






**From Tattered Past to Triumphant Present: Weaving Partitioned Lives by a Dalit Girl-child
in Kalyani Thakur Charal's Novella Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manush**

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From Tattered Past to Triumphant Present: Weaving Partitioned Lives by a Dalit Girl-child in Kalyani Thakur Charal's Novella *Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manush*

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Abstract

Inherited memory reflects the intensity of the impact of incidents, experienced by the ancestors on the descendants, and in the case of the partition of Bengal, these memories of memories are about both the violence-induced partition and its distressful reverberations as well as about the amiable and delightful past habitation in East Bengal. However, the awful commotion that the survivors confront steals all the researchers' attention, pushing the amicable exhibition in the past land to the background. Again, the transportation of memory to the second generation of these refugees assists them to reconstruct as well as to dismantle the eulogized notion of the lost land and look to analyze the past incident in a more pragmatic way that consequently leads to a dichotomous intellection of the two generations, as can be found in the novella *Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manush* (Waterbody Named Andhar and Some People) by Bengali Dalit writer Kalyani Thakur Charal. The juvenescence dealing with the postmemory of past times by the progeny of the refugees, more specifically by a Dalit girl in this novella, paves the way for further study on the class, caste, and gendered space of Dalit women in partitioned Bengal from the perspective of a child. A deductive, analytical, and objective method has been used in this research to comprehend the factual local historiography of a particular community in a specific locality of the border region of West Bengal through a fiction based on the collective memory of the populace.

Keywords: postmemory, Bengal, Namasudra, refugee, childhood, second-generation

Introduction

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5).

Marianne Hirsch thus defines the term 'postmemory' in her interdisciplinary book *The Generation of Postmemory* to analyse the written and visual art created by the descendants of the Holocaust victims that reflects the impact of that devastating and scarring genocide that has been transmitted to the following generations. Postmemory, as opposed to memory, does not refer to

the direct encounter of the events but rather the repeated recapitulation of those events, which strengthens it with the psychic power of memory. The transfer of the trauma to the progeny of the affected caught the attention of psychiatrists in the 1960s, though initially it was confined to "clinical cases" and "anecdotal reports" (Portney, 2003, para. 1). It is in 2012 that Hirsch examines the fractured forms of art created in the post-Holocaust era that represent the bearing of the traumatic memory by the subsequent generations, thus theorizing the concept of 'postmemory' that she had formulated in her earlier book *Family Frames* in 1997. Recent studies by sociologists and historians, such as Firdous Azim (2021), Narendra Nath Wig (2018), Umeeta Sadarangani (2008), and Anjali Gera Roy (2020), have shown that the descendants of the Partition refugees of India too possess the legacy of traumatic memories of "the largest mass migration in human history" (Sen, 2015, p. 128). Although Firdous Azim focuses exclusively on the postmemory of the following generations of the partition-affected refugees from the East, his study is solely concentrated on the third-generation refugees and deals only with the traumatic experiences of the survivors. These critics are so engrossed in the horrific episodes of Partition in their writings that they hardly utter the juvenescence experiences and gendered space, with a particular focus on the postmemory of Dalit refugee-children in post-Partition Bengal.

The novella *Andhar Bil O Kicchu Manush* (Waterbody Named Andhar and Some People) by Bengali Dalit writer Kalyani Thakur Charal, however, presents the memory of memories of the second-generation refugees of the East not only about the traumatic experiences of the Partition and its aftermath but also about the pleasing and prosperous past in East Bengal. This kind of transference of memory from the generations before to the next generations is apparently fraught with exaggerated eulogization and reverence for their lost *desh* (native land), which ultimately frustrates the latter's imaginary land after visualizing and experiencing directly their so long cherished parents' lost land and thus, consequently, shifts to their present birthplace as *desh*— a dichotomous intellection of the two generations. The story further illustrates the exuberant present of girlhood in West Bengal as it is written from the perspective of a pre-teen Namasudra (a Bengali Dalit subcaste of East Bengal origin that immigrated to India after Partition) girl named Kamalini, whose parents had migrated to India along with a large number of their neighbors and acquaintances immediately after the Partition in 1947. Therefore, the collective memoir of these migrated people seeking space in this new land is presented from a layered standpoint: first, as a refugee; second, as a Dalit; and third, as a girl. Starting with the arrival of these migrated people in the pastured land of West Bengal, the writer focuses on the lives of the children of these uprooted Dalit folk and draws a conclusion when these children further migrate to the city for a prospective future.

