



# Voices of Partition: Women and Violence in Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning*

Submitted by:

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## INTRODUCTION.

Jyotirmoyee Debi: An Enigma

Jyotirmoyee Debi is an author who is renowned and remembered for her documentation of the condition of women during the partition in Bengal as well as the difficulties and act to violence endured by women in Rajasthan. Her book *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* also known as *The River Churning* which was published 1995 is one of her major works which documents the plight of women during partition in the state of Bengal in India.

According to a Documentary made on Jyotirmoyee Debi by made by Raja Sen where Jyotirmoyee Debi's daughter Ashoka Gupta, Debi was a curious child and loved to gain knowledge. Her devotion towards reading and writing was never hindered and she was also taught how to speak English by her husband after their marriage. She was a highly educated woman who wrote for women. 'A Voice for women by a woman,' Debi was a perfect example for this.

The partition of the nation in the year 1947 was one of the most significant event in the history of Indian subcontinent which led to the birth of a new nation, Pakistan. The partition was accompanied by widespread violence among the different states of the two nations. It also led to the displacement of millions of people and in the loss of thousands of innocent people. The displacement also cost people their land and assets in kind.

Women were vulnerable during the time of partition. Women were targeted and subjected to d violence of different kind and various atrocities including rape, abduction, murder, and mutilation. Bengali literature has played a very significant role in documenting the events of partition. Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning* has played a significant role in doing so.

Her works were non-fiction in nature. Jyotirmoyee Debi herself experienced a lot of atrocities later in her life when she had to return to her father's home after her marriage. She, along with her six children had come back and after coming back she spent majority of her time in her grandfather's library, reading and writing her works. She spent majority of her time secluded from the outer world and under the rules of orthodox Hindu rules for widows.

Her works focused on the lives and rights of women as well as the lives and rights of Dalits. Her collection of short stories *Sona Rupa Noy*, *Not Gold and Silver*, won the Rabindra Puraskar in the year 1973. Jyotirmoyee Debi was an activist; she followed the rules and regulations imparted by Gandhi Ji but she did so with a critical attitude. Jyotirmoyee Debi spent a significant amount of time amongst the Harijans in order to observe and understand the conditions they resided in as well as the discriminations they were subjected to.

'*One is not born of a woman but rather becomes one*' this statement was written by Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* which was the main pillar for the second wave of feminism. The statement is rather justified by the works of Jyotirmoyee Debi. She paints a picture about the condition of women in a country where women were just looked upon as an object to abuse, conquer and possess. *The River Churning* narrates the story of Sutara, a woman who was ostracized by her own family because she was nursed back to health after a terrible incident took place and she lost her parents along with her sister.

### Urvashi Butalia: A Voice for the overlooked victims

Urvashi Butalia's most renowned text *The Other Side of Silence* is a groundbreaking compilation of oral history of the Partition that gives voice to the people who were suppressed and oppressed by the society during partition. Through the interviews which were conducted over a ten-year period, Butalia sheds light upon the stories of women, children, and ordinary people who were the victims of the violence. One of the most striking and unique characteristics about Butalia's interviews is the way in which the women she spoke to often described the violence. They spoke of violence in terms of being silenced. They spoke of being "silenced" by the violence inflicted upon them, of being "struck dumb" by it. This silence physical as well as psychological. The silence was a method of coping with the trauma of what they had experienced overtime. She narrates about the families that were torn apart, the women who were abducted, enslaved, and raped, and the children who were orphaned and traumatized.

Butalia's text recollects the events of the past and narrates it. The text also provides a profound analysis on the nature of the silence and the ways in which trauma perpetuates because of silence. Butalia argues here that 'the silence that has often surrounded the Partition has been a way of coping with the trauma of the event, but it has also had the effect of keeping the memories of those who suffered alive.' *The other side of silence* is a powerful text in its own right, which presents a unique perspective on one of the most important historical events in recent Indian history. The partition of the nation was a major event which left behind a lot of scars. It is an event which led to violent displacement of millions of people and the death of several innocent lives.

