Culture Shock in Canada: Eating Apples for Lunch

Shawkat Hussain

TWENTY years back I was awarded a Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship for post-graduate studies in English literature. I knew next to nothing about Canada in those days. I knew that Canada was cold, that it was to the north of the United States, and that a game called ice hockey was a popular sport there. So I made some deliberate effort to read up on Canada, particularly the Maritimes: I gradually thrilled to the idea of Peggy's Cove, the Citadel Hill, the restored waterfront (at the time I wasn't sure what it meant), the 'picturesque' fishing villages and lobster hutches (and the 'Lobster Trap' night club), all places that I read about in the brochures that I received.

Now fifteen years after returning from Canada in 1980, the thought of Canada, particularly of H— , fills me with a nostalgia that is hard to shake off. An irrecoverable, exciting part of my life belongs forever to Canada. After all, my wife and I spent five years in Halifax (1975-1980), five years during which I wrote two dissertations, had my first son, lost my mother, and had the rare privilege of having our apartment burnt down. Except perhaps for the fire, the highlights of my long sojourn in Canada are not much different from the experience of other graduate students from this region.

It is hard to organize the fleeting, elusive, sometimes painful, sometimes happy memories of five years in Canada after all these years. What do I remember most? The total cultural experience? The different ambience of campus life? The many new foreign friends? The lonely, hateful, agonizing hours of thesis-writing (mostly, non-writing)? Or the relief and pleasure of a thesis written, submitted and defended?

Let's begin with culture shock. That's what hit us first and never ceased to amuse us later. At the Halifax International Airport we had our first experience of a lady bus driver. I was struggling hard to lift the four heavy suitcases on to the bus when the lady bus driver snatched them from me and completed the job. I stared at her with amazement and shame, discomfitted by my inability to do the man's job. I do not know why this memory remains with me after all these years. About four and a half years later another lady cab driver took us home from the hospital with our new born son. I didn't find it surprising any more, but my wife and I were touched when she refused to take the fare. "This ride is my gift to the baby," she said.

We spent the first three days in a temporary residence arranged by the Foreign Students Office, and we lived only on apples and water! Nobody thought it necessary to orient us about the stores in the neighbourhood and we had neither the nerve nor knowledge to do it on our own. A Kenyan girl who lived in the room next to ours helped us by lending a knife and a plate. A Nigerian volunteer dropped in to say hello and quickly departed with the very helpful advice, "Get lots of sleep". We slept long hours and ate enough apples to keep the doctor away for years. An accidental encounter with a Bangladeshi led to a meal of boiled rice and curried beef, and some helpful tips on how to lessen the culture shock from which we were still suffering. So far, we hadn't met a Canadian in Canada. The Foreign Students Office probably believed that veteran foreign students could provide new foreign students with better cushions to absorb the culture shock.

On the fourth day we met our first live Canadian, the Assistant to the Dean of Humanities from whom I was supposed to pick up my first cheque. After the preliminary greetings, very warm and friendly, he decided to call the Graduate Coordinator in the English Department to tell him that I had arrived. After some time I heard him say, "Oh yes, he can talk English." Chuckling, he told me that the Graduate Coordinator had asked whether I could speak English. The latter was worried because he had never had a Bangladeshi in the English graduate programme.

Culture shock, like language shock begins to wear off after sometime. It took us a little more than a week to get over some of the most obvious, and often disconcerting, aspects of culture shock. Soon we were buying grocery bilingually from Dominion and Sobeys, spices and health food stuff from Bean Sprouts, and getting on and off escalators with the ease of veteran shoppers. Soon we were lending our knives and plates to other new foreign students to help them cut their apples with.

Having survived the first three days on a spartan diet of water and apples and suffering from a case of acute culture shock and jet lag, we set out to look for permanent accommodation. At the time, however, we did not know what we were suffering from. Jet lag and culture shock are both cases of retrospective diagnoses. We felt dazed, confused, hungry, but also terrifically exhilarated. Every act was an act of adventure and discovery. We shivered in our thin sweaters and read street signs with wonder.

