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Rajkahini And Politics Of The Radcliffe Lines

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Abstract:

Partition of India in 1947 and the drawing of the administrative lines of control: Radcliffe Lines which gave birth of two independent nationalities: the Republic of India and the Republic of Pakistan had its grim aftermath too especially in the border line localities of both the countries. This appeared massively in Indian literature written in English as well as in other languages like Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi and others, but a cinematic representation of the Partition has its special attraction for the viewers. And among all the Indian films based on the Partition of 1947, Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* (2015) is an exceptional filmic representation not because he has depicted the bleak and bloody history of the Partition, but because he has singularly represented the Partition and politics of the Radcliffe Lines on the backdrop of a whorehouse and the miserable lives of its eleven women inmates most of whom are in the flesh trade. The present paper proposes to find out some of these politics.

Keywords: Partition, Radcliffe Lines, Politics, *Rajkahini*.

Introduction:

'Time,' they had briefed him [Sir Cyril Radcliffe] in London, It's too late

For mutual reconciliation or rational debate:

The only solution now lies in separation.

. . . in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided.

A continent for better or worse divided.

(“Partition”, W.H. Auden 1966)

Partition of 1947, which made two independent nations, the Republic of India and the Republic of Pakistan and its violent aftermath has always been a popular theme for Indian film, especially since 1960s and onwards. Among the early Indian films that took up the circumstances of Independence, Partition and its aftermath as major themes include Nemaï Ghosh's *Chinnamul* (1950), *Dharmaputra* (1961), Ritwik Ghatak's trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962); among the later films, M.S. Sathya's *Garam Hava* (1973), and *Tamas* (1987) that was based on Bhisham Sahni's popular *hindi* novel, *Tamas* (1987) took up the plots that represented the violent consequences of Partition in both the new born Republican countries; and in the late 1990s and onwards this has also been an attractive theme for many Indian films such as Deepa Mehta's *Earth /1947 Earth* (1998), Pamela Rook's *Train to Pakistan* (1998), Kamal Haasan's self-written, directed and starred *Hey Ram* (2000), Anil Sharma's *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), Chandra Prakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* (2003), Vic Sarin's *Partition* (2007). The biopic films like *Gandhi* (1982), *Jinnah* (1998) and *Sardar* (1993) also significantly depicted the Independence and Partition of India as a major backdrop of their screenplays.

So, the list of the Indian films that depicted or represented Independence, Partition and its aftermath is really endless. And Srijit Mukherji's painful Bengali movie *Rajkahini* (2015) is a remarkable addition to this exhaustive list of Indian films showing Partition and its after effects as one major theme. Rather Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini*, which he has also made in *Hindi* as *Begum Jaan* in 2017, claims to have a special attraction of the viewers not because of its plot being based on Partition that "brings a dark phase of India's history back to life," (Upam Buzarbaruah 2016), nor even for its splendid visuals but, because the film has explored detailed 'minutia' of the lives of the eleven women residing in a brothel that has been bluntly divided into two parts as a result of the Partition and one of the Radcliffe Lines - the administrative Lines of Control erected between India and Pakistan immediately after Independence in 1947 - that passes through this brothel.

Perhaps, it is for this reason why the Times of India acclaimed Mukherji's *Rajkahini* as a special movie, while commenting on it:

"Not many Indian films have explored either the Partition or the goings-on inside a whorehouse to the fullest. Reason why Srijit Mukherji considers *Rajkahini* to be his most ambitious project till date" (Times of India, March 7, 2015).

Srijit's *Rajkahini*:

Delving into the grim history of the Partition of India, *Rajkahini* (2015) has been weaved around a border line between the two nations that runs through a brothel housing eleven women most of whom are in flesh trade. The brothel headed by Begum Jaan (starred by Rituparna Sengupta) is situated right in the middle of the then Debiganj and Haldibari districts of Bengal, which is the home and the world to eleven women and two men most of whom are involved in the profession of prostitution. Begum Jaan, a fierce and head strong woman,

