

Post-partition traumatic suffering, Displacement, and Violence: An analysis of Kapil Krishna Thakur’s “The Other Jew”

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Abstract: Through a close textual analysis of Kapil Krishna Thakur’s notable short story “The Other Jew” this research article attempts to analyze how the traumatic displacement from the native land has shaped the lives of the Bengali Dalit refugees in post-partition West Bengal. In a noteworthy manner, Thakur’s narrative shifts from the point of view of Bengali upper-caste elite refugee experiences and provides a counter-narrative of it. Centering the argument on Thakur’s short fiction “The Other Jew” this article tries to inquire the effects of the loss of a familiar space, the notion of traumatic displacement, painful suffering situations in the host nation, and the sexual violence imposed on the Bengali Dalit women refugees from the purview of trauma theory and Johan Galtung’s conceptualization of violence. It demonstrates the multidimensional aspects of the refugees’ experience from a Dalit’s point of view, the idea of traumatic suffering, displacement, pain, violence, and its representation in Thakur’s fiction which severely contradicts the upper caste refugee experience in the post-partition West Bengal.

Keywords: Bengali Dalit refugee, Dalit women, trauma, displacement, violence

Introduction

In the realm of South Asian history, the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 became a crucial factor that eventually shaped the future of two newly born countries (India and Pakistan) as well as millions of people who became refugees overnight. The field of partition studies, though existing for a few decades now, is still very much in the process of shaping and with the passing time it is necessary to understand its multifaceted dimensions related to the

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different sorts of experiences and sufferings people have endured during and after the partition. The Indian independence of 1947 resulted in the partitioning of the two provinces (Punjab and Bengal), due to which cross-border migration became very common for these two newly formed states. However, in an interesting manner, refugee is not a homogeneous category, and there are several interrelated and intersectional factors of one's identity like caste, class, ethnicity, and gender that can immensely contribute to the differentiated experiences of the refugee populace in several junctures of their arrival in India.

In post-partition West Bengal, refugee experiences vary due to several factors that have contributed immensely to the heterogeneity of refugeehood, which needs to be understood in greater detail. The literature based on the Bengal partition scholarship mainly focuses on the upper caste and upper-middle class *bhadralok* centric emigres who have settled themselves up in the important parts of West Bengal with the help of their social capital, economic resources, and contacts. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis (2021, 827) defines,

the term *bhadralok*, which came into use around the beginning of the nineteenth century, was associated in colonial times with upper-caste Hindus with access to some wealth or landed property and claims to a liberal education. The notion has been continually changed since the early twentieth century. *Chhotolok*, on the other hand, refers to unlettered, uncultured people belonging to a low-caste order.

To holistically understand the dimensions of Bengal partition scholarship, it is crucial to unravel the standpoint of the Bengali Dalit refugee populace, who have suffered the pangs of partition severely. Interestingly, in the first half of the twenty-first century, when the second-generation Dalit refugees started writing about their experiential stance in the post-partition scenario, it contradicted the upper-caste, elitist *bhadralok* standpoint of mainstream partition renderings. Bengali Dalit fiction dealing with the post-partition scenario also works as an eye-opener regarding the rehabilitation politics of West Bengal, and the sufferings that the Bengali Dalit refugees have encountered after crossing the border.

Kapil Krishna Thakur's notable short story "The Other Jew" was first published in Bengali as *Anya Ihudi*, and later, it was translated into English by Angshuman Kar. Thakur's short story chronicles the suffering of the East Bengali Dalit refugees who have encountered tumultuous rehabilitation crises after 1947 even after entering West

Bengal. The disadvantaged Bengali Dalit refugees have to encounter the trauma associated with the loss of a homeland and they have to undergo social alienation, cultural antipathy, and spatial segregation in their host nation. Above all these factors, the Bengali Dalit women strata became the victim of severe sexual violence. Thakur's fiction became the narrative of traumatic nostalgia, loss, unbelongingness and violence imposed upon the Bengali Dalit women section which exhibits the suffering of an entire community. This research article attempts to analyze the following factors in greater detail that how Bengali Dalit fiction centering on the post-partition times, portrays the nuances of traumatic encounters for the Bengali Dalit refugees, how the trauma associated with displacement from their motherland has created a sense of suffering and unbelongingness for the Bengali Dalit characters in the host-nation, and how the Bengali Dalit women strata became the victim of sexual violence and how these factors have impacted the experiences of the entire community.