It was in this state of mind that my wife and I began looking for an apartment. We managed to take two quick decisions: one, the place should be within walking distance from the English Department; second, the rent should not be more than one quarter of my monthly scholarship. The students' Housing Office supplied us with a map and allowed us to use their telephone. Somebody advised us that we should just walk around and look for "Rooms for Rent" signs. So, for two days we walked around looking for signs on windows. On one of these days, I remember walking through a flea market. With 500 dollars in my pocket (settling down allowance) we looked around and finally decided to buy an old, chipped plate and an old mug (remember, we were still dazed and jetlagged). The 'gentleman' selling them said they were two dollars each. We were a nice, polite and ignorant couple; we thought it would be impolite to bargain with a Canadian. Imagine our shock, veteran bargainers that we were, when we realised that we could buy a new plate and a new mug for a dollar each! We also bought an ugly, squat candle for five dollars. To this day, almost 20 years later, the candle remains, unburnt, a symbol of our initiation into the Canadian experience. So much for our chance encounter with flea market bargaining.

Eventually, after walking around for a day we managed to rent a room. We liked the bright, colourful floral pattern of the wall paper; we liked the ambience of the street. The area seemed a trifle run down, but it also seemed palpably alive — alive with young people drinking beer all day on their front porches, laughing, shouting, courting and fighting. A young lady who lived in a room down the hallway often bummed cigarettes from me, occasionally a five dollar bill. I thought of her as a frank and friendly person. A German student who lived in the same building later told me with a knowing smile that she was no "lady". But I must give her the benefit of doubt, though she never returned my five-dollar bill. A couple of months later, one of my professors told me that I had rented a room in one of the worst streets of the city. The street was a hang-out for pimps, prostitutes, winos and transients. We gave a week's notice, and moved into the vacant apartment of a friend who had gone to England for Christmas.

We moved about four times in six months — moving from one mistake to another.

Any student who has ever rented or wanted to rent a room in H— must have heard of one Mrs C. She owned half of the rooming houses in the city, and we were fated to rent a two-bedroom apartment that she owned. The rent was $235 per month all inclusive — at least that was the understanding I had. The apartment seemed fine; about six months later we were dumbfounded when Mrs C said that we had to pay the electricity bill for the last six months — about $150. I refused; the Power Corporation cut off the electricity. We spent one dark, cold night without sleep.

I lodged a complaint with the Residential Tenancy Board — a kind of civil court to settle disputes between landlords and tenants. Mrs C came armed with her lawyer; I came armed with my righteous indignation. The Chairman of the Board seemed to know her: "Ah, Mrs C, you are here again?" When the Chairman asked me to hold the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; I did, but told the Chairman that I was not a Christian. There was some laughter and Mrs C seemed very nervous. I pleaded my case passionately and won.

About a month later, we moved into a campus married students' apartment, and lived without disruption for the next four years. Only once we had to move down from the seventh floor to the second floor because of a fire in our apartment. But that's another story.

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The State of the French Cinema

Among western countries, France is still an exception as far as the cinema is concerned since her national film production accounts for 35 per cent of her market. This year, in which the cinema celebrates its centenary, provides the opportunity to make an assessment of the situation. What is the position of the French cinema a century after its birth questions Anne Rapin.

CERTAIN signs may lead one to believe that the French cinema is going through a crisis as the number of cinema-goers is dropping off. From an average of 180 million admissions a year in the 70s (which is half the number of 1960), admissions have regularly been falling off and amounted to 123 million in 1994. However, this does not prevent France from being the leader among European countries for the average number of admissions per inhabitant (2.3 admissions for 1993 compared with 2.1 in Spain, 1.9 in the United Kingdom, 1.6 in Germany and 1.4 in Italy).

Although it is true that the French go to the cinema less often than in the past, they are still just as fond of it. Films are their favourite programmes on television (which is usually presented as the main competitor of cinema and whose most reliable partner it has in fact become) and sales of blank or recorded video cassettes more than doubled between 1980 and 1993.