*The Other Side of Silence* is a very powerful text which offers a unique perspective on one of the most important events recorded in recent Indian history. The Partition of India on one hand was one of the major events that occurred in the history of this continent but on the other hand it is an event that saw the most violent displacement of millions of people and the deaths thousands of innocent lives. It was a time of great upheaval and chaos, and the experiences of those who lived through it were often horrific and traumatic.

### Scope and Objective:

The primary focus of this NTCC paper is on the issue of violence that was inflicted on women during the communal riots that followed the partition of India. The paper also aims to examine the different forms of violence endured by women during the partition of Bengal, including rape, abduction, and forcible conversions that is documented through the text written by Jyotirmoyee Debi. The text will be further analyzed and compared to Urvashi Butalia's text *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India* to provide further insight to the topic. It is an attempt to highlight the gender specific violence women went through and how their voices were subdued by the misogynistic society.

The paper also aims to identify the linkages between femininity and violence, and how women's body were used as sites of violence during the partition. It also analyzes the portrayal of violence against women in Debi's *The River Churning*, and how it reflects the experiences of women during the partition. It also aims to highlight the impact of violence on women during the partition, including the trauma and displacement many women experienced.

### **Methodology:**

The approach in analyzing the text is archetypal and comparative in nature. Secondary sources of information have been used in order to highlight the importance and to validate the analysis made in this NTCC paper.

*The River Churning* and *The Other Side of Silence* written by Jyotirmoyee Debi and Urvashi Butalia respectively, centers around the violence endured by women during partition. The comparison is done in order to highlight the importance and existence of Jyotirmoyee Debi as an author who wrote extensively about women and their plight at times based on her own experience.

### **Literature Review:**

Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning* is a powerful novel that narrates the experiences of women during the partition. The novel entails the various forms of violence that women were subjected to, which included rape, abduction, and murder. The novel also highlights the resilience that women displayed in the face of adversity. In a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Tribhuvan University, the author focuses on Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning* and explores the traumatic experiences of women partition victims whose stories have been silenced.

The author argues that the novel challenges the erasure of women from the history of the partition and reclaims their place in the narrative. In an article published on Academia.edu, the author examines the representation of women during the time of partition in novels of South Asian women writers. The critic includes *The River Churning* in the analysis and argues that the novel provides a nuanced understanding of the experiences of women during the partition. In an article published in *Genders* 1998-2013, the author contextualizes the deserts of abducted and raped women within the social production of a discourse of honour and of women's sexual purity.

The author examines the rejection of sexually assaulted women in *The River Churning* and argues that the novel provides indications of a qualitative difference in the treatment of women who were sexually assaulted during the partition. In a book titled *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence, and Representation in Postcolonial India*, the authors describe a cultural history of violence associated with widely divergent ideas of India after 1947.

The critic includes the in the analysis and argue that the novel provides a powerful portrayal of the experiences of women during the partition. In an article published in *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, the author provides a critical study of the text.

The author argues that the novel provides a powerful portrayal of the trauma and suffering women endured during the partition. In an article published on *Feminism in India*, the author explores the life and work of Jyotirmoyee Debi. The critic argues that *The River Churning* is an important work of Bengali literature that sheds light on the experiences of women during the partition.

In conclusion, the literature review highlights the significance and importance of Jyotirmoyee Debi's text, *The River Churning* in documenting the experiences of women during the partition of India. The novel provides a powerful portrayal of the various forms of violence that women were subjected to at the hands of the misogynistic society and the resilience that was displayed by them in the face of adversity. The novel challenges the erasure of women from the history of the partition and reclaims their place in the narrative.

## Chapter 1: Comparison between 'The Other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India' by Urvashi Butalia and 'The River Churning' by Jyotirmoyee Debi.

