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Reconstructing the Past: Memory and Gendered Trauma in Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*

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Abstract

The Partition of India in 1947 constitutes a foundational trauma in South Asian history, marked by mass displacement, communal violence, and the systematic targeting of women's bodies as symbols of religious and national honour. This paper offers a critical reading of Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* (*Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*) through the framework of pluralistic model of memory to examine how women's Partition trauma is remembered, repressed, and socially mediated. Departing from traditional trauma models that privilege coherent narration and pathological response, the study draws on theorists such as Michelle Balaev, Anne Whitehead, and Sue Campbell to conceptualise memory as contingent, fragmented, and shaped by shifting social contexts. Through the character of Sutara Dutta, Devi foregrounds trauma as an ongoing process rather than a completed historical event. Sutara's suffering is not confined to the initial episode of violence but is continually reproduced through communal suspicion, caste and religious anxieties, and gendered codes of purity in post-Partition society. Her fragmented memories, silences, and recurrent nightmares expose the instability of traumatic recall and challenge official histories that erase women's embodied experiences. The novel contrasts the empathy Sutara receives within a Muslim household with her ostracisation among Hindus, revealing how cultural frameworks determine whether trauma is acknowledged or transformed into stigma. From refugee-filled Delhi to contemplative landscapes of pilgrimage, Sutara's memories are reshaped by changing environments and relationships. Memory thus emerges not as a stable archive of loss but as a dynamic, ethically charged process through which trauma is continually renegotiated in relation to social belonging, gendered identity, and historical rupture.

Keywords: Partition Studies, Gendered Trauma, Memory, Pluralistic Approach, Partition Women.

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Introduction:

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most violent and traumatic events in the subcontinent's history. As borders were hurriedly drawn and millions were forced to migrate, everyday life collapsed into fear, uncertainty, and chaos. Amid communal violence, mass displacement, and the breakdown of social order, women became some of the most vulnerable victims of this upheaval. During Partition, women were frequently targeted as objects of sexual violence. Abduction, rape, forced conversion, and coerced marriages were used as weapons to humiliate entire communities. A woman's body came to be seen as a carrier of family and religious honour, and violating it was treated as an act of revenge against the other communities. In many cases, women had no control over their fate; some were killed by their own families to protect honour, while others were forced to live with the trauma of violence in silence. Yet women were not only victims of Partition, they were also survivors who carried the burden of rebuilding shattered lives. Many crossed borders alone or with children, negotiated hostile environments, and learned to live with loss and displacement. Their experiences reveal forms of courage that do not always appear heroic but are rooted in endurance and adaptability. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard puts forward, "The Partition riots of 1946-47 and the destabilisation of inter-community relations that they entailed also treated women's bodies as a site for the performance of communal identity . . . The woman's body thus functioned as a boundary protecting the nation and the community's collaborative interest" (28). By bringing women's stories to the foreground, Partition can be understood not only as a political division, but as a profoundly gendered experience marked by suffering, resilience, and unresolved pain.

Memory studies have evolved significantly from their early conceptualisations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when pioneers like Freud emphasised the unconscious and the repression of traumatic experiences. Traditionally, memory was understood as a repository where experiences, especially traumatic ones were recorded exactly and could be retrieved intact. This view of memory as veridical recall assumed that *"traumatic memory must be retrieved and narrated to another in order to recover" (Balaev 26)* privileging the notion that emotional responses to trauma are uniform and primarily pathological. Such a perspective is especially problematic in literary analysis, as it *"ignores the plethora of responses to traumatic experiences" (26) a*nd overlooks how the meaning of trauma is contingent upon a variety of social, cultural, and personal factors. Scholars like Michelle Balaev challenge this traditional model by advocating a pluralistic approach, emphasising that the "meaning and memory of trauma are contingent upon an assortment of factors" (26). In Balaev's view, memory is not a fixed archive of experiences but a dynamic process in which trauma is remembered, represented, and given meaning differently depending on context, perspective, and narrative form. This pluralistic framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of trauma, moving beyond the assumption that all traumatic responses are similar or pathological.

