***Victory Colony, 1950* by Bhaswati Ghosh, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2020, Paperback ₹ 499**

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"*Who is going to write their stories when no one even cares whether they exist or not?*

- MANAS DUTTA, DIARY ENTRY, SEPTEMBER 1950" (Ghosh 77)

This is how Manas Dutta, one of the central characters of Bhaswati Ghosh's first work of fiction, *Victory Colony, 1950*, ends his 'DIARY ENTRY' and the poignant question strikes at the heart of the ideological underpinnings of Refugee Studies at large. Written against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition that divided the province of Bengal into East Bengal[1] and West Bengal, *Victory Colony, 1950* deals with the lives of the refugees and narrativizes the tales of loss and longing, recovery and resilience through a realistic portrayal of Calcutta in the 1950s.

In the wake of the politically motivated riots that followed the Partition, individuals from the eastern part of Bengal mostly migrated to Calcutta (Ghoshal 93). Understandably, the novel begins at the Sealdah railway stations, where Amala Manna and her younger brother, Kartik, are engulfed in the crowd of incoming refugees. Amidst the squalor and commotion of the railway platforms, Amala and Kartik get separated. Soon, Amala is rescued by a group of volunteers led by Manas Dutta, and the narrative shifts its focus to the trials and tribulations of living in the refugee camp.

In the initial segment of the novel, Ghosh paints a picture of the Gariahat refugee camp, which becomes a veritable site of struggle between the government officials and the refugees. The paucity of space, lack of food and drinking water, and the looming presence of diseases haunt the spatial configuration of the camp. While the officials want to engage the refugees in productive labour, they pay little attention to the mental state of the homeless, rootless people. Urmila, who

has lost her husband in the riots, breaks down on seeing a pair of scissors in one of the volunteers' hands. Her irascible behaviour is further reflected in her unwillingness to take care of her infant son. In another moving episode, Amala, who has decided to immerse herself in work to keep her bearings together, fails to do the daily chores and she is sharply reprimanded by an official when she cites '*mon kharap* [feeling sad]' as the reason to avoid work for a day (Ghosh 27). In the narrative structure of the novel, the references to emotional breakdowns are illustrated quite empathically, but these moments do not embody the everyday struggle of the refugees. In the public life of the camp, these are after all personal moments, which are never displayed before the volunteers and officials. Though recollected in fragments, the momentary flashbacks acquaint the readers with the past lives of the refugees. Ghosh designs and directs the narrative of *Victory Colony, 1950* by adroitly juxtaposing the past with the present reality of the camp.

For the most part, the novel is about the interconnected stories of Manas Dutta and Amala Manna. The autodiegetic narrator, Manas Dutta, has religiously devoted himself to the cause of refugee rehabilitation. Unlike few of his friends, Manas, being the great-grandson of a *zamindar*, has enough resources at his disposal to look after the refugees. Manas' mother, Mrinmoyee, wants him to think about his career, but he spends his time looking for avenues to help the refugees become self-reliant. Manas's friend Manik introduces him to Chitra—a childless widow, living a retired life at Dhakuria, Calcutta. Chitra's soft-spoken, compassionate and amiable nature so endears Manas that they mutually initiate sewing classes and establish an evening school for the women in the camp. As Manas meets Amala, he takes her to the Gariahat camp and entrusts her with some camp works. Gradually, Manas develops feelings for her and confides in Chitra his desire to marry Amala.

Despite the excruciating experience of the loss of both her parents in the riots in East Bengal and the subsequent separation from her brother in the crowd, Amala nurtures hope and desire to get her brother back and live a normal life. She realises that life in a camp will not enable her to actualise the cherished wishes. She joins other refugees who forcibly occupy a vacant plot of land to build a refugee colony.[2] The colony is named Bijoy Nagar (Victory Colony). Amala emerges as one of the faces of the resistance group that stymies the goons of the landlord from destroying their humble settlement. In the teeth of such challenging circumstances, she secures a job and also fends for the elderly couple of Malati and Nimai. When Manas proposes to Amala, she takes her time to think over the entire prospect of getting married to him. Her realisation of Manas's social status and a keen awareness of her own refugee identity is a definite mark of maturity. Despite being in love, Amala does not readily accept the proposal. However, her marriage to Manas inevitably brings her in conflict with Manas's mother, who refuses to accept Amala as the daughter-in-law. When the couple decides to start a family of their own, Amala resumes her job and contributes to the family along with Manas.

Milan Kundera has remarked that all novels are concerned with the enigma of the self (23). Once a character is conjured up, it is through action that the character can be distinguished from others, and thereafter, the character becomes an individual. The quest for the self is rooted in the world of action (24). In *Victory Colony, 1950*, Ghosh takes a rather conventional approach in setting the course of the action. She does not experiment with the narrative voice as the novel follows a first-person narrative technique. Hers is a straightforward, sequential narration that moves from one episode to the other, following a predictable chronology. The central characters are so engrossed in the action that Ghosh barely sheds light on the reflective or philosophical aspect of the characters. Manas's efforts to help the refugees and Amala's relentless struggle for survival

do not acquire a philosophical depth. However, it is possible that Ghosh intentionally chooses to concentrate more on the actions because she attempts to re-write history from the vantage point of the refugee women in post-partition Calcutta.