Women have already been oppressed in the society for centuries. The emergence of the Feminist movement and the change in the motto of the movements is a testament presented to the society by women about the discrimination faced by them at the hands of the society. The texts '*The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*' and '*The River Churning*' sheds light on the violence endured by women during the era of partition of the nation. While both the texts share similar thematic concerns they differ in their approach and focus.

*The River Churning* is a memoir that recounts the author's experience during the partition of India. The book focuses on the author's journey from east Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to west Bengal, India. The text also accounts the violence she endured during her journey. The author's account in the text is deeply personal and emotional. She describes the horrors of partition in vivid details along with the discrimination she faced because of her orthodox Hindu family. The text highlights the impact of the violence on women and children, not only on a physical level but also on a psychological level. It also highlights the impact of the trauma which is a result of the violence that they witnessed.

The text, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India* written by Urvashi Butalia, is a non-fiction book that explores violence endured by women during partition using a different approach from Jyotirmoyee Debi. Debi wrote fictional stories based her own experiences and observations of women who were the victims of the prejudices existing in the society. The text, *The Other Side of Silence* is an account of the horrific experiences of women who were subjected to violence during partition. The text is non-fictional and is comprised of the interviews of the women who survived the horrors of the gender specific violence during partition. The author, additionally in the text, also explores the role gender played in violence, the ways in which specifically women were targeted.

The texts, *The River Churning* and *The Other Side of Silence* both discuss the same issues using different approaches. Debi uses a personal touch in her text which helps her in connecting with the readers on an empathetic level on the other hand Butalia in her text *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the partition of India* uses an analytical approach. The text talks about the violence endured by women based on real-life accounts of the survivors. *The River Churning* is a deeply emotional account of the horrific experiences of a woman on the other hand *The Other Side of Silence* provides an analytical account of the events.

*The River Churning* focuses on the journey of the protagonist from East Pakistan to West Bengal while *The Other Side of Silence* explores the issue on a broader context. *The Other Side of Silence* explores the or rather highlights the frustrating amount of silence that revolves around the violence against women during the partition. It also emphasizes on the need to acknowledge and address this issue. The authors also explore the ways in which women were targeted because of their gender in a strictly analytical manner where as in *The River Churning* the author projects her personal feelings and experiences through the character of *Surata*. She also unveils the discrimination faced by women and the young girls in their everyday life because of the orthodox views and beliefs of the society. *The River Churning* on the other hand focuses on a single character. The story revolves around *Sutara*, the text provides an account of her life in both the phases, when she was not ostracized and later when she was ostracized. The text portrays a gradual change in her life.

Both the texts, *The River Churning* and *The Other Side of Silence* provides the account on a similar situation but uses different approach. Butalia's text is a collection of oral stories that give voice to the experiences of women who were affected by partition. The text sheds light on the ways in which women were marginalized and silenced during this period of partition, and how much they struggled to survive in the face of violence and displacement. Debi's novel on the other hand is a fictional account in the form of a of the partition that focuses on the experiences of women who were forced to flee their homes. The novel portrays the trauma and displacement as well as their resilience and strength in the face of adversity.

Both the texts, *The River Churning* and *The Other Side of Silence* provides a nuanced perspective on the violence endured by women during partition and highlight the impact of trauma on their life. *The River Churning* provides a deeply personal account where *The Other Side of Silence* provides a broader perspective of the issue.

In Conclusion, both the texts provide an account of the same issue through different approaches but Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning* becomes a beacon of strength for the victims of the violence and help them in narrating their story. The emotional connect that the book provides helps the reader in understanding the emotions rather than the statistics and the facts alone. It generates an empathetic response and creates a greater impact and urges the reader to understand the severity of the horrors of partition and the way it impacted women and gave birth to new gender specific violence in its wake.