is the matriarch of the brothel who takes care of the wellbeing of all the inmates of the house with no remorse. These women come from diverse backgrounds; they are of both upper and lower castes, of both Hindu and Muslim faith, “but most importantly, the connection and community they share comes from a shared history of past trauma and violence” (Rohini Banerjee 2016). They have been abandoned by their respective families and the communities. Now all they have is each other here in this brothel - their home and the world. Here they live with no differences of caste, creed and religion. They might have diverse socio-cultural backgrounds in the past; they might have differences in their faith on religion, but they live here in this house now together as a single entity. In such light, an International Partition does not have so much meaning to them as much of their struggle for existence. Government officials from both the Unions: India and East Pakistan meet Begum Jaan and tell her to evacuate her brothel along with all the inmates of the house as the Radcliffe Line which separates the two countries goes through Begum Jaan’s brothel. And they do not have any other choice but to leave the house. But, strangely enough, in spite of submitting herself to the messengers of the two Governments, Begum Jaan decides to fight her own battle along with her loving woman-soldiers and the other inmates of the brothel. She, rather, not being perturbed by the demands of the government representatives, simply laughs at them considering the drawing of the boundary lines by the governments as most ridiculous. She is neither concerned about Hindustan nor about Pakistan, her only concern is her business that is running very badly because of the partition and consequent riots, and the wellbeing of her people in the house. The government officials take every possible step for making Begum Jaan and her team to abandon the house. But she does not succumb herself to the adverse situation nor she is afraid of the red eyes of the government officials from both the countries. Rather, she determines to face her destiny by staying there firmly along with the other inmates at the brothel - her ‘home and the world’ to protect fiercely her own land and the people. Mukherji’s portrayal of Begum Jaan as a true existential figure here in this film is really praiseworthy. Meanwhile, the Nawab of Rangpur (starred by Rajatava Dutta) is relocating with his family and followers to West Bengal. While on the way he stays at Begum Jaan’s brothel for a night, Begum Jaan complains to him about Mr. Sen and Mr. Ilias, the two distinct government representatives respectively, to get them out of their own parties, and requests him to do something to save her brothel and the inmates. But, after visiting Delhi for the meeting of the rulers of the Princely States, he informs Begum that he is not an influential person anymore, and the Princely States have been integrated in the Indian Union, and the titles of Nawab are no more in existence. However, Begum Jaan does not lose her spirit and decides to fight her own combat. The faithful guard of the house, Salim then trains all the women of the house including Begum Jaan how to fight with guns to face their destiny fiercely. So, when the house is attacked in a night by the hooligans led by Kabir (starred by Jeeshu Sengupta) deputed by the two government representatives, and set fire to burn the house along with all its inmates, the women fight their battle with tooth and nail, without leaving their inner humility. At the end they decide that it is better to burn themselves to death in their blazing house than to submit themselves to the government forces. Srijit Mukherji’s dramatic presentation of the age-old fight of matriarchal *shakti* (energy) with the patriarchal forces in a new, though violent, way has a very special cinematic appeal here. This last scene conveys a lot of messages to the

viewers that patriarchal forces, however strong may be, become useless in front of matriarchal defiance forces; that the true sense of self-respect never succumbs to any forces; that a false sense of patriotism gains nothing; and, above all, a mere Line of Partition cannot uproot the people emotionally bonded together from their own land. It is for this reason, Upam Buzarbaruah, in a review of this movie in *Times of India* (April 20, 2016), commented: “Each frame [of the film] is pregnant with some emotion, each emotion rooted in some form of injustice, each injustice ultimately linked to a man-dominated world” (Upam Buzarbaruah, 2016).

The Crisis of Radcliffe Lines:

On 17th August 1947, two days after India got Independence, the award of Radcliffe Line was declared as the boundary demarking separation between the Republic of India and the Republic of Pakistan, following the Partition of India. The line was named after Sir Cyril Radcliffe who was appointed by Britain as the Chairman of the two Boundary Commissions then formed: one for Punjab and other for Bengal with a charge for equitably dividing approximately 175,000 square miles (450,000 km²) of territory with 88 million people (Read and Fisher, 1998).