In *Citizen Refugee*, Uditi Sen observes that the refugee women occupy an ambivalent position within Partition history. "On one hand, they are hyper-visible as the 'chief sufferers' of gendered violence, including mass rapes and abductions, that accompanied and followed the partition of India. On the other hand, as soon as the focus shifts from the extraordinary and traumatic events of partition to the mundane and prolonged affair of rehabilitation, women all but disappear from the archives of the state" (Sen 201). It will not be an overstatement to claim that Ghosh tries to address this lacuna in Partition discourses by focusing on the stories of refugee women in *Victory Colony, 1950*. While the life of Amala acquires large space in the novel, it also, through episodic narration, tells the stories of Moyna, Urmila, Malati, Tara, Bakul, Purnima and others. In fact, *Victory Colony, 1950* is replete with instances of mutual solidarity and cooperation among women who look after the persons of their own ilk and clan. For example, Chitra helps Amala take a decision regarding Manas, and Amala, who finds it difficult to make both ends meet, accepts Urmila and her son at her home in Bijoy Nagar when a disease breaks out in the Gariahat camp. In the intimate spaces of domesticity, the snippets of their conversations build a form of feminist camaraderie that does not differentiate between refugees and non-refugees.

The most intriguing aspect of the 1947 Partition is that the so-called 'refugees' are also citizens of their putative homeland (Gera Roy 46). The differences between the refugees and the inhabitants of West Bengal eventually lead to establish a binary between the two categories, which has become an integral part of the vibrant cultural life in West Bengal.[3] The refugees, who are also referred to as the *Bangal*—the term used to identify those from East Bengal—talk in a dialect and

prepare cuisines in a manner that are different from those of the *Ghoti* inhabitants of West Bengal (Sarkar 10). Quite naturally, the taste buds of Amala remain unsatisfied on having the dishes at her in-law's house. While Chitra shares a meal with Amala, she wonders if Amala would like the taste of the food at her home. That Amala is a lower-caste Hindu does not perturb Mrinmoyee. It is her *Bangal* origin that becomes a cause of discomfiture for her: "I have no problem with that *shudra* girl staying in the house…I won't have that ugly *Baangal* girl show up before people as Maanu's wife" (Ghosh 248).

Jhuma Sen posits that the upper-caste Hindus formed the unauthorised colonies in Calcutta and its vicinity, and the lower-caste Hindus were pushed out of West Bengal by carefully crafted official policies (104-105). By presenting a lower-caste Hindu woman as one of the founding members of a forcibly occupied refugee colony, Ghosh, in a way, offers a fresh perspective in studies related to the Partition. Though archival records and documentary evidence substantiate Jhuma Sen's proposition,[4] Ghosh's alternative viewpoint resonates with, what Marek Tamm calls, the mnemohistorical reading of the past that consists in the relinquishing of a positivistic investigation of events to see how narratives rehearse, reinvent and/or reinterpret history (501). Most importantly, Amala represents the resilient and enterprising character of the refugees who migrated after the Partition. It is a far cry from the general conception of refugees as passive victims of circumstances. It does not, however, mean that refugees require no institutional support. While individuals move out of Gariahat to resettle in Bijoy Nagar, some old, infirm refugees remain in the refugee camp. The camp gets rechristened as a *PL* (Permanent Liability) camp in official paperwork—a term loaded with significance, and pointing how obliquely the government had viewed the refugees who needed some form of support. It dampened the spirit of the refugees

who, as Manas says, "Already invisible to the world, they weren't alive in their own eyes" (Ghosh 108).

Given the conventional framework that Ghosh adopts, the ending of the novel does not surprise the reader. The permeating tension finds a closure in the end when Amala miraculously finds her brother. The narrative journey comes full circle, but it does not end as Amala plans her life anew with Kartik and Manas. Perhaps it is symbolic of a refugee's eternal search for a place that she can call her home. One can fairly claim that the multiplicity of characters, hailing from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, their viewpoints and perspectives make Bhaswati Ghosh's *Victory Colony, 1950* an important work of fiction that opens up new areas of enquiries for scholars engaged in studying the lasting impacts of the 1947 Partition.

Notes

[1] Throughout the review I use the term 'East Bengal' to refer to the topographical area that was renamed as East Pakistan in 1955 through the constitutional amendments of Pakistan.

[2] In Bengali parlance, these forcefully occupied colonies are termed *jabardakal* colonies. See, Joya Chatterji's 'Dispersal and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal', in *Partition's Legacies*, 2019, p. 310-357.

[3] One is immediately reminded of the famous Bengali actor, Bhanu Bandyopadhyay—a real life Bangal—who made a career out of his Bangal identity on movie screens and radio recordings. See, 'Bengali Cinema: A Spectral Subnationality' in Bhaskar Sarkar's *Mourning the Nation*, p. 158-161.

[4] Renuka Ray Papers, Subject File 27, p. 1-4, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi. Also see, Tanvir Mokammel's *Seemantorekha, Youtube*, 2018, 51:04-52:30 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CplnC_5lco&t=1765s)

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