

Partition of Bengal and Folk Tradition: An Analysis of the Novel *Fera* by Taslima Nasrin

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Abstract

The novel speaks on behalf of numberless people who are affected by the traumatic experience by the partition of Bengal. The protagonist of the novel Kalyani leaves her birthplace rather forcefully when she was in her adolescent period and has given her heart to a dark young man. From being born and brought up in a well to do family in Bangladesh to work like a serving woman to her aunt, being bullied at college and home, she was disillusioned by the harshness of life. She had a strong connection with her motherland. But unfortunately due to the effect of partition her father chose to send her at Kolkata with her brothers. But her soul was connected with the nature, the soil of Bangladesh. The motif of soil, river and trees are very much imbibed into her consciousness and her existence. Life has taught her many lessons but the memory of her childhood friends, the freshness and attachment of her birthplace was the greatest treasure hidden in her heart. She remembered all those traditions of Bengali community, their folk beliefs and customs, stories, myths perfectly and thus she never forgets her birthplace. She bore the emptiness of life with one hope that one day she will visit that pious land again which she does after thirty years. Facing the ruthless reality she understands her dream haven has drastically changed. She goes through an inner struggle to reconnect innocence and affection with her home, motherland and nature, her friends and folks.

Keywords: Partition; Folk; Culture; Memory; Expectation; Experience.

INTRODUCTION

There are several literary works that very brilliantly portrays the plight of people who got affected by the partition of India. In the name

of independence, they are judged and divided by the religion and uprooted from their motherland. The pangs of separation from one's birthplace are really traumatic. In the introduction of the book *The Partition of India: Beyond Improbable Lines* it is stated that "Partition of India had and still continues to have on generations of people, on their identity and their sense of belonging, and on the way, they choose to negotiate the meaning of their pasts and the effort to heal its wounds". This novel very realistically captures this emotion and as it gives the description of a woman who left her country i.e. Bangladesh and came to Kolkata. Though the languages of both the countries are same but she could not adjust properly in the new settlement. She could feel the humiliation due to the difference in

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the intonation, pronunciation. Her customs, rituals, beliefs come again and again into her space. She feels that her home, her folk culture all are still the same only she is away. She was devoid of love and compassion from the family with whom she was living. So, in her heart she always had that calling, that desperate passion to return to her birthplace and feel united with everyone, with the soil there.

What the Protagonist Has Left Behind: The name Kalyani literally means someone who is benevolent to all. But ironically she couldn't enjoy true bond and benevolence once she was taken away from her root. How painful and traumatic it is to be separated from someone's root is reflected in Kalyani and her obsessive thinking about her root and her past. She was the daughter of one of the most revered magistrate of the court. She was admitted in one of the most prestigious college of Mymensingh where her father, her brother also studied. Here she meets the man who makes a permanent imprint in her heart. When this devastating news was told to her she vehemently refused to go to India. She speaks in her mother tongue, the dialect that she was habituated. But it differs a bit from the polished and Bangali language used by the elites. Thus she becomes the embodiment of all the folk people who use that dialect for a better relation with their land. She says, “কসিঁরে ইন্ডিয়া? আমি ইন্ডিয়া যাইতাম না।” (Nasrin: 11). For using such colloquial language she was teased by her cousins in India as “Bangal”. But her father was adamant as he could understand the increasing pressure on Hindus in Mymensingh. So out of his care and concern he was determined to give Kalyani a better life. But the better life remains an illusion. The naive girl faces various challenges unknown to her till now. She marries a man but he also does not give Kalyani her proper value. So Kalyani keeps thinking about the past, her life and lore. She was kept in a place where she became physically as well as emotionally vulnerable. Her assertive personality was hidden somewhere when she was bullied as “Bangal” (used derogatorily) in college. So with this process she was losing some vital essence of her Self. But her quintessential spirit always harboured the real Kalyani.