Jyotirmoyee Devi is a writer who has placed women at the very centre of her literary world. Her stories focus on the inner lives of women who are often silenced by tradition, family authority, and social convention. Rather than portraying them as passive victims, she reveals their emotional strength, quiet resistance, and moral clarity. With a calm, understated tone, she exposes how customs such as child marriage, widowhood, and domestic confinement shape women's everyday experiences. Her writing avoids grand drama or complex language. Instead, she uses simple words and closely observed details to show how power operates within homes, marriages, and communities. This simplicity makes her work accessible, while the ideas it carries are deeply unsettling to established norms. Devi is especially sensitive to the gap between what society demands of women and what they feel and think internally, a tension that runs through much of her fiction. Some of her most well-known works include the short story collection *Sona Rupa Noy* (*Not Gold and Silver*), which won the Rabindra Puraskar, and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* (*The River Churning*), a novel dealing with women's experiences during the Partition of India. Her stories also appear in translation in collections such as *The Impermanence of Lies* and *Behind Latticed Marble*, bringing her feminist and socially aware writings to a wider audience. Through these works, Jyotirmoyee Devi establishes herself as a powerful voice for women whose struggles are often hidden but profoundly real.

The River Churning by Jyotirmoyee Devi is a powerful Partition novel that revisits the catastrophic events of 1947 through a gendered lens, urging a re-evaluation of Indian society's historical, political, and cultural realities before and after Partition. One of the rare Bengali Partition narratives written by a woman, the novel emphasises on "the society-wide repression of memory of the contest over national borders, both geographical and mental, performed on the bodies of women" (Leonard 32). Through the restrained yet unsettling portrayal of an adolescent Hindu girl from East Bengal, possibly a victim of rape, Devi foregrounds the lasting physical and psychological trauma inflicted on women and the rejection they face within their own communities in post-Partition secular India. Memory plays a crucial role in the narrative, as fragmented recollections and silences become the means through which trauma is recalled and processed, revealing how personal memory challenges official histories that seek to erase women's experiences. Originally published in 1967 as *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga, the* novel stands as a vital feminist intervention that restores women's memories and suffering to the history of Partition.

The River Churning begins in the contemplative space of Sutara Dutta's mind. Now an Assistant Professor of History at a women's college in Delhi, she confronts the gaps and silences that pervade historical narratives, particularly those histories marked by trauma, humiliation, and erasure. Her scholarly inquiry into the past increasingly merges with personal memory, revealing that the archive alone cannot contain experiences of profound loss. This novel is "a representative text on a Bengali woman's experience of social hostility following

her violation during Partition and her subsequent endeavour of rehabilitation and emancipation" (Sarkar 144). The novel thus unfolds not as a linear chronicle, but as a meditation on memory, grief, and the fragmented nature of human recollection. The narrative moves back to the autumn of 1946, a period when eastern Bengal, especially the districts of Noakhali and Comilla, was engulfed in waves of communal violence following the Great Calcutta Killing. Villages were destroyed by fire, widespread terror claimed countless lives, and individuals were subjected to murder, sexual assault, and forced displacement. Within this maelstrom, Sutara, then a child, experienced the violent disintegration of her family. Her father was killed in the riots, her mother disappeared following an attempted suicide, and her elder sister Sujata was abducted. Sutara herself was rendered unconscious during the attack she suffered. Her survival owed much to Tamijuddin, a Muslim neighbour and longtime family acquaintance, who, together with his sons, provided shelter and care. For nearly six months, Sutara remained under their protection, existing between survival and mourning. Sutara recalls, "Now a more mature Sutara looked back and realised that in actual fact they were separated forever. But what would have happened if they had not rescued her in those troubled days? The very thought made her shudder" (Devi 30). As her physical strength returned, so too did the urgent desire to reconnect with her surviving family members. Navigating a landscape still marred by unrest, she was escorted by Tamijuddin and his sons to Calcutta, a city envisioned as refuge and sanctuary. In Calcutta, Sutara reunited with her three brothers and her sister-in-law, Bibha, who had sought safety at her parental home. Although she had reached relative security, Sutara remained burdened by irreversible loss. Her individual trauma became inseparable from the larger, often unrecorded, history of Partition-era suffering, an enduring testament to the ways personal memory and collective history intersect in the wake of communal catastrophe.