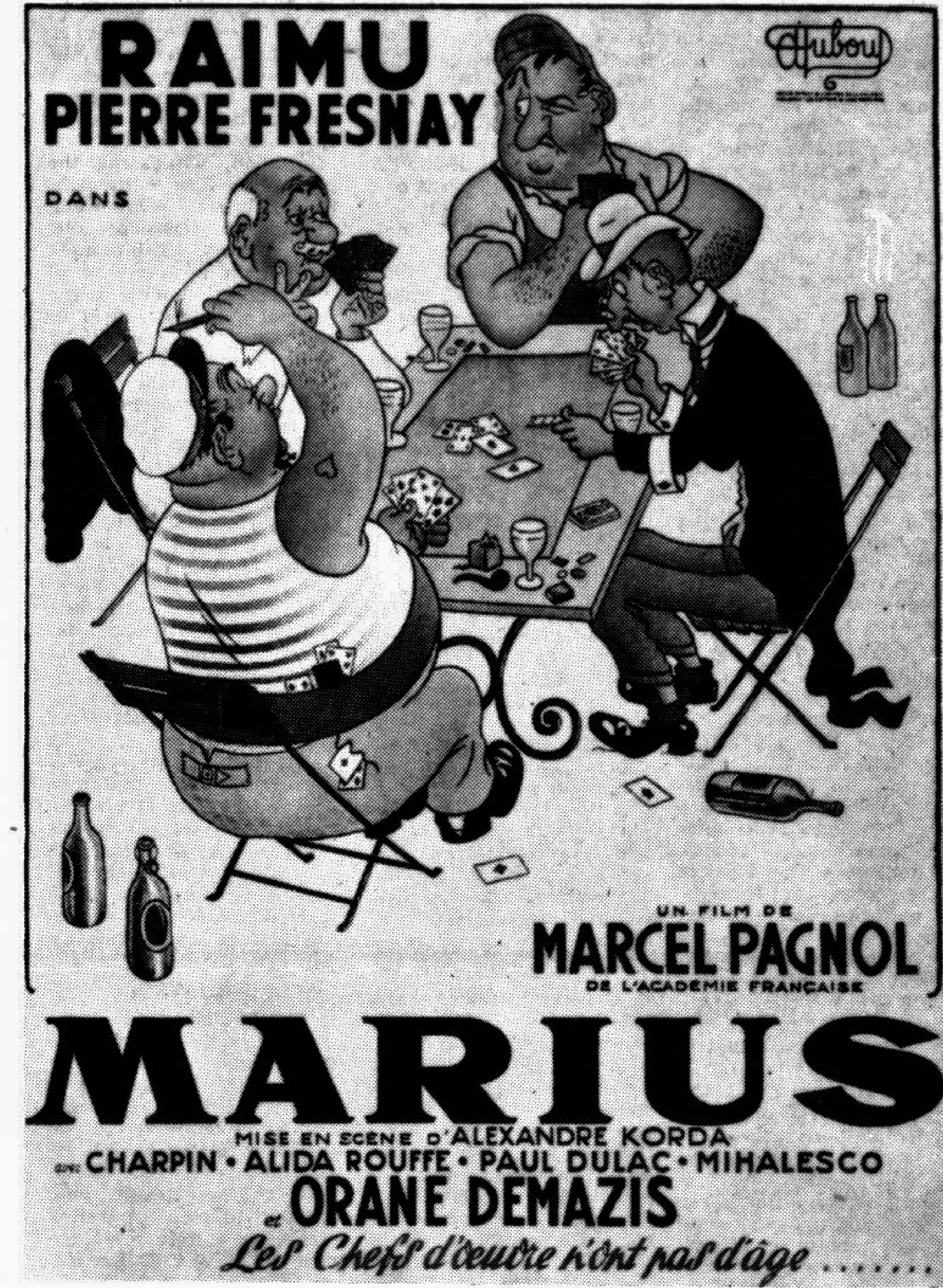
Moreover, in France, the cinema benefits from being in a privileged position compared to its European neighbours. Although there has been a fall since the mid-1980s, French films still account for a third of admissions (30 per cent in 1994 compared with 34 per cent in 1993), just after American films (which increased from 36 per cent in 1984 to 57 per cent in 1994). These figures can be compared with the 24.3 per cent of the market share held by Italian films, 9.3 per cent by Spanish films and 3.6 per cent by British films.

Indeed, French film production is one of the most dynamic in Europe, with about a hundred films produced on French initiative (1) every year (136 in 1984 and 89 in 1994). Better still, the number of first and second films has been on the increase since the early 90s (36 first films and 22 second films in 1993) showing the extraordinary renewal of film creation in France and the vitality of the new directors.