Kalyani Nourishing and Memorising her Bond with mother Nature and her Remembrance of the folk traditions that helps in shaping and transforming her personality: Taslima Nasrin is mostly famous as a controversial writer who writes openly about feminism, fundamentalism. Habiba Zaman says in an article that alongside the issues of oppression “Nasrin's stories transcend national boundaries and present feminist as well as transnational issues.” Like Taslima Nasrin, Kalyani

was also living her life like an exile. The outward composure of her did not how desperately she wanted the true attachment. So when Anirban came with freshness of his perceptions Kalyani was drawn to him irresistibly. She spoke very little when they first met but slowly she was ensnared by the charm of Anirban. So when the outwardly unkempt, but strong-willed, courageous Anirban proposed to marry her she easily affirmed. She thought this man can eradicate a little bit of her despondency. Instead of a marriage full of merriment and splendour that her father dreamt of she accepted the simple registry marriage. So with time she knows how to deal with reality of life. She is now strong and resilient. She thinks of her romance with Badal which was more thrilling, she thinks of her promise to her best friend Sharifa about her definite return one day and life seems incoherent for her. Her life becomes a search for the question, why does the border exist as both the lands share the same sky! The dispute goes on in her mind why the world is so cruel to separate her from her native people. She and her brothers couldn't even go to perform the last rituals to her dead father and mother. These incidents haunt her throughout her life. Due to their immigration all the siblings have lost the precious innocence and purity of their bond. After her marriage with Anirban she wanted to take care of her small brother Parimal but Anirban was indifferent about the idea and Kalyani that again hurt her.

The marriage was actually very shallow and superficial as Kalyani slowly understood the patriarchal mentality of Anirban. Kalyani was not infertile but due to some undiscovered health issues she had some miscarriages which made Anirban very angry and intolerant of her. Finally she was able to give birth to a girl but it didn't satiate the demand of Anirban. He wanted someone who can carry forward the legacy of the family. As in the patriarchal set up of the society the place of a girl is really very inferior than a boy. She does not understand how an educated man like Anirban still harbours the misogyny within him. With the birth of her son she was appreciated by many of Anirban's family. She was also doing her daily household chores but deep down she was so disconnected with the place that she was living. Anirban being her life partner was always dispassionate about the feeling that Kalyani had for her native country. Moreover he teases and sometimes passes sly remarks about the stories that he heard from his wife. Anirban's culture does not match with her culture and she considers the “Bangal” (Bangladeshi) culture more generous than the “ghoti” (Indian Bengali) people and their culture.

Kalyani heard from her mother that her maternal uncle lived in India and lived in a place Tiljala. Kalyani wanted to come to her uncle's home using the folk vehicle for transport *i.e.* the boat. She thinks about her love for Badal, a village boy and their love on the river bank of Brahmaputra. She remembers it with a folk song, “কোঁথায় পাব কলসি কইন্যা কোঁথায় পাব দড়ি। তুমি হও গহীন গাঙ, আমি ডুইবা মরি” (Nasrin, 19). This is taken from a famous folk song about the love of Krishna and Radha where Krishna wants Radha to become the deep river of love where he can dive. Badal told her of making a home with ‘chhan’ or ‘ulookhar’ (a special long slender grass, scientific name *Imperata cylindrica*) inside the paddy field. His extremely idyllic location and emotion make Kalyani overwhelmed with love. She thinks about the river Brahmaputra and listens to the Bhatiyali song and understands the stark difference between the mechanical life of Kolkata and the lively Bangladesh. She recalls the song – “নাইয়ারে নাওয়ারে বাদাম তুইলা কোঁ ন দশে যাও চইলা।” (Nasrin, 37). But according to Anirban Kalyani suffers from nostalgia.

So most of the time Kalyani lived in reminiscence of her childhood, of her happy, innocent days with one determination that she will return to her root again. She fulfils her own wish and out of her irresistible affiliation she finally comes to back to Bangladesh. To her ultimate disillusionment everything has changed here. No one welcomes her emotionally. Till now she was living in her memory but with the arrival her present situation outsmarts her memory and she again is stuck by the arrow of reality.

