



PORTRAYAL OF THE TRAUMATIC STATE OF MIGRATED PEOPLE IN DEBENDRANATH ACHARYYA'S JANGAM

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Abstract

Written in the backdrop of Second World War, Debendranath Acharyya's novel Jangam delineates realistically the traumatic experience of survival of Burmese Indians. When the Japanese soldiers captured Burma from the hands of British, the Indian settlers who were once migrated to Burma with the British faced a hostile situation and were forced to leave Burma instantaneously, although they were living there generations after generations. Taking the advantage of war, the Burmese insurgents treated the Indian settlers inhumanly and forcefully displaced them from Burma to suffer in the state of existential dilemma and thousands of people embarked a hazardous journey to Northeast India. The novel Jangam serves as the essential fictional record of this mass exodus unrecorded in history. It is without any doubt that Debendrantha Acharyya's language as well as the art of representation is so appealing and realistic that the story of Jangam captures the attention of every reader intact until its ending. The paper seeks to study the traumatic state of migrated people – their immeasurable physical pain in the way back to India as well as their mental trauma due to the betrayal of the Burmese whom they assumed as their kin after years of living together there.

Key Words: *Migration, Trauma, Forced Migration, Existential Dilemma, Memory.*

Introduction

Debendranath Acharyya's Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *Jangam* delineates a miserable story of a group of migrated people who are under the traumatic state both physically and mentally. The novel revolves around the character of Ramgobinda and his desperate escape with his pregnant wife, his elderly mother and his son. The central characters, Ramgobinda and his wife Lachmee undergo mental illness due to the trauma they endured in their life. According to Cambridge Dictionary, the word "trauma" refers to "a severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience". Trauma can be of two types: Physical and mental. The transformation of meaning of "trauma" from physical to psychical wound took place over the course of later half of nineteenth century. Medics soon recognized that accident victims could escape physical injury completely, yet suffer persistent forms of mental distress long after the event. A psychical trauma is something that although falls out of the conscious memory, still it present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost. The term "trauma theory" was first introduced in Cathy Caruth's influential work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) where she formalized a cross-disciplinary framework for understanding trauma's relationship to memory, narrative, and history. Debendranath Acharyya was a promising and extraordinarily genius writer in the field of Assamese literature. Born in 1937, Acharyya took his education from Kharagpur and later from London. With his three novels – *Anya Yuga Anya Purus* (1970), *Kalpurush* (1976) and *Jangam* (1982), Acharyya establishes his literary genius and set a model of proficient prose style. Published posthumously, Acharyya's third novel *Jangam*, which won him 1984 Sahitya Akademi Award, is based on the backdrop of Second World War describing realistically the pathetic story of escaping from Burma by the migrated people of Indian Descent.



Discussion

The story of the novel started with a small village called Manku situated in the bank of Iravati River. Long ago under the British colonialism, a group of Indian people migrated to Burma in search of better fortune and they lived there for generations. When the Japanese soldiers captured Burma from the hands of British during the Second World War, the Indian settlers in Burma faced an unexpected situation and were forced to leave Burma instantaneously by a group of Burmese insurgents. They treated the Indians inhumanly and displaced them from Burma to suffer in the state of existential dilemma. Although the story focuses on Ramgobinda's family, it also portrays the larger picture of collective trauma endured by thousands of migrated people of Indian origin.

This paper aims at to study the traumatic state of migrated people – their immeasurable physical pain in their way back to India through the impassable path as well as their mental trauma due to the betrayal of the Burmese whom they assumed as their kin after years of living together there.