Memory often carries us back to places and moments that are intimately tied to our sense of identity and belonging. For Sutara, recollection is not just about remembering facts, it is a way of feeling the presence of a home and life that has been irrevocably altered by loss. She reflects on her early environment, evoking the small village that shaped her childhood:

She recalled the small village where she had lived, the handful of neighbours they had. A river, a tiny branch of the Padma, meandered on one side, more a stream than a river. The backyard had two tanks and an orchard, with a lot of flowering trees mixed with fruit trees. It was their ancestral home, hallowed by the footprints of many generations. (Devi 4)

This passage highlights the deep emotional resonance of place in memory. The village, the stream, and the orchard are more than physical features; they symbolise continuity, familial roots, and a sense of security that has been disrupted by historical violence. Through this recollection, Sutara's memory becomes a bridge between the present

and a past marked by loss, emphasising how memory preserves both personal and collective histories even when the world itself has changed. Campbell puts forward Villedieu's arguments, "Memory is a machine that continuously constructs and reconstructs recollections. It mixes elements . . . Sometimes it even invents" (2). Like Villedieu suggests, memory here is not purely factual, it is a creative act, combining sensory recollection with longing, grief, and imagination. Through this process, Sutara reconstructs and blends precise details with emotional significance. Her memory preserves a sense of belonging and continuity, even as the actual village and the life she knew have been irrevocably altered.

Memory in the novel is portrayed as an ongoing, unstable process, one that is repeatedly rebuilt, often in incomplete or unclear ways. It does not function as a simple, reliable record of past events but rather as a shifting mosaic of impressions and emotions. As the text reveals:

She could not clearly remember what had happened, but the dreadful memories of that night kept returning like a nightmare. Did she fall to the ground or was she pushed down? What happened after that? Who rescued her and when? For how long had she been running a fever? (Devi 16)

This illustrates that remembering the past is dependent on **social and emotional contexts** and is not a simple reproduction of events, but a **process that involves** compression, amplification, and reconstruction. Sutara's inability to recall the exact sequence of events whether she fell or was pushed, who rescued her, and how long she was ill, reflects the **condensation** of memory, where details are compressed or lost due to trauma. Balaev argues, "remembering the past is contingent on social contexts, and importantly, remembering is a process of "condensation, elaboration, and invention"" (31). The recurring nightmarish flashes represent **elaboration**, as her mind reconstructs emotional impressions of horror and grief linked to the disappearance or death of her family members. Finally, her repeated questioning and uncertainty demonstrate the **inventive aspect of memory**, where the mind fills gaps and negotiates fragmented recollections. Thus, her traumatic memories are not exact recordings but socially and emotionally mediated reconstructions shaped by fear, loss, and trauma.

Although Sutara is reunited with her Hindu relatives in Calcutta, this return does not mark the end of her suffering. The violence she endured in the village becomes internalised and transformed into a deeper psychological wound when she is subjected to suspicion and exclusion within her own community. From the standpoint of pluralistic memory, trauma does not reside solely in the past event but is reproduced through everyday acts of social rejection. At Amulya Babu's house, Sutara's identity is reconstructed not as that of a survivor but as a symbol of communal dishonour. Her presence triggers anxieties about caste purity and religious boundaries, and these anxieties dictate how her story is remembered and retold. After the riots, when Sutara was finally brought back to her own community, she expected warmth and comfort after all that she had suffered. Instead, she is met with emotional distance and rigid social attitudes. Her brother's mother-in-law, shaped by fear, prejudice,

and notions of ritual purity, responds not with relief or affection but with cold indifference. It is this moment that Sutara recalls later with pain and disbelief, **"Are you out of your mind? Her clothes have been polluted by the touch of a Muslim household . . . How can you have her pollute everything? . . . She must be purified with Ganga water first. God only knows what kind of forbidden food she has eaten there" (Devi 31-33).** Sanat's mother-in-law functions as a custodian of a rigid, patriarchal memory system. Her repeated remarks about Sutara's ruined future reveal how memory becomes moral judgment. The question is never what Sutara suffered, but where she stayed, what she ate, and what her body is presumed to have absorbed during her stay in a Muslim household. Memory here is governed by fear of contamination rather than compassion. As a result, Sutara is excluded from household work, ritual spaces, weddings, and even access to water, reinforcing her status as an internal exile. Each act of exclusion reshapes her trauma, demonstrating how remembrance is mediated by social power structures. Anne Whitehead asserts:
The weight of memory, by contrast, may embroil us but it also connects us both to others and to reality itself . . . the past is thus experienced as an overwhelming and crushing burden . . . remembering seems to assume a crucial moral and ethical dimension. To remember may be a crushing and painful activity but it is also a 'responsibility'. (87-88)