## Chapter 2: Thematic analysis of Trauma and Survival in Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning*.

Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning* (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*) is a novel that explores the trauma and survival of women in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947. The novel begins and ends with the tale of Sutara and her family. The text documents the events which lead to Sutara being separated from her family as a result of the chaos which was generated because of partition. The novel is a recollection of her journey and the new path in the form of a new life that she carved after crossing the border on her own.

*The River Churning* is a text which is also known for its transparent portrayal of the brutal violence which took place during partition. Jyotirmoyee Debi portrayed the events that followed partition and the plight of women in those turbulent times through her work. Along with the physical violence that took place she also portrays the psychological impact of the chaos and carnage.

However, *The River Churning* is not just a trauma narrative but it is also a story of survival against the odds. Sutara, the protagonist of the text, is a young and naïve but grows up to be a strong and resilient woman who refused to be beaten down by her experiences of the past. She finds the courage to rebuild her life, and to create a new future for herself.

Despite the trauma she has experienced, *Sutara* is a strong and resilient woman. She refuses to be beaten down by her experience, and she finds the courage to rebuild her life. She finds a new home in India, and she starts a new life with her husband and child. She also finds a way to come to terms with her trauma, and she learns to live with the memories of her past.

*Sutara's* story is a story is not just a story of sadness and turmoil but also of hope and courage. Her story shows that it is possible to survive through the trauma, and to rebuild a new life for oneself. It is also a story of resilience, and it shows the power of the human spirit to overcome the atrocities of life.

The novel has been praised by various critics for its powerful and moving depiction of the trauma of Partition. It has also been credited with bringing the experiences of women to the forefront of the discourse on Partition.

In an article *Gender submerging the caste–class question? Revisiting Jyotirmoyee Devi's The River Churning*, written by Sarbani Banerjee, she argues that the novel can be read not only as a story of female trauma, but also as a critique of the caste and class hierarchies that existed in India at the time. She writes that "The River Churning is a novel that refuses to be confined to the narrow confines of gender. It is a novel that speaks to the complex and intersecting identities of women, and to the ways in which these identities are shaped by caste, class, and religion."

In an article *Violence of 1947: The River Churning*, Pratibha Parmar, the author of the article argues that the novel is a powerful indictment of the violence of Partition. She writes that "The River Churning is a novel that refuses to forget the violence of Partition. It is a novel that reminds us of the pain and suffering women experienced during this time, and of the need to continue to fight for justice for all victims of violence."

## Chapter 3: The Feminist Perspective in Jyotirmoyee Debi's *The River Churning*.

Jyotirmoyee Debi's novel *The River Churning* portrays the painful experiences of women partition victims in Bengal who suffered sexual violence, rape, and social exclusion because of the communal riots. Devi's work becomes extremely important as there is a dearth of literature that records such gruesome atrocities inflicted upon

women. Devi's politics can be concluded through the focus of her writings and the themes around which they are centered.

While exploring her partition novel, no one can deduce that the chastity of a woman was linked to their identity and the metric to define their 'holiness' was the absurd and the outrageous concept of 'purity.' The social consequences of having been a survivor of rape or sexual violence ended up having lifelong ostracism from the society. The women who were the survivors of sexual violence and rape were excommunicated from the society and were labelled as 'impure'

or 'fallen women.' Another text dealing with partition, *Ice Candy Man* written by Bapsi Sidhwa also talks about this issue. A woman named *Hamida* who was kidnapped from her house and was raped, was disowned by her family along with several other woman who went through the same phenomenon.

The novel portrays women's struggles to survive in a society that has deemed them 'impure' and 'unworthy' of even an ounce of respect. The novel also stresses upon the importance of voices of women being heard as well as on their rights to be heard. The novel's feminist perspective is evident in the way it portrays the women's struggles to overcome the social stigma attached to them and their fight for justice. Women's struggle for survival and the violence they endured is an integral part of Debi's works.

