

Mapping the Affliction of Refugees of Partition in Bengal: A Study of Salil Sen's *The New Jews*

Krishna Bera

(M.Phil. Scholar, University of Calcutta)

Email: krishnabera88@gmail.com

Abstract

The division of the Indian subcontinent resulted with uninhibited bloodshed, loss of human lives, homelessness of people, communal riots, loss of material wealth, and distress of womenfolk and so on. Partition literature vividly portrays the plight of people. A detailed research establishes that people who were uprooted from their own homeland had to accommodate themselves in an entirely new environment or locality. The dislocation of these people is analogous of the Jews of 8th Century BCE. After being uprooted from their own native land, they were bound to spend days in the Sealdah Railway Station and on the streets of Calcutta. They were doubly traumatised- first, being splayed from their own land, and secondly, being duped in a new city by those who were prerogative of their own places. The after-Partition Bengal also witnessed degenerated humanity, the tricking lineament of the citizens of Calcutta. The agony and struggle of those displaced people has been portrayed in a number of novels, short stories and plays.

Key Words: Partition; Bengal; Refugees; Uprooted; *The New Jews*.

Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent is the most unwanted and unexpected incident that resulted with uninhibited consequences of

communal violence, bloodshed, loss of lives of hundreds of thousands of common people, loss of home, afflicted condition of women and so on. The Partition acted heavily on the socio-cultural set up of the country, dissembling the normal course of life of common people, making them uprooted and homeless from their own places. They were bound to leave their land and make a new 'home' in a new place unknown to them. In an article while reviewing Gyanendra Pandey's book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Tony Ballantyne writes, "...Massive chains of migrants moved east and west and minority communities were increasingly anxious for their property and lives. Old patterns of cultural accommodation and co-existence became increasingly precarious and violence erupted in villages, towns and cities across north India. Abduction, sexual violence, murder and forced migration became tools through which community identities and national allegiances were tested and ultimately defined..." (Tony, p.197)

The Partition was not a momentary event in the history of India; rather its consequences came out to cast a disastrous effect on the lives of the people, especially to those belonging to the marginal areas. Accordingly it was seen that the elementary lifestyle of

common people, their moral values, trust of people on one another- all were replaced by falseness, mentality to deceive the decrepit and above all, the frantic attempt of those uprooted people to affirm their own existence by struggling in a completely alien environment. Mushirul Hasan comments, "One of the most unexpected and tragic consequences of the political decision to divide the Indian subcontinent was that millions of people were forced to leave their homes, their bastis, their *desh*, their *watan*, and undertake a difficult and sorrowful journey, often against their desires and better instincts, to cities and villages whose names and images had rarely ever before drifted across the boundaries of their affective realms. A majority of the migrants were ordinary Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs who were more concerned with the problems of survival in their daily lives than with their religious identities." (Hasan p. 4)

Formation of a man's identity

A man lives in a community. He is born and grown up in vicinity, adapting himself with his surrounding orbit. Gradually he begins to esteem his native land to be his mother, as his existence or individuality is shaped by assimilating the social, economic, cultural, religious prospects of his native land. This outlook was, however, consumed in ancient India. They believed in '*Janani Janmabhūmishā Swargadāpi Gariyasi*'- Mother and the Motherland are loftier than the Heaven. So, when a man, being uprooted from his own aboriginal area is forced to live in a place completely unknown to him, he feels awfully helpless as both his identity and social security suffers from a jeopardized ham. The

Partition was such a reality with its cataclysmic consequences. Meghna Guha Thakurta, in her essay entitled *Uprooted and Divided* observes that the "...Partition compelled divided or migrant families, whether of Hindu or Muslim origin, to render different orientations in their resources base: whether land-based or service-oriented, or located near or linked to a mega city like Calcutta. Likewise, individuals within families speak with many voices given their resource base, life skills, age and gender. Questions of migration and mobility not only link up to the events of Partition but also to the quest for education, employment and the sustenance or breaking-up of marital and kinship ties." (Trauma and the Triumph, p.112)

Partition literature in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and English vividly portrays the holocaust and aftermath of the Partition that included unemployment, homelessness, communal violence, bloodshed, plight of women of the dislocated people. Bengali compositions also depict the consequences of the Partition in an elaborate manner. Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (translated as *The River Churning*), Atin Bandopadhyay's trilogy *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje*, *Aloukik Jalojan*, *Ishwarer Bagan*, Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel *Poorba-Paschim*, Manabendra Bandopadhyay's short story collection *Bhed-Bibhed*- all impersonate the plight of the people that followed in the after-Partition Bengal. Salil Sen's play *Natun Yehudi* (translated as *The New Jews*) became a great success in the 1950s. It brings into light the agony of dislocated and uprooted people of a Hindu family that was compelled to leave their own land as well as their home and take

shelter in the Sealdah Station after the heydays of the Partition. Jasodhara Bagchi comments about their condition, “The pull at home, however, was one of being uprooted, loss of dignity and honour. Families huddled together on Sealdah Station platform and the streets of Calcutta. The sense of being uprooted had overtaken the psyche of Bengal. A little pressure here and there and the sense of pain gushed out.” (Trauma and the Triumph, p.17)