This insight is particularly pertinent to Sutara, whose recollections of the communal continue to embroil her in trauma. These memories, while profoundly painful, simultaneously anchor her to reality, preserving the truth of the events she endured and maintaining her connections to both her lost family and her rescuers, such as Tamijuddin and his sons. Thus, remembrance functions dually as a mechanism of both psychic burden and ethical witness. It affirms lived experience and relational bonds, even as it imposes an enduring emotional weight. For Sutara, the past persists as an inescapable and oppressive force that shapes her subjectivity and underscores the enduring psychological ramifications of communal violence. This experience stands in stark contrast to Sutara's earlier life in Sakina's household. Sakina's mother offers care and emotional security, anticipating the rejection Sutara would face among Hindus. Her fear that Hindu society would not accept the girl exposes an alternative mode of remembering trauma, one rooted in empathy rather than honour. From a pluralistic memory perspective, this contrast shows that trauma is not defined solely by the act of violence but by the cultural framework within which it is interpreted. The Muslim household acknowledges Sutara's vulnerability, whereas the Hindu household translates that vulnerability into stigma.

Sutara's transfer to a boarding school deepens her marginalisation. Among displaced and orphaned girls, memory becomes collective yet remains largely unspoken. Their shared exile forms a silent community where trauma is normalised rather than addressed. Sutara's experience connects her to a long history of female suffering. Her memory shifts from being personal to part of a broader cultural record of gendered neglect. The shift to post-Partition Delhi after getting a job in a college introduces a new spatial context for memory. The city,

transformed by the influx of refugees from Punjab and Sindh, becomes a palimpsest of displacements. Sutara's interactions with homeless Punjabi women allow her to retrospectively understand her own trauma, even though she remains unable to articulate its nature. Her silence reflects not an absence of memory but its repression, shaped by shame and social taboo. According to Balaev, "silence . . . conveys a variety of individual and cultural values that include connotations of internal imbalance as well as a refusal to accept the world as previously formulated" (88). Pluralistic memory theory recognises such silences as meaningful, revealing how trauma is often remembered through fragmentation rather than narration. Sutara reflects on the lives of Punjabi refugees while recalling her own experiences of trauma during the Partition. She wonders, "Had they also experienced a trauma like hers? The land they left behind, did it have an upheaval like Bengal?" (Devi 73) showing how memory shapes her understanding of others' suffering. By observing their hospitality, "You could sit on their cots in the open courtyard and chat for hours in a broken language" (73) and noting cultural differences, such as their shared meals and the freedom of girls cycling to school, she gains insight into lives shaped by different histories and customs. Yet, she refrains from asking deeply personal questions, recognising the sensitivity of Partition memories, " But she did not know them well enough to ask the questions that troubled her: how had they fared? Had all the family members been able to cross over? When did they come? Before the holocaust or after?" (73). Such reflections demonstrate how memory enables Sutara to understand a variety of experiences, revealing the different ways individuals navigate displacement, survival, and social change.

Sakina's visit to Sutara assumes considerable significance, as it represents not merely a physical reunion but also an emotional reconnection after a period marked by trauma and isolation. Although Sakina is enroute to Karachi due to her husband's professional obligations, she deliberately stops in Delhi to see Sutara, demonstrating the depth of their friendship. For Sutara, who has experienced prolonged loneliness, Sakina's letters have provided an essential source of warmth and comfort. In contrast to the more formal and restrained correspondence from her own family, Sakina's communications are affectionate and nurturing, offering Sutara a sense of emotional sustenance that she otherwise lacked.

This was the first time they were meeting after the disaster. Naturally, the memory of those days acted as an unspoken barrier. Sutara felt sad and tearful. She owed them her love, respect, regard and gratitude, beyond measure. Sakina's companionship had filled her with warmth and tenderness. (76)

This encapsulates the complexity of Sutara's emotional response to the reunion. While there is evident joy at Sakina's presence, it is tempered by the lingering impact of past trauma, which manifests as an unspoken barrier between them. Anne Whitehead, in explaining Maurice Halbwachs' understanding of collective memory, notes that "His own

