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Book Review

Victory Colony 1950 by Bhaswati Ghosh

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Reviewer

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Review of Bhaswati Ghosh's Novel *Victory Colony 1950*: Discovering the Transformed Role and Identity of the Migrated Bengali Women and its Impact on the Migrated Place

Abstract

Partition of India has left a permanent wound in the lives of the migrated people who had to leave their homeland to find themselves in a new place: geographically, socially and culturally. The scar has been transmitted directly and or indirectly from one generation to the next through personal accounts of the family members and or through memories in the form of objects. Partition of India has its different magnitude of outcome on the three pre independence states of India: Punjab, Sind and Bengal. Sind as a province remained in the newly formed Pakistan and the Hindu Sindhis migrated to India. The part of Punjab which was included in the Indian Territory only welcomed the Non-Muslim residents of Punjab. The partition of Bengal caused massive continuous arrival of migrated Bengalis from East Pakistan who were Hindus and unlike their counterparts of western border; they did not receive the assurance of rehabilitation. Bhaswati Ghosh's novel *Victory Colony 1950* is based on the aftermath of the partition of India on Bengal and Bengalis: It narrates the heart-breaking incidents that occurred in the lives of the migrated Hindu Bengalis which forced them to leave their homeland in East Pakistan. The novel describes the effects of their influx that had rattled the social-economic-cultural-political set up of West Bengal and while depicting that picture, it highlights specifically the role which the penniless refugee women played along with the men to achieve victory in setting up their own colony as well as in attaining their own path of independence. Simultaneously, it portrays another type of partition which existed in West Bengal in the form of *we* and *they* and gradually the manner through which very slowly the intermingling started to minimise this kind of differentiation though with severe resistance in certain areas of life.

Keywords

refugee camp, permanent liability, Partition, women and Victory Colony

There was a land - yours, mine, our forefathers'?
Some suddenly halved this land of love into two.

.....
None kept account of who perished and who survived.
Residents of Bikrampur landed on Gariahata crossing
Some came to Phultali from Burdwan,
Some fled to Howrah from Jessore,
From Netrokona to Ranaghat,
From Murshidabad to Mymensingh.

– Nasreen

Victory Colony 1950 is a partition novel which revolves around the lives of the rootless migrated refugees of Gariahata refugee camp situated in South Calcutta and the creation of victory colony by the young members of the same camp. As an integral part of the theme of the novel, the protagonists appear with their own life stories, despair and hope which are all intertwined to each other forming a long lasting impression on the reader. The novel commences with Amala Manna, a young girl from Barisal of East Pakistan who along with her younger brother Kartik had managed to escape the riot mongers of her village and has arrived at Sealdah railway station. They face the battle against hunger from the very beginning of their escape journey. Amala leaves her brother at the platform of the railway station in search of some food for him but to her dismay, she fails to manage a single slice of food despite having requested to so many sellers outside the station. When Amala returns back to the spot where she had left her brother she finally realises that she had lost her brother too amidst the chaos: “Before landing here, *melas* were the only place where she had seen so many people at once” (Ghosh 1). Amala’s encounter with this completely new city becomes further more unwelcoming as she faces some policemen who instead of asking her the reason of shouting which she was doing by calling Kartik’s name to find him, start making indecent comments towards her: “*Ei*, girl! Stop barking or you may have to give us a visit at the police station. Don’t mind that, do you?” The other constables guffawed and voiced their own suggestions: “Outside the police station too” (3). Her dreadful experience with this group of policemen has been cut short by the author through the introduction of a group of young volunteers of Gariahata Refugee Relief Centre lead by Manas Dutta who rescues Amala from the greedy eyes and paws of the policemen. In the book *Women and Borders: Refugees, Migrants and Communities* (2018), Emanuela C. Del Re has dealt elaborately with the topic of women’s engagement with European borders and while doing so, she has quoted an Amnesty International report that states that refugee women from Syria and Iraq face sexual harassment, violence, assault, discrimination “at every stage of their journey, including on European soil” (Del Re and Sekhawat 10). These policemen’s attitude towards Amala allows the reader to fathom the magnitude of the discriminatory remarks and the sexual harassment that the refugee women had to face after crossing the border between East Pakistan and West Bengal. Manas guides Amala to arrive at the Gariahata Refugee camp along with the other refugees from the station: all of whom along with Amala had received their refugee cards. This stamped card would finally identify Amala

as “refugee and entitle her to accommodation in a relief centre” (Ghosh 5). The mind-set of the government towards the refugees has been mirrored in the idea of establishing the camp for vaccination for the refugees as described in the novel as “After all, these people aren’t just ‘pests’ for the govt, but also the potential carriers of pests. They need to be immunised against cholera and other deadly diseases before they become immune to the more sinister jokes that await them” (4).