Understanding Kapil Krishna Thakur's "The Other Jew"

Kapil Krishna Thakur's "The Other Jew" starts from the grim point when Bishtu Pandit left his Boultali home in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and came to Brajabasi's hut adjacent to the shanty area of Sealdah railway station in Kolkata (capital of West Bengal) with his younger daughter Runu to find shelter. Besides being a close relative to Brajabasi, Bishtu Pandit was also his teacher in his erstwhile homeland. In the tumultuous situation of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Brajabasi left East Pakistan quite early with his family. At that point, Bishtu Pandit was reluctant to leave because of his attachment towards his homeland and moreover he thought everything would be settled down with time. During the conversation, Brajabasi gets to know the exact reason behind Bishtu Pandit's arrival in West Bengal. In a heart-wrenching manner, Bishtu Pandit narrates how a local goon, Feru, kidnapped her elder daughter, Jhunu, while she was returning from her college. Feru wanted to marry Jhunu, but she denied his proposal. After that, Feru and his companions physically tortured Jhunu all through the night, and eventually Jhunu died.

Bishtu Pandit previously lost his wife, now, after losing his elder daughter, he was only left with his younger daughter, Runu. After this painful incident, without delaying for a single day, Bishtu Pandit left his native place with his younger daughter, to save her *maan* (respect) as well as *praan* (life). Through the narrative, we get to know that

sexual violence and the murder of her elder sister, Jhunu, have affected Bishtu Pandit's younger daughter, Runu in an appalling manner. The entire incident has numbed and silenced her, and throughout the narrative, there is not a single moment when she speaks with anyone. Even after coming to West Bengal, Brajabasi tries to talk with Runu and console her, but it is of no use. Moving away from the familiar discourses of Bengal partition scholarship, this article intends to unravel the traumatic sufferings of the Bengali Dalit strata in the post-partition West Bengal, how the traumatic displacement from their motherland and sexual violence inflicted on the Bengali Dalit women strata have shaped the lives as well as the experiences of the Bengali Dalit community.

“The Other Jew” covers the factors of migration suffering, trope of nostalgia, trapping in a liminal space after coming to West Bengal, and instances of sexual violence in both sides of the borders. But leaving East Pakistan and coming to West Bengal with an aspiration of a secure future became useless to Bishtu Pandit and his other community members. At the end of Thakur's rendering, in West Bengal also, Bishtu Pandit's younger daughter Runu and several other girls from the Bengali Dalit community were demonically dragged by the local youngsters of the so-called decent families to the other side of the railway line and became the victim of severe sexual violence. All the family members of these victimized girls just screamed and were unable to do anything to save their girls because some of the youngsters were putting guns on them. Satirically, the reason for which Bishtu Pandit left his homeland, to save his younger daughter's *maan* (honour) became entirely pointless at the end. Nation and nationality, caste and gender these three crucial factors have shaped fates of the Bengali Dalit women. After encountering the same fate for both of his daughters, Jhunu and Runu, in East Pakistan and West Bengal, respectively, Bishtu Pandit frantically asked a relevant question to all who are present there, “tell me, you tell me, where is our real home?” (Thakur 2012, 90).

Traumatic Suffering and Displacement in “The Other Jew”

Regarding the notion of trauma, Michelle Balaev (2008, 149) suggests,

contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This serves as the basis for a larger argument that suggests identity is formed and shaped from the transmission of trauma from a specific event.

Here the central protagonist, Bishtu Pandit, and her younger daughter Runu became the victim of traumatic suffering because, along with the loss of their dear ones they also lost their homeland, all these factors become crucial in case of shaping their identities. The traumatic renderings of the narrative numbed Bishtu Pandit's younger daughter, Runu, and she is unable to speak about her grief to anyone. Cathy Caruth (2016) talks about the trope of unspeakability, that the traumatic encounter and the suffering associated with it ruptures one's identity in such a manner that one cannot speak about it. Regarding the traumatic memory during partition and the trope of unspeakability, Urvashi Butalia (1998) comments, "one of the commonest responses I encountered when I began work was people's (initial) reluctance to speak about the trauma they have faced"(8). To understand the effects of traumatic experiences on an individual, Jennifer Yusin (2009, 462) suggests,

if there is one common thread among traumatic experiences, whether they are collective or individual, then it is the profound manner in which people who survive traumatic events are hollowed by trauma and emerge entirely other and unrecognizable to themselves.