Division of Bengal

The segmentation of the Indian subcontinent led to the creation of the Dominion of Pakistan and the Republic of India. Later on the Bengal province was divided into East Pakistan or Bangladesh and West Bengal. A huge number of people were compelled to migrate from their own homeland due to this event. Joya Chatterjee records that “The new state of West Bengal contained a population of 21 million, of whom approximately 25 per cent, or 5.3 million, were Muslims...Conversely, in East Bengal’s population of 39 million, there were 11 million Hindus.” (Chatterjee 107) The dissemination of people after the Partition of India corresponds to the dispersion of the Israelites from their own homeland, being uprooted and separated from their *janmabhumi* and their own community during the 8th century BCE. Here, the title of the play *Natun Yehudi* anticipates the agony and torment that the ‘New Jews’ will confront during the course of the play.

Present condition of a dislocated family

The setting of Scene II overtly presents a picture of a deracinated family- “Calcutta, part of the Sealdah Station. A piece of cloth has

been hung, in order to create something like two rooms. The Brahmin family has taken shelter in order to create something like two rooms...” At present this is the status of the ‘home’ of dislocated ‘Panditmashai’, Manomohan Bhattacharjee, “head of the upper Brahmin family who was school teacher in East Bengal.” The once settled and felicitous family of a Hindu school teacher is just destroyed; presently he has somehow been successful to occupy a corner in a Railway station, thronged by uprooted people like him. They are staying there for eight days with a frenetic search for a home - a single room that will provide them with security, dignity and therefore, relief from being intimidated by volunteers. The strain of being settled is heard in the voice of Annapurna, the woman of the family- “After we have found a home and settled down a bit...” Ascertaining a home amidst such a calamity is their primary solace.

Frantic Search for a home

But finding a home in a new and unknown city like Calcutta, where thousands of homeless people are in search of the same, is nothing but a miracle. As the play progresses, the reader gets to know that Kestodas, the “Namasudra peasant who was Monomohan’s tenant farmer” is in search of a land which he can use according to his own will. Kesto’s wife, Ashalata conveys the information to their master that Kesto happened to meet a man who “will sell him two bighas of land for three hundred rupees...” Mohan cannot understand how Kestodas can get access of such a land, because “In Calcutta, a katha of land costs five or six hundreds.” The audience has to realize the precision of Mohan’s words as Panditmashai brings news of a room which

“costs 100 rupees as ‘selami’ and twenty rupees a rent.”

Condition of young women

In addition to the moral degradation of common folk, the play focuses on the degenerated condition of women. The after-partition Bengal as well as India witnessed their vulnerable condition including abduction, rape, and coercion to marry the abductor, rejected by their own families to take them back to families and so on. The present play depicts Pari, the daughter of the Bhattacharjee family who has gone to take bath in the middle of a crowd. But she returns without bathing. She complains before her mother- “is it possible to take....I won’t bathe.” The mother also consoles her, “You won’t die if you don’t take a bath... come to this.” Pari’s condition shows the insecure position of women whose privacy is violated along with being dislocated.

Condition of women

Both Annapurna and Ashalata, Kestodas’s wife - the two housewives in the play represent the position of women in the family - those submissive, fragile, and uneducated and who have not the capacity to take a decision or nobody cares for their opinion. Ashalata complains that her husband has fallen victim to a swindle because he has not paid any attention to her words. Annapurna also expresses her discontent - “They have sold the house without telling me. I am an illiterate woman.” The women serve the family with dedication and cannot expect of the minimal attention from others, not even from her husband.

The Motherland has been regarded as the figure possessing enormous strength. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay offers his homage in the song *VandeMataram*. Rabindranath Tagore also eulogises the Mother in the following words-

A scimitar shines in your right hand,

And your left hand quells our fears,

Your eyes are tender and smiling,

But your third eye scorches and sears.

O mother, we cannot turn our eyes from you.

Your temple of gold has opened its doors to
ever enduring view.

(‘Aji Bangladesher Hriday Hote’

(Translated by Chandreyee Niyogi, *Trauma and the Triumph*, p.18)

Annapurna’s name itself reminds the audience of the myth where Devi Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, is giving alms to beggar Shiva. In this play, Annapurna, the lady of the family stands for Mother India, also the wretched condition of women of divided India. But she is a helpless mother and also chagrined as she cannot provide her daughter (at least) with the minimum requirement of an enclosed space for taking bath.

Conclusion

The Partition of India, as it has been said earlier was not a momentary incident; its tragic consequences appeared to be fatal in the lives of common masses. Hundreds of

thousands of people died instantly, but those who survived it in any way, life became unendurable to them. Several issues regarding their religious identity, the country to which they belonged actually, and of course, it became a special subject for women of both Hindu and Muslim community. *The New Jews* or *Natun Yehudi* thus became successful in depicting the atrocities faced by a Hindu Brahmin family in divided Bengal.

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