How does someone who once lived a free life in his or her own house during the pre-partition time finds the life of a refugee camp after the partition and the accomplishment of the official Independence? The reader could perceive the situation echoed in Amala’s feelings in the novel:

As her eyes wandered around the camp, another flash hit Amala - her father’s giant fish tank with fish of all different sizes and textures squabbling in water, desperate and powerless. That same scene played out before her now. Only people had replaced the fish - refugees scrambling to receive their daily dole of watery rice-lentil porridge. (9)

Through this passage, the author has very effectively provoked the reader of the novel to put herself in Amala’s position as one of the refugees. This Kafkaesque style of the author is unique as although the nightmarish model of Kafka is omnipresent in this context through Amala’s emotions, the notion of surrealistic nature of Kafkaesque style has been completely replaced by the cruel reality.

When the local and state administrations consider them as burden as “Calcutta seemed to be bursting” (11) with the flow of migrated Bengalis, Amala unknowingly resonates the thoughts of the refugees to the query of Manas on her past: “Everything is lost” (14). “They took away all of my family. Why not me? What good is it for me to be here, like a dead stone?” (15). The author has aptly portrayed here the farce of the life as a refugee: Migrating from East Pakistan to escape death and wishing for death in West Bengal.

Victory Colony 1950 through its initial chapters becomes the representation of helpless and ruined refugees who at the same time wished to go back to their lost homeland: Barisal, Khulna, Rajsahi in East Pakistan and were terribly haunted by the trauma and bloodshed caused by the riots in their villages. They knew that they would never return to their root but they were yet to find the ray of hope to start from the scratch in the new social set up. The reader realises that their trauma as well as their quest for that spark of hope was oscillating as between the question cited in the book *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*: “Where could we have gone leaving this [old] neem tree behind” (Pandey 15) and the emotion shared in the book *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: “Nita shob hariyeo baachbaar swapno dekhey”¹ (Rajguru 118). On the same note, the diplomatic activities between the central and the state government send shivers down the spine of the reader and crowd her mind with several questions that were bothering Manas too: “Why this abject lack of planning when it came to the settlement of

¹ The English translation of this sentence originally written in Bengali will be: Despite having lost everything, Neeta dreams of surviving.

the refugees from the east? What prompted feelers being sent to the state govt to restrict assisting these helpless people with only relief and no rehabilitation?” (Ghosh 43). The reduced quantity of allotted food along with the increasing influx of refugees has often caused outbursts of the camp members. Their anger based on the anticipation of receiving one additional spoon of Khichuri by another camp member forces the reader to juxtapose what hunger could possibly mean to a homeless and to those who have a permanent shelter: “fry a few *luchis* for Maanu. And make some *alu-phulkopi chhenchki* with it” (49).

The novel in the middle and final chapters throws light on the slowly transformed role of the refugee women in the Gariahata Refugee Camp with the introduction of sewing class. Amidst despair and agony, this initiative which was the brainchild of Manas Dutta gives them the much needed mental strength to attain self-confidence. In addition, along with men, some women get selected as leaders too to supervise the camp members. The seed to survive had been sown. As a result, when the shocking incident of rape of one of the camp women, Minoti, at Sealdah takes place whose innocent nature to trust everyone welcomes the hungry vultures which corroborates the reality of that uncertain time and finally when the appalling condition of health and sanitisation facility in the camp starts spreading life threatening diseases among the refugees residing in the camp, a bunch of young women in the Gariahata camp armed with the new found confidence decide along with the able bodied adult men to occupy a land of a local landlord near Shibpur: “They had set up a new colony by occupying a large tract of unused land some twenty kilometres away, near Shibpur. The land reportedly belonged to Niranjana Chowdhury, a local zamindar” (91). Their occupancy does not portray a smooth ride as the refugees face challenges from the landlord’s goons who vandalise the initial set ups of the refugees in their newly built colony. The system of landholding and the tax collection by the landlords which was introduced by Lord Cornwallis under his Permanent Settlement Act was abolished with the constitutional amendment act of 1951 in India and this incident mentioned in the novel very aptly depicts the social transformation of Bengal and in this context the diminishment of Niranjana Chowdhury’s supremacy has been possible with the combined power of refugee men and women who were till date considered only to be pitied. These refugee women consist of young widows, teenage girls, young mothers, sole girls. They are in the forefront to set up this new colony and are led by Amala whose courage has been infectious. Their fighting spirit reminds us of the short story *Sadak* from the book *Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals* where the author-cum-narrator’s friend says: “See...I can hear so many people marching, taking strong strides! And you laugh? Why not lend your ears...your ears! You talk too much” (Sengupta 15). They are also assisted by the Communist Party and some open-minded educated people of the society such as Dr Majumdar who opens a free clinic after being impressed by the enthusiasm and courage of the refugees of the colony in their battle to survive and settle. With the passage of time, the colony receives its name as Bijoy Nagar which is Victory Colony in English. They “registered for it to be entitled to the same legal and administrative as were granted to other areas under the city’s civic corporation” (Ghosh 96). The reader grasps the transformed role of the migrated women and girls from performing only the household chores into the role of working women to earn for their