Through a close textual analysis of the narrative, the effect of trauma is clearly visible in the case of the actions of the characters, Bishtu Pandit, who stayed in East Pakistan, even after so many difficulties, with this hope that one day will come when everything will be as before, changed his standpoint after the death of his elder daughter. The traumatic effect of the incident is clearly visible from Bishtu Pandit's comments— "I cannot go back to that cursed land anymore" (Thakur 2012, 82). Thakur in his narrative minutely portrays the effect of trauma on the characters of the short story, Runu becomes speechless realizing the brutality that was imposed on her elder sister due to which she lost her life. On the other hand, even after leaving the homeland and coming to West Bengal, Bishtu Pandit was continuously suffering inside his mind. A respectable schoolteacher turned into a voiceless refugee who is continuously finding it difficult to deal with the harshness of refugeedom, a father who is unable to save his elder daughter and the constant indignation in the society for his refugee identity all these facets equally contributed to Bishtu Pandit's traumatic experiences.

Displacement from one's native country is an intricate psychological process with multifaceted dimensions, which tangibly affect the victim's personal, social, and cultural life. While dealing with Thakur's narrative, it was understood that unlike others Bishtu Pandit waited for better days and did not want to leave his native land but in the end, he lost his daughter, left his known home space, and came to West Bengal. Regarding the notion of traumatic displacement, Madeline Hron (2018, 289), in her essay, suggests, trauma may also occur in transit to safety, or in supposedly safe places such as

refugee camps or detention centres. Immigrants also face various hardships when in the host society – such as exploitative work conditions, inadequate living conditions, hostility, and discrimination which may lead to traumatic sequelae or psychological conditions for some individuals.

Hron's understanding of traumatic displacement is entirely applicable to the situation of Bishtu Pandit and the other members from the Bengali Dalit strata of the narrative. Leaving their motherland behind, they were exposed to various kinds of hardships in case of settling themselves in the host country. Regarding the interconnectedness of trauma and displacement Monica Luci (2020, 262) in her paper suggests,

being outside one's country and being unable or unwilling to return to it implies a substantial loss of rights and a multilevel rupture with one's own community and family. It also suggests tangible losses of material possessions, job, house, social relations, and, sometimes, personal identity and purpose.

Thakur in his rendering portrays the hardships faced by the Bengali Dalit strata. First, they have to stay at the small makeshift huts of the railway shanties and adjust themselves in the tiny spaces of the huts, and due to the problems with their citizenship scenario, they even have to suffer to earn their livelihood. The tyrannical attitude of the local political leaders and local hooliganism made their lives tough. Thakur narrates, Channo's grandma Harimoti repeatedly requested to the local leaders for the issuance of their ration cards. She told the leader, "what about our ration cards, we don't get even a drop of kerosene, to whom can we tell our plight" (Thakur 2012, 85). After hearing Harimoti's plea in a resentful manner the local leader replied that "ration card? If I give ration cards to people who live by the side of the railway line, I'll have to go to prison" (Ibid.). The local population of the host nation were considering them as potential manpower on the pretext of their

numbers but disagreed to help them to obtain their basic humanitarian rights. In the narrative, the local leader came to the refugee populace and ordered them to be present in a rally in the peak workhours but when people from the refugee populace requested them about the ration card and the citizenship rights in the host nation, they have been rebuked badly. From this scene, the point becomes clear that for the host nation the Bengali Dalit refugee populace was nothing but a collective group of nameless, faceless, voiceless people who can be used whenever and wherever needed.

The central protagonist of the narrative, Bishtu Pandit, was a respected schoolteacher in his former homeland. But after migrating to West Bengal, the scenario changed in a converse manner. Bishtu Pandit has to sell fried chickpeas in the local trains to earn his livelihood. As he was not accustomed to hawking and chooses this profession only for the sake of earning bread, this process becomes extremely difficult for him. Side by side Runu also started sewing blouses to help her father. From a respectable schoolteacher in East Pakistan to a fried chickpea seller in the Sealdah railway station, this drastic occupational shift becomes utterly problematic for him, because he loses his societal position, respect and dignity. The notion of traumatic displacement is associated with the sense of uprootedness from the former homeland and provides the sense of unbelongingness in the current host land. Pointing out Abdelmalek Sayed's conceptualizations mentioned in his *La Double Absence* (1999), Madeline Hron suggests,

the immigrant subject as both an immigrant and an emigrant who remains psychically both in the former home and the new host country, due to this, their lives always got stuck between the past and the present (Hron 2018, 289).