But the cinema is not only appreciated in celebration years in France. With more than 4,000, France has the highest number of cinema-auditoriums in Europe and Pairs is the capital for cinema-lovers. Everything can be seen there, from the German or American classics of the 30s and 40s to the latest Cuban or Iranian film. The Georges Pompidou Centre is one of the important places for film-lovers in Paris. Since 1978, it has devoted nearly 50 retrospectives to directors (Kurosawa), producers (Pathe and Warner Bros), actors (Anna Magnani), and films from all over the world (Portugal, Georgia, Italy, Armenia, Korea, Hungary, Denmark, Brazil, etc). Greek films (22nd March-24th July 1995), Swiss films (January-April 1996) and Turkish films (April-October 1996) are next on the schedule.

Throughout France, among the dozen film festivals organised every year with the support of the National Cinematography Centre (2), the *"Festival des Trois Continents,"* held in Nantes, is one of the most original. It is a crossroads for films from Black and Latin America, Asia and Africa, and every year since its creation in 1979, with growing success, it has presented (3) about fifty films and has helped with their distribution on the European market. Before the Cannes Festival, the one in Nantes had already given an award to the Malian director Souleyman Cisse (who made *"Yeelen"*) and the Chinese director Chen Kaige (*"Farewell my concubine"*). In 1994, 30,000 spectators came to discover films from Brazil, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Iran, Mongolia, India and Tunisia.

Lastly, a retrospective of films produced by Gaumont (which, like Pathe, is also celebrating its centenary) with English, Arabic, Chinese, Spanish and Russian subtitles) will be shown in more than 40 countries including China, Japan, Mexico, Russia and the CIS.



Poster of the film Marius made by Marcel Pagnol in 1950.

BOOKS

Pawn in the Game

Meenakshi Mukherjee

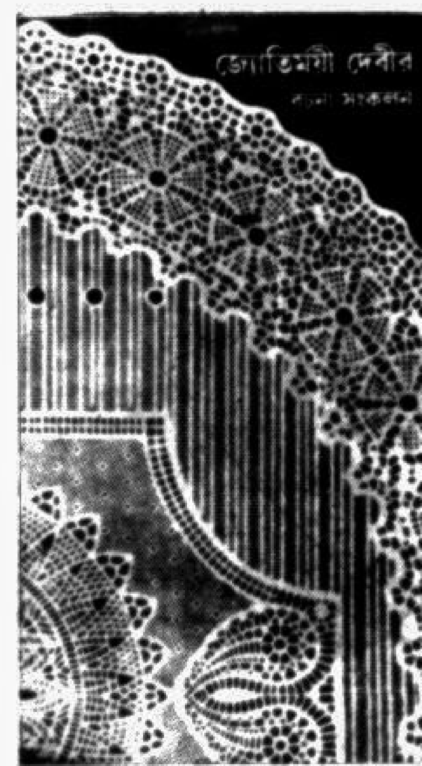
RETRIEVAL of fictional and personal accounts of the partition of India has suddenly gained a fresh momentum in the last few years, generating new anthologies (eg. the three volumes of Stories About the Partition of India, ed. Alok Bhalla, 1993), films and TV serials (e.g. Tamas, Buniyad, A Division of Hearts), special issues of journals (e.g. Seminar, August 1994), workshop and symposia (e.g. those held by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in August 1992 and December 1993) in addition to special features in newspapers (e.g. Indian Express 14.8.94). This new interest is not surprising because the gap of at least a generation is necessary to analytically understand any momentous event in history, and also, as Urvashi Butalia, the guest editor of the Seminar issue has suggested, this introspection about our past may have something to do with the recent escalation of communal violence and rise of fundamentalism in the country. While official history documents the political dimensions of this epochal event, recording the loss of life and property only statistically, personal reminiscences and fictional representations can capture the nuances and the indeterminacies, reanimating the intricate and long-term human consequences of the division of the country.

Jyotirmoyee Debi (1894-1988). Born in a prosperous Bengali joint family in Jaipur, Rajasthan, where her grandfather was the Diwan of the Maharajah. Married at age of ten to a Bengali lawyer, who practised in Patna. Had six children by 1918 when she was widowed. Returned to father's place, took to writing as an outlet of her bereavement. Was recognised by contemporary literary figures as a powerful creative writer.