Since the Partition of India was done on the basis of religious demographics, Muslim majority regions in the northwest part of India were to become part of Pakistan. Baluchistan and Sindh with a clear Muslim majority automatically became part of Pakistan. The challenge, however, lay in the two provinces of Punjab with 55.7% of Muslim population and Bengal with 54% of Muslim population. Eventually, the Western part of Punjab became part of West Pakistan and that of the Eastern part became part of India. The state of Bengal was also partitioned into East Bengal (a part of Pakistan) and West Bengal, which remained in India. Hence, it was decided by the British Parliament that a well-drawn line was required to demark the partition in these two provinces very clearly that would also reduce the separation of villages and farmers from their fields and which would at the same time minimize the number of people who would have to relocate after partition.

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who was appointed by the British Government as the Chairman of both the Boundary Commissions, arrived in India from Britain on 8th July, 1947 and was given five weeks to work on the border for drawing the line. When he visited to Lahore and Kolkata (then Calcutta) to meet the two Boundary Commissions, Jawaharlal Nehru and his team representing the Congress and Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his team representing the Muslim League, he was requested to complete the boundary line by 15th August 1947, so that the British might leave India in time. Strangely enough, the reason behind making the Border Lines in so haste remained somehow mystery as Sir Radcliffe did not want to disclose this; perhaps, this is why he “destroyed all his papers before he left India” for Britain (Chester, 2009). Though in haste, Sir Radcliffe also completed the boundary line a few days before Independence but due to certain political reasons, the Radcliffe Lines were only formally revealed to the surprise of the people of both the nations on 17th August 1947, just two days after Independence of India (Read and Fisher, 1998). Some, however, say that the date of declaration of the Radcliffe Line was intentionally deferred by Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India for he did not want

to hamper the joy of the people of both the new nations in their celebration of Independence (Read and Fisher 1998).

The Radcliffe lines evoke in the film several layers of politics:

- * Politics between the two newly born nations: Republic of India and the Republic of Pakistan
- * Communal politics of the two distinct communities: Hindu and Muslim as projected through the depiction of the two government officials, Mr. Ilias and Mr. Sen who, though childhood friends, now hate each other for nothing or for everything.
- * Gender politics: Srijit's '*Rajkahini*' or '*Begum Jaan*' is not merely a filmic depiction of the violent impact of the Partition of India in 1947 but also a filmic version of gender politics and the unsurpassable force of the women victims of the Partition.

The film explores the Partition in a way that is rarely seen with such poignancy on the big screen — through women's voices and struggles. Our history books and popular narratives, often, when they talk about the Partition, paint women as the victims — of abuse, rape and violence. They are hardly given a voice or any kind of agency. But '*Rajkahini*' turns over that narrative entirely and instead chooses to place its focus and agency on women — who are seen fighting not just the oppression of the separatist State, but also the forces of patriarchy or male dominance. They are indomitable women forces, who decide at the end of the film, better to accept death by burning themselves in the brothel — their home than to succumb to the murky hands of the patriarchy.

- * Politics within the brothel: the brothel here is depicted as if a replica of a government where Begum Jaan is at the top of governance; other inhabitants are workers and soldiers at the same time to protect the government. Begum Jan is neither concerned about Hindustan nor about Pakistan, her only concern here is her business that is running very badly because of the partition and consequent riots, which also hampers the wellbeing of her people in the house.

Conclusion:

Though Srijit has chosen an imaginary locale somewhere between Debiganj and Haldibari districts of Bengal as the main backdrop of his film, it has re-enlivened the murky phase of Indian political history especially that of the Partition and its gloomy impact on the lives of the stake holders of this Partition like the eleven prostitutes as here in this tale. A haste political decision of the Government, which these women – the most ignored in the society - are neither aware about nor interested to, shatters the normal flow of their lives to death. Historical records say that during Partition, women were the worst affected victims because both the countries very wickedly thought that if they wanted to harm the other country most, they must attack the women of that country to jeopardize their honour, their self-respect. Srijit's film too represents this grim reality like other Indian films based on Partition. But Srijit's film is a unique one among the others, because here he

succeeds to represent his feminist stance that no scathing patriarchal force can stop feminist forces by mere physical attack to the women.

Partition of 1947 appeared massively in Indian literature written in English as well as in other languages like Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi and others, but a cinematic representation of the Partition has its special attraction for the viewers or the cinema goers. And Srijit's *Rajkahini* is, no doubt, a champion filmic version of the representation of the grim socio-political history of the Partition and its after effects upon the two Nations.

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