The forefathers of Ramgobinda, moved to Burma in search of a utopia, that there are abundance of materials for survival, opportunities of job and cultivation in fertile soil in Burma. So, they entered Burma with the help of British. At the beginning, their lives were run smoothly as they started their livelihood with cultivation residing in the fertile area of the bank of Iravati but gradually they were turned into a deplorable condition by the natural calamities like flood, drought etc. which caused famine – out of scarcity, they had to eat *chira*, *mudi*, *pitha* etc. as the substitutes of rice. Aggravating their condition, the Second World War started. It brought opportunity for Burmese to banish the British who ruled there almost one hundred years. Burmese nationalists joined the hand of Japanese army for this purpose. In such a turmoil situation, the fate of the migrated Indians who settled there long ago had to move back to India forcefully. Along with the British, the poor Indian peasants were not spared from the animalistic behavior of the Burmese insurgents. The innocent families of Indian farmers like Ramgobinda, Haricharan, Budhu, Nitu, Chinti etc. had to flee from Burma within one night to save their lives through the borders of India-Burma. The insurgent Burmans played with the blood of innocent peasants of Indian descent and they became so violent that if any Burmese either gave shelter to the Indian immigrants or helped in escaping, he/she would be brutally killed too. The novel portrays the loss of humanity very masterfully. Throughout the novel, a group of sixteen migrants, their trials and tribulations in their arduous journey back to India are described in a very realistic way. But there were some sensible and good-hearted Burmans also, the neighbors like Guchenpung, Ba-Mao, Joynao, Buchamao etc. who did not support this forced migration. Out of sympathy and utter emotion, Guchenpung, one of the chiefs and elders of the Manku village says to the Indian peasants in the novel: “You are neither the oppressor, nor the deceiver... You are yourselves the group of oppressed...” (Acharyya 18)

The Indian origin Burmese were living like a family with the people of Burma. However, with Japanese invasion and the hostility of the Burmese people towards Indians made Ramgobinda question his own identity and existence when he was about to become a refugee. Born and brought up by generations, the Indian settlers never thought that they would be banished by the people who were once their friends and neighbors. This group of people was traveling to a country that was completely foreign to them. For Ramgobinda, Burma was home, not India, and losing his house in Manku was the first painful blow of trauma for him and for his fellow in the group. In such a predicament, Ramgobinda says:



But where will we flee? We are the inhabitants of Burma. We born here, our homes and everything are here. We belong to here – similar to you. Who will interpret this to the Burmese insurgents? His eyes outpour the fire of anxiety, hatred, detestation and depression. (Acharyya 22)

The path taken by the migrants bore unendurable suffering and danger of death hedged them in every single moment. Their journey from Manku to Nampung by foot through the impassable hills took almost one month. Sometimes they took rest in some unknown villages for a short while. The condition of the migrants became so horrible as well as pathetic that it mocks the humanity itself:

This journey is uncertain by a group of helpless and impoverished people. This escaping of a group of oppressed and frightened people is like an extreme disgrace towards the entire human entity. (Acharyya 65)

They carried little food and clothes along with them. Out of the utmost hungry, the group of migrants ate the wild fruits found in their path via forest. In this painful journey, two Christian missionaries and an Anglo-Burman girl also joined them. The path through the thick forests troubled them a lot. The thorny vines bothered them to move forward and cut their clothes as well as fleshes which were bleeding. They were nearly dead and looked like corpses. Still all were moving forward silently and aimlessly without the fear of death as it is mentioned in the novel: “Nobody has the fear of death now – as if the unbearability of life has ridiculed even the gruesomeness of death.” (Acharyya 125)

During such a toilsome journey, Ramgobinda’s wife Lachmee gave birth to a son. But Lachmee and Balllab had been sent to the hospital of military camp due to their deteriorating health. The separation from his loving wife made Ramgobinda internally restless and desperate which later led to his mental illness. Through the scene of their separation till the very end of the novel, the novelist may try to emphasize the fact that how war separates and breaks the loving and happy families. Both the husband and wife; Ramgobinda and Lachmee are shown as mentally imbalance which indicates the extreme level of psychic pain of the migrated people or what we call trauma. All the migrated people depicted in the novel are under traumatic state both mentally and physically. The couple Ramgobinda and Lachmee is the perfect examples of that. The Anglo-Burman girl, Ma-Po who joined the group of migrants desired to join as a Buddhist nun somewhere in India which indicates the necessity of peace and harmony in human life. But later she joined as a nurse to dedicate her life in service of humanity which brings an optimistic note. At the end of the novel, the lost Lachmee was searched out which indicate another ray of hope and momentum to the story.

Conclusion

The novel is filled with pain of losing loved ones, anguish of leaving behind one’s home and sense of belongingness and sense of self or identity. The journey of migrated people is a relentless confrontation with death and torment leaving with deep psychological injuries on the survivors. The novel represents both personal and collective trauma of a forgotten exodus. It stands as a crucial document of forgotten tragedy of displacement at the cost of war and insurgency often unregistered in mainstream historical narratives. The novel also gives voice to the marginalized. The title of the novel, “Jangam” refers to the momentum, the motivation for life. At last, it can be said that the title of the novel is appropriate in the context of the story.



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