These recent retrievals and reflections have also made one thing clear — that the experience in Bengal was not quite the same as in Punjab. While numerous short stories and several novels in Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi (also a few in English) have chronicled the brutality and mass migration at the western border, the Bangla writers focussed not so much on the violence of the moment, but on the continued misery of the refugees, the degradation of lives and the erosion of values. The fact that the transfer of population in the eastern sector was relatively gradual may explain why the exodus and the trauma of displacement were not represented in Bangla fiction so dramatically. Thousands of landless people did cross the border to swell the crowd in the Sealdah station and fill up refugee camps, but a large number of Hindus of the professional and landed class stayed on till long after the partition, unwilling to accept the verdict of history. Indeed, Taslima Nasreen's novel Lajja reminded us recently that some of them never crossed the border at all.

But the partition of Bengal nevertheless became allegorized in the literary imagination through a nostalgia for a lost paradise, and the severance from the wholeness of an organic past. Prefigured years ago in Pather Panchali (1929), the theme of the irrevocable transition from a childhood rooted in nature to a fractured adulthood in the city now got accentuated by the fact that the East Bengal was on the whole more rural and agrarian than Calcutta and its surrounding districts.

In Bengal the epic statements about the partition are to be found not in novels but in Ritwik Ghatak's films. Growing up in the post-partition years, I have memories of reading innumerable udvastu (refugee) stories, but novels that grapple with the sweep of this historic event without allegorising it, do not easily come to mind. That is why last year when I came across Jyotirmoyee Debi's novel E-paar ganga o-paar ganga for the first time, it was, as the editors have justly predicted, "like the discovery of a new country".



Much to my shame, I had not read the novel when it first appeared (in the journal Probasi in 1967, then as a book published by Rupa & Co. Calcutta, in 1968). The present edition appears in a volume that brings together a selection of Jyotirmoyee Debi's (1894-1989) work — two novels, six short stories, eight critical and six personal essays. The material is carefully arranged and amply introduced — first by the editors, then by Jasodhara Bagchi, Director of the School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur (who sponsored this publication) followed by a personal note by the author's daughter. The meticulousness of the bibliographical notes and the appendix all add up to what is a model for responsible editing. But reviewing the collection is not my purpose here. I focus on a single novel in the volume which to me — despite the deceptive simplicity and gentleness of tone — is one of the toughest renderings of the partition theme that I have across in Bangla. The evocation of the Mahabharat adds a resonance to the narrative, forming understated, but powerful subtext. The references are not to the fratricidal battle, but to the elegiac Stree-parva and the devastation of the penultimate can to of the epic — the Mushal-Parva. In the prologue the author tells us that she had chosen Stree-parva as the title of her novel, but had to change it at the request of the publisher. The original title would have reflected the starkness of the theme better, highlighting the link with the Mahabharata. The present title echoes a nursery rhyme (e-paar ganga o-paar ganga madhyekhane char/taar majhete boshe achhe Shib sadagar), but suits the theme neither literally nor metaphorically. The dividing river between the two Bengals in any case is not Ganga; if at all it is Padma.

In the Prologue to the novel Jyotirmoyee Debi points out that the Stree-parva in the Mahabharata is not about women alone, it is an account of the death, separation and sorrow of an entire clan. The true story of the women, according to her, could not be written, because it was indescribable. Vyasa did not have the pen or the ink or the bhurja-patra on which to inscribe the shameful desecration of the female body that a war entailed. Only a few verses in the Mushal-parva briefly touch upon it. When Arjun came to Dwaraka to protect the women and accompany them to a safer place, the bandits seized and ravished the women right in front of the great warrior. He found he could not lift his gandiva, suddenly his weapons failed him. Jyotirmoyee Debi's novel is as much about female vulnerability in a male battle for power, as about the impotence of the men who act as their custodians.

I understand that the English translation of the novel is shortly to be published by Kali for Women. But until that is available a brief summary may not be out of place here. When the story begins Sutara Datta lives alone in Delhi, teaching history in Yagyaseni College (another reminder of Mahabharata through Draupadi's name) near Tughlaquabad. The flash-back of her life is triggered off by a realisation that the officially sanctioned history she is supposed to teach in the classroom is riddled with inexplicable holes. Which historian can ever fill up these blanks?