family through certain passages of the novel, such as: “Amala didn’t realise how a month flew by after she, Bakul and Tara first started going to Purnima Mashimoni’s... shop-factory at the edge of the city. Purnima taught them a few commercial tailoring tricks distinguishing between different types of fabrics.... hand sewn and machine items” (158). Amala starts working in Jogajog tailors owned by the refugee couple: Jogen Halder and Purnima. Purnima’s main aim has been to employ predominantly the refugee women apart from men: the solidarity in the form of refugees helping the other refugees in post partition Bengal has been very intrinsically depicted in this novel through characters like Purnima, Jogenbabu and Amala. They receive whole-hearted support from people like Manas and Chitra mashi who are not refugees. When at one hand landlords like Niranjan Chowdhury are in sword hand on the refugees, young educated Bengalis like Manas who belongs to a landlord family volunteers in Gariahata Refugee Camp and nurtures feelings towards Amala: “The quiet strength in her eyes, her measured speech, the weight of her conviction - these were the things that drew him to her” (74).

The Ghoti-Bangaal rivalry that originated from the concept of Bengalis of East Bengal and those who have their root in West Bengal is another dominant social and cultural feature of post partition west Bengal where the refugees had to face discriminatory remarks and here too the novel has aptly portrayed this social dichotomy through his mother’s comments with Manas’s grandfather when Manas marries Amala without his family’s permission and comes to his house : “I could have no problem with that shudra girl staying in this house. Can’t believe I’m being this kind. But Baba, with all due respect to you, I won’t have that ugly Bangaal girl show up before people as Maanu’s wedded wife” (248). The novel draws attention of the reader to the eternal truth that love is the only bonding that could negate all the malice and all the social barriers which in this context culminates into a new social-economic-political-cultural identity. Thus Manas and Amala turn into representative of this new Bengali identity where Manas starts working as a school teacher leaving behind the financial comfort of his rich landlord family and settles down in a rented room with his wife Amala. It is through Manas’s school that Amala finally reunites with her lost brother Kartik and three of them stay together. Ultimately, Amala establishes her independence in the form of her new social, familial, economic and cultural identity.

Bhaswati Ghosh’s novel *Victory Colony 1950* triumphs the perseverance and resilience of human being which reciprocates in the form of victory in various aspects of the life of migrated Bengalis. Her novel highlights the victory of the migrated women which ultimately proves that the gender specific role of the people becomes useless in the face of the bitter reality: the reality which first and foremost teaches that one has to face with courage and fight against all sorts of unprecedented challenges that life throws towards them to survive, to earn and to have food and to achieve their goal to survive with dignity, people have to be united irrespective of gender. This unrelenting attitude of the migrated young women becomes one of the dominant features of the migrated place, i.e. West Bengal in this context. This in turn results in the gradual transformation of the concept of permanent liability to cooperative responsibility. The cooperation among various segments of the society to accept and welcome those who are different in their eyes creates the hope of the possibility of establishing a strong and balanced society.

When fiction mirrors reality through its lucid movement between flashback and reality, when it places the reader in the context of the characters and the era based on which it has been written and leads her to pause and reflect, it is a victory for the creator and the creation too. Thus, Bhaswati Ghosh's *Victory Colony 1950* could be termed as an ageless fiction that resonates reality more than the real eliminating the barriers of generation and time.

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