After living for some months in West Bengal, from one of his acquaintances Bishtu Pandit gets to know that “Feru has been shot dead by unknown persons. Some of Feru's mates have also been killed” (Thakur 2012, 88). After listening to this news, he instantly feels a bit relieved and in a jolly mood decided to visit his native land at the earliest. This incident portrays that though Bishtu Pandit is now living in West Bengal for quite some time but psychically he is deeply attached with his motherland that his life as well as his existence is stuck between his past and present as Sayed postulates.

While discussing the ideas of traumatic displacement, problematic rehabilitation scenarios in the host nation, and the sexual subjugation of women hailing from a particular community, the notion of pain became utterly important. Madeline Hron (2018) aptly describes the notion of pain concerning immigrant/refugee suffering. She suggests examining individual experiences of immigrants and refugees and tries to analyze,

the ‘damage’ associated with the migration process on a personal and social level. In so doing, it also becomes invested in ‘social suffering’ or the human consequences and responses to social problems related to migration, be it structural violence, economic disenfranchisement, or systemic racism (Hron 2018, 291).

Here in the narrative the notion of traumatic displacement for Bishtu Pandit and her younger daughter Runu is clear from the event that in what sort of appalling situations they have left their homeland. Now from the narrative it is clear that, Bishtu Pandit and the other members of the Bengali Dalit strata exposed to several cases of social sufferings.

The dichotomous scenario between the *bhadralok* refugee experience and that of the refugee experience of the Bengali Dalit strata are converse to each other. Manoranjan Byapari in this regard suggests, “the upper caste Bhadraklok community set up some 149 unauthorised new colonies in and around Kolkata” (Byapari 2018, 6), which was quite opposite to the case of the Dalit refugees who were trying to adjust themselves in the makeshift railway shanties. Bishtu Pandit, Brajabasi, Moti and the other members of the community was facing severe economic crises, and they were trying to earn their livelihoods by selling chickpeas, cucumbers, betel-leaf, cigar and other items. Without any significant reasons the local party leaders and hooligans demand hundreds of rupees of subscription fees from the refugees for their own political causes. Moreover, the native inhabitants of West Bengal address the refugees as *Banglu* (Bengali colloquial term used for the East Bengali refugees) which creates a sense of cultural antagonism towards the identity of the Bengali Dalit refugee strata. Caste Stratification in terms of rehabilitation, displacement from the motherland, belligerent attitude of the host nation, cultural antagonism, and attack on the Dalit women strata all these factors portrayed the instances of traumatic experiences and the suffering of the Bengali Dalit refugee populace in the narrative. The idea of collective identity demonstrates,

the notions of what makes individuals unique as to what makes them similar to other people in a group they belong or to which they identify themselves (Beauregard et al. 2017, 114).

It also denotes a group of people who have or think they have some traits, characteristics, symbols, cultural connotations, or history in common. The notion of collective identity also became prevalent when people from a specific group or community suffered for similar reasons or became exposed to an event that extensively affected their group consciousness and ruptured their identity. In Thakur's narrative, the Bengali Dalit strata suffered through the post-partition pangs, displacement from the native land, rehabilitation crises in West Bengal, and sexual assault on the women strata of the community, all of these worked together to build their collective identity as a community, who are compatriots in their sufferings and agonies.

Bengali Dalit women strata and the notion of sexual violence

The barbaric sexual assault on Runu, Shiuli, and other girls of Chennu's age by the locals can be considered as a mechanism of control imposed by the casteist patriarchy on the Bengali Dalit strata. In both countries, the so-called powerful men holding social capital with their barbaric treatment played with the Bengali Dalit women's lives and in both cases "female sexuality and body become a fetish" (Dasgupta 2011, 30) for them. Women belonging from the Dalit strata are twice marginalized because of their caste and gender identity but in this case the Bengali Dalit women section is thrice marginalized based on their caste-gender and refugee identity. Bringing upon Johan Galtung's conceptualisation of violence (1969, 1990) this article also aims to examine the dynamism of violence in "The Other Jew".

Thakur's narrative highlights how gender-centric sexual violence "operates at different levels and intersects with other forms of oppression" (Asl and Hanafiah 2024, 2) such as caste, class, culture and ethnicity. Galtung categorized violence into three distinct types—direct, cultural, and structural violence. Galtung asserts that these categories are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, with direct violence serving to reinforce structural violence while cultural violence is often used to justify both forms (Galtung and Fischer 2013). Galtung suggests, "structural violence as subtle and systemic that stems from unequal power relations and manifests in 'social injustice' like poverty and marginalization" (Galtung 1969, 171). In this narrative, Thakur (2012, 89) demonstrates

those frenzied drunken members of so-called 'decent families' forcibly pull Runu, Shiuli and other girls of Chenno's age out of the huts and demonically take them to the darkness on the other side of the railway line.