The story then goes back to that unsullied past, a rural childhood in East Bengal, where Hindus and Muslims lived side by side, the children playing together, the fathers sharing their work. But the description falls short of idealisation, because we are reminded that the mothers of the Hindu and Muslim children never visit each other, an act of silent and gendered segregation on which Jyotirmoyee Debi has commented in her essays also. Even when Sakina and Sutara foraged together in the woods for unripe mangoes and berries, occasionally the remembered that if their mothers knew they were biting into the same fruit there would be hell to pay.

When violence broke out unexpectedly one night in 1946, two Muslim servants who were like a part of Sutara's family set fire to their cowshed. Before the adolescent girl understood what was happening, her parents were dead and her elder sister had jumped into the pond. An unconscious Sutara was rescued by the neighbour Tamijuddin Sahed, the headmaster of the school where Sutara's father was a teacher. His wife tried to nurse the stunned girl back to normalcy while public opinion mounted against the Tamijuddin family for sheltering a Hindu girl. Six months passed before anyone could figure out what to do with the girl. Sutara's brothers in Calcutta did not seem too enthusiastic about taking her back, and Sutara clung on to Tamij Saheb's wife, refusing to go with any relief party. This unsophisticated village housewife, to whom Sutara was no different from her own Aziz or Sakina, does not understand why a woman's body should be a pawn in the male scramble for dividing the land. She asks her school-teacher husband — which religion teaches this? The quran does not Tamij Saheb's attempts to reason with the village elders fail because they want to know had there ever been a time when women were not the victims in men's strifes? This was human nature, they said. Look at the Hindu puranas. Did Ravan not abduct Sita? and what about Draupadi? Did Tamij Saheb not have a Hindu girl in his own house?

Once in Calcutta, Sutara realises that an invisible barrier prevents her from belonging to her brother's family. After shuttling from one home to another she finds refuge in a Christian missionary hostel, where she resumes her interrupted high school education. There are no villains among those who reject her, but insidious pressures in the name of purity, pollution and the Hindu social order erode the most liberal attitudes. By the time the grown up Sutara arrives in Delhi to take up her first job, she is a lonely introvert, the only human links being with the Tamijuddin family through letters, and a tenuous friendship with a young man and a woman from the extended family in Calcutta.

From this point the plot gets too complicated for summary but one poignant moment stands out. On her way to Karachi, Sakina meets Sutara in Delhi, and prompted by her mother, suggests a marriage between Aziz and Sutara. Sutara is faced with a crucial decision. She values her relationship with them and knows she would be cherished more by Aziz and his family than anyone else in the world, but she cannot accept the offer as long as she remembers the death of her parents. Religion and human bonds pull her in different directions. The novel ends with the promise of another relationship which might heal the scars of a wound that was inflicted a decade and a half ago. Meanwhile she gets drawn into her present life, goes for a journey to the Himalayas, and the realisation that her Punjabi colleagues also have been through similar traumas in the past, thaws her out of her stony stupor to forge friendships across the barrier of language. This is the only narrative text that I know that brings together dislocated people from Punjab and Bengal in a single story.

Reading Jyotirmoyee Debi in her centenary year is an experience of continual amazement at the way she could transmute a personal vision of localised terror into a historic and mythical paradigm of dispossession and paralysis of identity. The strategy of recalling the events through a young girl's consciousness enabled the author to keep up a non-judgmental stance and to conjure up the claustrophobic ethos of stigma without ever mentioning the word 'rape' which lay at the core of the plot. Married at eleven, widowed at twentyfive, Jyotirmoyee Debi entered the world of literature late. She knew the culture of Rajasthan well because she grew up in Jaipur, but she took trouble to learn about other regions and other religions, and not infrequently her fictional characters are 'non-Bengali' a creature shunned by the Bangla novelists even today.

The sweep of her mental as well as geographical horizon makes today's reader forget the obstacles she must have faced in the patriarchal Bangla literary establishment, long before it was trendy for women to be either feminist or political. Jyotirmoyee Debi is unhesitatingly both.

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