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## Partition Trauma and Layered Experiences in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*

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### Abstract:

The present paper aims to examine the traumatic and layered experiences of the Partition victims of East Bengal by exploring the intersection of history, memory, identity, and marginality in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*. This nonlinear narrative presents a compelling tapestry of chaos, communal violence, loss, anguish, and alienation endured by the displaced. Through the life and struggles of the protagonist, Arjun, the author draws a parallel to the existential crisis and moral dilemma faced by Arjuna in the Mahabharata. It exhibits that the catastrophic event of Partition renders millions of people homeless and identity less, and how the affected fight against various forms of violence and marginalisation. The paper also explores how the experiences of Arjun show that the Partition was an act of political cynicism, and how the political elites failed to assess and control the fringe elements, who galvanised the common and illiterate masses into religious frenzy by exploiting their sensitivities. The bullying of Arjun by fellow Muslim classmates, but encouragement and appreciation of him by the Muslim teachers in school in East Bengal, lecherous male gazes and denial of assistance by Hindus during the painful migration to West Bengal, administrative apathy, bullying and deadly attacks from within community, and exploitation of the vulnerable offer new perspectives about the torments of the refugees.

**Keywords:** *Partition, Communal Violence, Refugee, Trauma, Memory, Marginality.*

Sunil Gangopadhyay, one of the prolific Bengali writers, was born in Faridpur, Bangladesh, but his family migrated to Kolkata before the Partition of India in 1947. His literary oeuvre deal with diverse themes of love, sexuality, politics, history, identity and existence etc. *Arjun*, published in 1971, encompasses a range of themes reflecting the contemporary issues faced by the refugee diaspora. Hindus and Muslims who had been living together for centuries were divided into Hindustanis and Pakistanis immediately after the declaration of Partition. The happiness and joy of being free Indian after independence from the colonial power turn into gloom and despondency for millions of people at both side of the new borders. Criminals from both sides took the opportunity to loot, rape and murder people of the other religion. Although the

Partition was comparatively less bloody in the Eastern part of the country than the North-West region, it witnessed significant disorder and displacement nonetheless. The novella focuses on the poor migrants who remained in East Bengal for decades, but had to leave during 1960s due to increasing fear of being harmed by religious majority. The group of migrants consisted of well-to-do upper caste Hindus, who had good connections and relatives already in Calcutta, migrated immediately after the Partition, but the poor Hindus who started coming after a decade were not accepted and given any space in West Bengal by their fellow Hindus who had migrated earlier and settled well in Calcutta, as in the case of Amaladi's sisters.

“A second trend in the literature has focused on Partition as a cultural and personal disaster, the fissure of two major regional cultures (Punjab and Bengal) that were divided between the successor states, and the suffering of millions of uprooted refugees and their descendants.”

(Schendel; 24)

The novella shows that the poor migrants have to manage to sell their small patches of land at very low prices with hopes of reception and subsequent integration into new place and culture in West Bengal. The narrative of Arjun offers the post-partition sufferings of the families who are despised in East Bengal and considered as burden in West Bengal. The nonlinear narrative of the novel begins with a small filthy refugee settlement called Deshpran colony with many families of destitute refugees reside with no appropriate legal documentation and civic amenities. The opening of the novella lays bare the endeavours of the residents to uplift their conditions by setting up small businesses and getting children educated so that they can get some employment. No water, no road, erratic electricity and no welfare scheme for these refugees indicate the apathy of government. The naming of colony as Deshpran Colony symbolises that the place is vital for the survival and existence this community.

Despite all the collective sufferings and predicaments, deviation of some youths to different paths such as being aggressive, bully, self-proclaimed brigades to protect the colony signifies that human being has some traits that are universal and independent of religion, region and ethnicity. The colony serves as a microcosm of the beginning of any civilisation. Arjun's recollection of his past and present while trying to recover his memory after being admitted to a hospital following a deadly attack reveals events from his childhood days in East Bengal. Before the Partition, East Bengal had huge number of Hindu populations with many wealthy landlords, middle-class families, and untouchable Hindu communities. A majority of poor Muslims peasant worked in the fields owned by Hindu landlords without any tension. However, with the Partition, landlords left East Bengal by selling off their lands, and began settling in and around Calcutta. The novel shows how the influx of refugee Muslims from India to East Bengal in turn increase the Muslim population significantly, and poor Hindus become a minority.