Moreover, a critical study of the novel in the context of modernity has also been conducted. The study focuses on the trauma experienced by the protagonist of the text, *Sutara*, and how she copes with it and survives. The study argues that the novel is a trauma narrative that highlights the female protagonist's experience of a 'social death' in the aftermath of partition. The study also highlights the importance of women's agency and their ability to overcome the trauma that they experienced.

In addition, another study has been conducted on the caste-class question in the novel. The portrayal of *Sutara's* orthodox Hindu family is a prime example of how caste and creed played a very important role in governing the lives of women. A Hindu girl sheltered in the house of a Muslim family for months made her 'impure' and she was ostracized by her own family first and later by the society as well.

Several scholars have written about the feminist perspective in *The River Churning*. For example, in her article *The River Churning: A Feminist Reading* by Maitreyi Chatterjee argues that the novel "provides a searing indictment of the patriarchal structures that have led to the oppression of women." Chatterjee also argues that the novel "offers a powerful vision of female resistance and resilience."

Another scholar who has written about the feminist perspective in *The River Churning* is Tanika Sarkar. In her article *The Partition of Bengal and the Fate of Hindu Women*, Sarkar argues that the novel "provides a unique perspective on the ways in which the Partition exacerbated the vulnerability of women." Sarkar also argues that the novel "offers a powerful critique of the ways in which women's bodies are often used as symbols of communal violence."

In conclusion, Jyotirmoyee Debi's novel *The River Churning* portrays the feminist perspective of the partition of Bengal and the painful experiences of women who were the victims of sexual violence, rape, and social exclusion as a result of communal divide during partition. The novel highlights the patriarchal society's oppression of women and the consequences of their actions through the character of the protagonist, *Sutara*. The feminist perspective on *The River Churning* is a rich and complex one. The novel has been interpreted in several ways, but all the interpretations made agree that the text provides a critique of patriarchal society and narrates the ways in which it oppresses women. The novel also offers a vision of female resistance and resilience. The protagonist, *Sutara*, is a young woman who is forced to flee her home during the Partition. She experiences violence, discrimination, and trauma, but she also finds strength and resilience. She refused to be defined by her gender or her traumatic experiences, and she eventually finds a way to rebuild her life.

## Conclusion:

Urvashi Butalia and Jyotirmoyee Devi are two of the most important authors in the literature of the Partition of India. Their work offers a different and sheds light on an overlooked perspective on one of the most traumatic events in recent history.

Butalia's text *The Other Side of Silence* is an oral history of the Partition is a text that gives voice to those who have been largely forgotten and overlooked by history. Through interviews which were conducted over a ten-year period, Butalia brings to light the stories of women, children, and ordinary people who were caught up in the violence. She tells the experiences of the families torn apart, the women who were raped and abducted, and the children who were orphaned and traumatized.

Devi's *The River Churning* on the other hand is a fictional account of the Partition that explores the psychological and emotional impact of the event on the victims. The novel follows the story of a young woman who is forced to be separated from her home and family during the violence. Devi's writing in the text is both lyrical and powerful, and she captures the pain and trauma of the Partition in a way that it is both moving and unforgettable.

Both *The Other Side of Silence* and *The River Churning* are essential. The texts offer a powerful and moving testament to the cost of the event which not only meant in the wealth of the nation but also costed human life, and they are a reminder of that past should never be forgotten in order to build a better future.

In addition to the thematic similarities between *The Other Side of Silence* and *The River Churning*, there are also some important and notable differences between the two texts. Butalia's text is a work of nonfiction, while Devi's novel is a work of fiction. This difference in the genre leads to different strengths and weaknesses in each text. Butalia's text is stronger in its historical accuracy as it accounts the details narrated by the surviving victims. She has done extensive research and conducted numerous interviews for over a decade to ensure that her accounts of the Partition are as accurate as possible.

However, Butalia's text is also weaker in its emotional impact. This is not to say that *The Other Side of Silence* is not an important book, but it is simply not as emotionally powerful as *The River Churning*.

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