Through this demonstration Thakur tries to portray how the women population of the Bengali Dalit community becomes the victims of structural violence on the hands of the powerful men, backed with social status and power in the newly formed West Bengal. Here the sexual violence imposed on the Bengali Dalit women section portrays the unequal power relation that is prevalent between them and the men of the so-called decent families. Applying the Galtungian understanding of structural violence, we can proclaim that the impoverished situation and the marginalized 'Dalit' and 'refugee' identity of the women strata make their position weak in comparison to the malefactors. Due to all these factors the offenders from the reputed families thought that it will be unchallenging for them to exercise their power over the Bengali Dalit women strata.

Thakur also tries to portray the fact that how the unequal distribution of power among the perpetrator men and the victimised Bengali Dalit women strata gives confidence to those offenders that they assaulted the women in the presence of their community members. Galtung suggests in this regard—

torture is a system that enables individuals to exercise social and political control over others. Therefore, this form of violence is categorized as community violence, which in the case of the portrayed patriarchal society, facilitate prioritizing male dominance and increasing the prevalence of physical abuse against women (Asl and Hanafiah 2024, 10–11).

Here the so-called members from the decent families attacked the Bengali Dalit women strata and asserts their power on the bodies of women folk. The characters like Runu, Shiuli, Chenno and other girls of same age have been sexually assaulted by the powerful men of the society in front of their community members. This incident becomes crucial because the Bengali Dalit women section did not have the basic humanitarian rights in the post-partition West Bengal, they even don't have the citizenship of the host nation. Exercising the control on the women strata who were devoid of citizenship rights, social capital and economic possession and belongs from bottom line of the caste structure was basically unchallenging for the perpetrators. This whole incident creates a severe traumatic impact on the family members of

the girls who became the victim of it. To portray the intensity of the scenario, Thakur (2012, 90) narrates,

Bishtucharan looks at some of the faces in perplexity and then he bursts into sobs. He questions, O Bejo, for what then did you leave your home behind?

At this point of time, the entire point of leaving his beloved homeland seemed pointless to Bishtu Pandit. The impact of trauma is clear from the point that, being a father, Bishtu Pandit has witnessed the same sort of miserable fate for both of his daughters, and he was unable to do anything to save them. The impact of traumatic suffering in Bishtu Pandit's character is clear from the lines- "seeing the last train for Bongaon coming, he starts running down the track in utter desperation, crying out, 'O my Runu...o my Jhunu'" (Thakur 2012, 90). The frantic yelling of Bishtu Pandit, directionless running, and questioning the other refugees in a painful tone about why they have left their country and came to this foreign land when a similar sort of fate is waiting for them everywhere, illustrates the traumatic underpinnings of the scene. Thakur, through his rendering, depicts how the Bengali Dalit refugee women strata became the victim of structural and sexual violence, which devastated their lives in every possible manner.

Conclusion

Thakur's narrative provides a wide scope for revisiting the sufferings as well as the experiences of the Bengali Dalit refugee strata in the post-partition West Bengal. In the post-partition historiography, the subjection of Bengali Dalit strata in several ways creates sheer hardships and painful traumatic experiences for the Bengali Dalit populace who have lost their homeland. Kapil Krishna Thakur, with his narrative structure, has pointed out the notions of traumatic encounters, suffering, and pain related to displacement, oppressive behaviour from the characters of the host nation, and extreme form of sexual violence that was imposed on the Bengali Dalit women strata. In this painful suffering process, the angle of caste associated with the Bengali Dalit people's identity also contributes in the utmost manner.

Through the close textual analysis "The Other Jew", this article attempts to trace the shift from the homogeneous standpoint to the differentiated experiences of Bengali Dalit people and the Bengali Dalit women populace based on the contours of their caste, gender, and refugee identity and how these factors and the notion of displacement substantially impacted the lives of Bengali Dalits as well as the

disintegration of the community as a whole. Thakur's narrative became one of the path-breaking pieces of evidence in challenging the state-sponsored official narrative to analyze the agony of the Bengali Dalits in post-partition West Bengal. This short story also adds new dimensions in terms of post-partition Dalit scholarship because previously, in the case of the understanding of the post-partition Dalit refugee experience, the crucial point of gender was substantially ignored. "The Other Jew" adds newer dimensions in terms of post-partition Dalit scholarship because it portrays the otherized Dalit side of experience in the post-partition West Bengal.

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