Arjun is exceptionally intelligent and always stands first in his class, which the Muslim children despise, but the class teacher and the headmaster, despite being Muslims, appreciate and encourage him. Arjun is always bullied and sometimes thrashed by the frenzied boys on the grounds that he belonged to the Hindu community. The novella highlights that the aged and sensible people of the village from the Muslim community show their sympathy and kindness to the Hindu minority, but the supporters and firebrands of the Muslim League adopt an aggressive attitude, instilling a sense of insecurity in Hindus. This feeling of foreboding descends on all Hindus, bringing the upper castes and untouchables closer together, thereby

shifting caste dynamics among Hindus. When Arjun is threatened and beaten by fellow Muslim students, the all the Hindu castes show solidarity, though not openly. The novella showcases that all social hierarchies and caste dynamics are social constructs, that shift and evolve with the emergence of new power structures.

The willingness of Arjun's father to not leave his village, highlights the immense pain and trauma of migrants. His health deteriorates leading to his death, and after completing all the rituals at the place where he was born as per his desire, Arjun's widowed mother plans for migration. The village teacher Amjad Ali's persuasion and assurance to Arjun's widowed mother to get their burnt house rebuilt and providing all possible help and security project that humanity is beyond all fault lines of religion. The experiences of the teacher and Arjun's family were traumatic. The elderly, irrespective of their religious identities, had firm faith in a return to normalcy and brotherhood once the difficult times were over. They believed, "The misconception of a few ignorant leaders turned millions of people into servants".(Arjun) It was a political propaganda for miscreants to gain control over mass by fuelling hatred and anger. The story foregrounds that the social fabric of East Bengal was very strong and withstood the contemporary political injustice. Arjun finds that the tendency of criminality causes much harm rather than the Partition. The following instance serves as a commentary on the religious hypocrisy that led to the Partition:

"The Bengali Muslims never managed to acquire power; the West Pakistanis continue to play the part of foreign overlords. So, in absolute term, it would not be a mistake to say that within the framework of Pakistan, East Bengal never achieved freedom.... The holders of power in Pakistan had no proper adherence to Islam. In their manner, life-style, food and habits, they aped the British. (Arjun; 49)

To fulfil their vested interests, corrupt politicians and criminals began provoking communal hatred. Financially weak and bound to spend days on railway platforms without any assistance, Arjun's family undertakes an arduous journey on foot into uncharted territories that unearths the dark side of human nature. Some rascals pretend to offer them shelter with the motive of seducing his mother. The respectable family in desperation and hunger is forced to beg for survival. Their identity shifted to that of a refugee overnight. The story of a fellow migrant, Grandfather Nishi, who goes blind under torture of the colonial police during the struggle for independence, foregrounds the horror of Partition, which did not value the sacrifices of freedom fighters, as Grandfather Nishi also had to escape the homeland he had once fought for. The shelter tents on Indian side could not accommodate all the refugees and forced them to take "shelter under the trees eating, sleeping, defecating in the same place led to cholera spread and massive deaths."(Arjun) The lack of preparedness and apathy of government agencies aggravated the victims' pangs. It showcases that the loss of homeland and the extremely shocking marginalisation by the host country were unbearable, and furthermore, compounded by the visits of seducers who offered help in exchange for young refugee women. No mechanism to ensure safety and security was devised, as Arjun's family—once reputed in their village—now faces an extreme existential threat in India. The paper argues that the idea of religion and brotherhood in terms of Partition proves merely a façade. Under the garb of religion, scoundrels' meanness and moral depravity are covered up. The protagonist's layered experiences underscore the propaganda at work during that time. The Partition exposed poor refugees to all forms of bestiality and exploitation. Millions died on their way to

supposedly guest countries in search of a better future. Those who remained alive were traumatised by the wickedness of human nature. According to Dipesh Chakarbarti, the writings by these refugee underscore:

“Stories and incidents of sexual harassment and degradation of women, of forced eviction, of physical violence and humiliation marked their experience. The Hindu Bengali refugees who wrote these essays had to make a new life in the difficult circumstances of the overcrowded city of Calcutta”

Arjun’s flashback offers a compelling narrative of their final settlement in West Bengal. Poor migrants irrespective of their castes undergo the same suffering. It shows how life becomes burden while waiting for help from Government machinery. A minor character, Biraj Thakur, seeing the deplorable condition of the refugees instils bit courage to capture and occupy empty houses in Dum Dum area forcefully.

