually she wanted to avoid her touch. The touch of a raped girl would make her unholy. Jhinuk was allotted a room on the ground floor along with a maid servant, though the other members of the family and the other guest Binu were placed on the first floor. She says directly to Jhinuk,

See, now I want to say you something that would hurt you, but I can't help it. I have heard that you fell into the riot in Dhaka, and the gundas (hooligans) captivated you for a number of days. I felt so sad hearing the news. I know you are absolutely innocent. But I am an old lady, bound with the prejudices of the old days. (Roy, 2003, pp. 503-504)

Then she said, "the few days you are staying here, you'll stay at the room on the ground floor. We have our idol on the first floor. So it's better you won't enter the first floor" (Roy, 2003, pp. 503-504) (translation mine). Binu is shocked to hear this. He could not even imagine that such a blow can come, and that too from the close relatives. Jhinuk is so upset that she cries relentlessly. Then she refuses to stay at the house of Hemnolini and asks Binu to take her from there. Once again Jhinuk becomes a refugee, with no mental shelter for her.

When Abanimohon, Binu's father, returns from pilgrimage, Binu and Jhinuk go to stay at his house. Abanimohon accepts Jhinuk's *pronam* and provides them hospitality. Jhinuk is not untouchable to him. This encourages Binu to hope for something good. But then he talks to Binu separately and asks him about his future plan with Jhinuk. He reminds him that if he marries her, the relatives would leave/desert/cast them off. He then asks Binu whether he at all has the courage to marry such a girl. Then he suggests sending Jhinuk to the home built by the government for such wretched girls. Hearing this Jhinuk leaves the house at once without saying a word to anyone, not even meeting Binu. Much same kind of attitude is expressed by another old man Ramkesaba. He says to Binu that the missing of Jhinuk is a kind of blessing in disguise for him. What would he do with such a girl? Neither could he have left her, nor could he accept her as his wedded wife. Binu felt deeply hurt to hear it from such a near relative.

Neelam's story is also almost similar. Her own family denied having her back into the family because of the prejudices of the society. The topsy-turvy in the lives of people during the partition could not change such meaningless prejudices. The belief that accepting a girl who has lost her virginity is a deadly sin is a deep-rooted one. The Rajinders have no escape/relevance from such belief. The only bright exception is Suresh.

The reaction of Dipali's family is even more shocking. The father laments to Binu,

My daughter wasn't found. It's a kind of blessing. What would I do with her if she were found? She couldn't be married. Nobody would receive/accept even a glass of water from our family. We would have lost the honour of the family. It is not right to wish the death of one's own child. But now I am praying to God relentlessly that the girl might die— (Roy, 2008, p. 104) (translation mine)

And even more surprising is their reaction when they hear of Dipali's marriage to Rafikul Islam, a Muslim young man. The marriage resulted from their mutual love. So it could be hoped that Dipali is going to lead a happy life hereafter, after experiencing so much sufferings in her former life. So it could be, rather should have been a good news to her parents. But the reality is just the opposite. Her parents are more shocked than ever. To them, the occurrence of the marriage has ruined the piety earned by their ancestors. Earlier her mother was crying relentlessly for the lost daughter. But the current news is so disturbing that she even tries to commit suicide. Isn't it a kind of selfish thought? How can the so-called honour of the family be prioritized over the well-being of the own daughter? If this is the attitude of the parents, then how the outsiders like Hemnolini, Ramkesab, and others be criticized?

Now I would like to indicate to some contradictions, especially regarding Binu's viewpoint regarding these issues. Abanimohon raises a very pertinent question related to the future of Jhinuk and Binu, "If you marry her, the problem might be solved. But then the relatives would forsake/desert you. Besides, do you have

the courage to marry such a raped girl?" (Roy, 2003, p. 622) (translation mine). Binu has no answer to it. His reaction to the question, as the novelist has narrated, is:

It seemed to Binu that the world around him is falling down. Only he knows that within what terrible situation he has taken Jhinuk across the border from the bitter atmosphere of East Bengal. But Abanimohon has made him stand before the most difficult, most crucial situation. Embarrassed, confused Binu couldn't think what to answer. (Roy, 2003, p. 623) (translation mine)

Here I would ask the audience/readers to note the use of the two words "embarrassed" and "confused". Later we see that Binu is annoyed with his father for his approach towards Jhinuk to the extent that he refuses the money his father wished to give him for his future. When Ramkesab hints at almost the same question, Binu's reaction too is almost the same. He leaves their house at once and decides never to go there again. He thinks that all the old people are the same—Hemnolini, Abanimohon, Ramkesab—entangled within the same age-old prejudices. But what he misses is to analyze his own mind. Though not old, is he not entwined with the same prejudices? If not, then why couldn't he answer Abanimohon in positive? Why couldn't he declare clearly that he would marry Jhinuk? Immediately after the missing of Jhinuk, we find Abanimohon repentant for his words. But Binu is still not realizing his own responsibility regarding the issue. May be, it was not the words of his father but Binu's silence that hurt Jhinuk the most.

Binu's reaction to the incident of Dipali's marriage also gives scope for questions. It seems he is sympathetic to her family, sharing with them their view that Dipali has invited damnation to the family by marrying a Muslim. We never see him to consider the issue from Dipali's point of view. He never thinks that even she has every right to be happy in her life. He never says or even thinks even once that the marriage is much better than her previous condition. Does it mean that Binu too is entwined with the prejudices of the society which is leading him to feel sympathy for Dipali's family preferring her death rather than for the wretched girl? If so, then does he have the right to criticize the other people like Hemnolini, Abanimohon, or Ramkesab? Or is it the fact that the questions raised by these people instigate, though indirectly, to stand him before the mirror that makes him so furious against them? Perhaps so, as later we see him repenting for his lack of courage after he comes to learn about the story of Neelam and Suresh. Suresh was the eye-opener for him. But then it was too late. By now, the wretched girl has made herself lost forever, taking upon herself all the burdens of something for which she was not at all responsible.

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