model emphasizes the partial and incomplete nature of past recollections and he attributes the ability to remember not to internal processes but to the reawakening of former experiences by external stimuli, such as meeting an old friend" (126). This insight is particularly relevant to Sutara's experience as her reunion with Sakina functions as an external stimulus that brings previously latent memories to the surface. The emotions of sadness, gratitude, and tender affection highlight the enduring importance of Sakina's companionship and underscore the profound moral and emotional indebtedness that Sutara experiences towards her. Sutara's reflections also reveal that her past experiences continue to exert a profound influence on her present consciousness. The enduring memories of her peers' humiliation, intertwined with the panic, confusion, and helplessness of her family, remain vivid, generating unresolved questions and heightening Sutara's emotional vulnerability. Devi writes, "Scenes of her playmates' humiliation passed before her eyes. Behind everything hovered the still figures of her panic-stricken didi, confused mother and helpless father. The picture remained vivid even after so many years, but so many questions remained" (76). The present moment of reunion is suffused with warmth and affection, yet it is simultaneously overshadowed by the persistent memories of past suffering. Together, these recollections highlight the intricate interplay between memory, trauma, and the consolatory power of friendship, emphasising how Sakina's presence provides not only companionship but also a form of emotional restitution for Sutara. Apart from this, Sakina's continued presence in Sutara's life offers moments of emotional connection, yet the proposal of marriage exposes the limits of personal bonds in the face of communal identity. Sutara's refusal is not a rejection of Sakina as an individual but a response to the symbolic weight Sakina now carries as a representative of a community associated with humiliation and violence. This moment underscores how memory, identity, and belonging are deeply intertwined, and how trauma restricts the possibilities of reconciliation.

Nature plays a central role in Sutara's journey, offering her a space of refuge and quiet healing away from the pressures of society. The landscapes of Badri-Kedar, with their vast mountains, flowing rivers, and serene surroundings, allow memory and grief to lose their immediate intensity, creating room for introspection and renewal. In the midst of such unspoiled natural beauty, Sutara is able to step outside the constraints of social judgment and the lingering weight of her past. The physical journey becomes symbolic of her psychological movement towards freedom, as the natural world provides both distance from her troubles and a sense of continuity and calm that human interactions have denied her. As grief-stricken, Sutara reflects:

[She] had joined them but not from any pious desire to attain salvation. Neither was she bothered about her life after death. She was trying to escape – a lonely soul trying to find companionship among strangers. She did not know who or what she was running away from – perhaps from those who did not want her, and also from those who did. (95)

This captures her inner motivation clearly. She is not seeking spiritual merit or divine reassurance. Instead, she is fleeing the pressures of those around her and the suffocating expectations of society. It elucidates the duality of her journey, she seeks connection, yet does so on her own terms, among people who do not know her past and do not impose judgment. Sutara tries to recover from the traumatic experiences that keep haunting her through "rituals and physical contact with the land . . . to understand the emotional pain within a larger social context that includes acknowledging the repercussions" of the ostracisation and dehumanisation that she has "directly experienced" (Balaev 28). In this way, the pilgrimage into nature provides a sanctuary where Sutara can exist beyond social scrutiny and begin to rediscover the possibility of meaning and renewal in her life.

The novel ends with Sutara's quiet emotional awakening rather than a dramatic closure, as Promode's proposal brings her hope, reassurance, and a sense of security after twelve years of emotional isolation. His words feel like a blessing because they offer care and protection rather than passionate romance, lifting a burden she has long carried unknowingly. This moment transforms the way Sutara understands her past, which she now recognises as a "long nightmare even though she had not really been aware of living" (Devi 133). As Sue Campbell explains, "Memory is not only selective in terms of what significance something has for us at the time of attending; how and what we remember also depends on the concerns, interests, and associations contributed by our present environment. Our understanding of the past, its significance to us, changes as we evolve new interests, gain knowledge, shift circumstances, and enter new relationships" (185). In Sutara's case, the new possibility of companionship and love reshapes her memories and allows her to reinterpret years of emotional barrenness. Promode's proposal thus not only opens a hopeful future but also alters her relationship with her past, enabling her, for the first time, to feel like a young, dreaming woman rather than merely a detached college professor.

Jyotirmoyee Devi presents Partition trauma as a layered and mediated experience, particularly for women. Sutara's suffering is shaped not only by the initial act of violence but by the responses of family, community, and nation. Through the lens of pluralistic memory, the novel reveals how trauma is continuously reworked through social interaction, cultural narratives, and personal resilience. While the text mourns the historical silencing of women's pain, it also gestures toward the possibility of healing through education, empathy, and love. Jyotirmoyee Devi's portrayal of Sutara's post-Partition life can be fruitfully examined through the perspective of pluralistic memory, which argues that traumatic experience is never remembered in a single, stable, or universal way. Instead, recollection is shaped by a range of mediating factors such as social environment, communal ideology, gender norms, cultural memory, and the psychological disposition of the sufferer. Sutara's trauma is not confined to the moment of physical violence, it is continuously reinterpreted and intensified through the responses she encounters after her rescue.

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