“Long after 1947, we now realize, refugees and displaced continued to move within and across the new borders. The state, whether India or Pakistan, set its face against them and offered them little or no support. Such rehabilitation as they achieved was by their own efforts. Often refugees occupied property by force, regardless of to whom it belonged, whether government or other citizens”. (Chatterji; 311)

The novel underscores that in destitution, people resort to animalistic behaviour, and if the refugees had not had a shelter, they would have turned to crimes and begun to behave savagely. But the newfound place in Dum Dum area gives temporary shelter, some security, meaning and hope to their bettered lives. Gradually, they started engaging in menial work to make a living. The wounds from their traumatic and horrific experiences slowly began to heal. Arjun’s sincerity, intelligence, and remarkable academic performance in a college in Calcutta earned him many deserving friends, such as his classmate Shukla, her brother Prabal, and Professor Abanish. His intelligence restores some reputation to his family and locality. His desire to serve his people, despite many offers from his resourceful acquaintances from Calcutta to settle there, entangles his life into endless perils. The factory owner, Kewal Singh, wants to purchase their land for expansion of his factory, but Arjun’s knowledge of law and good connections doesn’t let him succeed. Dibya, a goof friend of Arjun and a muscular, and strong boy, once saviour of the colony, is manipulated by Kewal Singh, who bribes and offers a job to him.

Kewal’s attempt to influence the poor people and boys like Dibya with the power of money and wine hinder the noble efforts of Arjun to get the colony legally authorised. Arjun’s rejection of his mother’s persuasion to leave the place for better opportunities showcases that how selflessly he wishes to see his people as legal citizens of West Bengal, so that they and their generations could not suffer identity crisis, rootlessness and exploitation. His vehement resistance is thwarted by the capital Kewal Singh’s manipulation. His friend Dibya with gangs of other boys turns antagonist owing to utter ignorance and unfounded biases against him. Inebriated Dibya and his gang’s subsequent raping of Labonya, beloved of Arjun, indicates the degeneration and decline in values. Arjun’s wisdom and farsightedness infuse the majority of residents with a sense of collectivism against capitalist forces, but his endeavours fail to persuade these rogues who endanger the future of the community and the colony.

These scoundrels’ efforts to harm Arjun, his beloved Labonya and his loyal dog evoke the myth of Mahabharata in which the Kauravas insult Draupadi, reject peace proposal from Krishana, and eventually

meet horror and great destruction in Kurukshetra. Arjun's pain while fighting against his own ignorant friends, driven by greed, serves as a parallel to the dilemma of Kunti's son Arjuna, but he had Krishna to guide and support him. The modern-day Arjun has no such help from anyone, from the beginning till end. His experiences of communal riots in East Bengal to conflict among same community of refugee in west Bengal provide multiple perspectives about the nature of human being. Gangopadhyay uses Arjun as an active agent who emerges from passive victimhood to fight all odds. He fights hard to protect his place as 'place' is according to eco-critic Lawrence Buell "a deeply personal phenomenon founded on one's life-world and everyday practices" (Buell 71). In the memories of the refugee, the homeland always remains alive- a place they long to return to.

### **Conclusion:**

Gangopadhyay's Arjun negotiates the horror, trauma and painful rehabilitation of East Bengali refugees by exploring layered experience of them through the memories of the protagonist, Arjun. It portrays how the poor, minorities, women and vulnerable groups are the worst sufferers, enduring unbearable pain. Murder, rape, hunger, and destitution dominate their lives. Their hopes are shattered when they face similar treatment and neglect in the host country too. Their individual and collective traumas are aggravated, when some of the victims, become perpetrators by exploiting members of their own community. The novel also demonstrates that women remain as vulnerable as they were during partition, often exploited and seduced by their own community members. It highlights that criminality is not characteristic of any caste, creed, religion, or nation.

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