She reaches Mymensingh but unexpectedly it seems to be difficult for her to recognize her own town. Numerous things have changed in the long lost thirty years. She gets electrified for her much anticipated union with the river Brahmaputra. But to her utter disappointment the river has dried so much that it has become like a drain! The old, petite river makes her heart ache. She frantically searches for her large home but cannot find. Some new buildings are constructed over there. An alarming air encompasses her heart. But she recognizes the house of her best friend Sharifa. In that house she finds the nephew of Sharifa who doesn't recognize her. Sharifa is now a mother of many children and lives a miserable life under a conservative, orthodox husband. They are concerned more about fulfilling the rituals of their religion than about their guest.

Sharifa acts pretentiously with Kalyani, while she craves for the purity, integrity of their relationship. Slowly she realizes a breach has

been created between them which is irreparable. She comprehends that the thirty years of their separation has marked such a distance between them that they can never be in symphony again. The world has been so cruel to them that they can never join together and live harmoniously in consonance with each other. She thinks of the Bhaifota ritual when Kalyani used to put mark of blessings to her own brother and also Anis's forehead. At that time people were not fed with the vicious ideology of religious differences. Kalyani also informs Yasir, the son of Anis about his parent's marriage when Anis went for marriage riding on an elephant. Kalyani has a vivid memory of how she and her brothers sat at the yard of their home in a winter morning and listen to the stories of ‘mechhobhoot’, ‘mamdobhoot’ (types of ghosts exists in the folk culture). She memorizes the evening prayers and lamp ignition in the Tulsi plant by her mother at the evening wearing a white saree with red border. Kalyani had a kamini flower plant at her home and at night the entire home would get the fragrance of the flower. Her mother believed that the scent of Kamini would attract snakes and recommended Kalyani to close the windows. She thinks about her making a whistle using a coconut leaf.

Kalyani came with her son Dipan to Mymensingh, Bangladesh near the intrinsic river Brahmaputra. She comes with high expectations that all will remain same. She thinks that the entire town will enliven once she lands there. With the smell of her soil she knows this is her own, she cannot be of any other land. Her own umbilical cord was kept inside the soil, is now part of the soil:

“কার দাশে সোঁ আজ পথো পথো পরশপাথররে মত কচ্ছি খুজছে? জন্মরে পর নাড়ি ফুলো হয় মাটিতে, সেই নাড়ি খুঁজছে সোঁ? নাকি গন্ধ খুঁজছে মায়ে বুকরে গন্ধ?” (Nasrin, 57). She cannot understand which punishment for whose fault she is suffering this separation with her motherland, with her mother. She is enraptured by the memory of her father. She went to the cremation place of her father with her son. After thirty years she has come to find the flame of their cremation. No child will ever want such fate. She tells her son about this place that his grandmother and grandmother were cremated at this place. But for her child Dipan his sires are so unfamiliar that they only reside in his imagination like the “bangoma-bangomi” of faery tales. (Nasrin, 57).

She yearns for soulful acceptance but even the landscape, the environment seems to deceive her. No one cares about her feelings, she wants unification with her home, she wants to hug her childhood but

nothing seems to exist now. According to William Safran this is the dilemma of the diaspora, where they want to return to a home but the home is no more “not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially”.

CONCLUSION

At last, she releases all the pangs of sufferings, all her traumas of detachment, her insecurities, her loneliness hugging a tree. She thinks no more as anything else but intrinsic part of this soil. She gets the illumination that she is not different but part of this soil. Her cry relieves her from all the anguish that she nourished against everyone and mostly against herself. This denouement makes her come stronger from the ashes of her memory. This visit, this return gives her the sense that the nostalgia that she was clinging to was like a mirage. It was like a cage where she imprisoned the happiness, the liberty, the love of her soul. Now this return releases her from the shackles of her past. She

makes reconciliation with her imagination and the reality. She accepts the hardest lesson that like the Brahmaputra her childhood has vanished. She is now just a guest, an outsider in her own country with a close attachment to her folk traditions. This understanding and acceptance makes her mature, solidifying her Self.

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