The present paper explores how a second-generation Dalit girl weaves the narratives of Partition and its aftermath in post-Partition Bengal through her inherited memory. It also shows how the idealization of the lost land (East Bengal, now Bangladesh) varies from generation to generation, and how this little educated protagonist, with her critical outlook, condemns superstitious rituals and irrational devotionism towards the local sect known as Matua religion, even though the entire Namasudra community was strongly mobilized to keep it at the center. Again, the focus is on how effectively and confidently the agency of womanhood and widowhood, through the lens of this protagonist, is constructed by sharing the collective memory, as well as how this novella presents Dalit childhood as a state of compromise between rustic innocence and an inevitable

materialistic discretion. To comprehend the child spectator's perspective in a better way, this article is divided into several segments on the basis of the theme.

Peeping to Partition and its Reverberation through Progeny

Kamalini and her companions, being born in independent India, could observe neither the impending ground for Partition, nor the violence-induced Partition, nor its consequences in person. They are, however, fortunate to have postmemory and do not even rely on written history to recognize the series of struggling situations. Their phonocentric prioritization of the oral memory adequately supports them to know that the prosperous land and the calamitous time from the recapitulation of their ancestry that they inherit as they have grown up closely perceiving the survivors. On top of that, with the knowledge about the past that has been acquired by birth, the second-generation refugees reconstruct history by assimilating their own imagination in it. Therefore, the fictional character becomes the representative of the "hinge generation" (Hoffman, 2005, as cited in Hirsch, 2012, p. 1) of the Bengal Partition that transmutes the inherited memory into history. One can recognize that both the political events prior to Kamalini and the history of her community that she has constituted and graphed from the free and easy narratives and conversations of her elders have symmetry with the institutionalized history. In this segment, the focus will be on the Dalit historiography of Partition and its aftermath, and the local historiography of the Namasudra community (to which Kamalini belongs) narrated by this little Dalit girl and how they are connected to the authoritative historical narratives.

Kalyani Thakur Charal (2019) opens the novella *Andhar Bil O Kichhu Manus* with an archetypal and iconic picture of the migration of the uprooted after Partition, as Kamalini visualizes:

Partitioned India... Independent India... People are coming from East Pakistan in groups. Some of them move towards Bangaon after crossing the Darshana border through Kushtia from Jessore, Khulna, Barishal, and Faridpur. Others reach the Gede railway station. They are *sharanarathi*, or refugees in English... an undisciplined long procession. Children, elderly people, and youths all get on the train with small luggage either on their heads or under their armpits. (p. 7)

The cartographic presentation of the imagined land is so accurately narrated, particularly the post-partition journey of these Dalit refugees towards West Bengal, by the child narrator that substantiates how the impact of Partition imprinted on their lives as Sekhar Bandopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury (2014) with the aid of the official documents espouse this fictional protagonist that a large number of refugees migrated to Nadia, the border district in West Bengal, by mid-1948 (p. 5). The fictional characters of Charal's novella are created being inspired by some of those real Namasudra peasants of East Bengal who could manage their rehabilitation during the very first phase of migration, as these characters too came to India immediately after Partition and settled in this border district. Yet, making the decision of leaving their *bhite* (habitual abode), as Kamalini perceives, was not an easy one for these people. Departing from their dearest place was undoubtedly unbearable for them, and thus, while leaving for exile, they took with them saplings of *mankochu* (giant taro) along with their pet cat (Charal, 2019, p. 7). Every insignificant thing of their land becomes "a vivid reminder of their original home" which is now lost (Basu Raychaudhuri, 2019, p. 36) and a symbol of their forced migration (Chawla, 2014, p. 15), therefore, precious for them. The importance of these trivial things lies not in "their usefulness or [in] their

monetary value [...] but in the preservation of their memory, and the ways in which [the refugees] can construct their sense of selves in connection to these memories." (Basu Raychaudhuri, 2019, p. 36) The importing of these common belongings shows how desperately they tried to cling on to their homeland. Even after starting their journey, the refugees in Charal's fiction were not able to console themselves and relentlessly lamented for their homeland and felt regret.

However, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury (2014) point out, due to the ongoing schismatic frenzy that gradually hovering over their harmonious relationship with Muslims, these Namasudra peasants had discerned "a pervasive sense of insecurity" and had no other option but to migrate with their limited resources to save their lives. They also observe that the Hindu-Muslim relationship started deteriorating prior to independence, and the 1946 communal riot in Kolkata and Noakhali in particular made the Namasudras prefer "a Hindu majority province of West Bengal within the Indian Union" (pp. 2-6) rather than a united, sovereign Bengal. In the conversation between So'teka and Permatha in the novella, the issue of communal conflict comes forth many a time. The Namasudras suffered much when the districts where they inhabited were included in Muslim-majority Pakistan. Home and the homeland are considered to be the safest places for a person, but for the Partition refugees that homeland remains no more vulnerable due to the ongoing communal hostility. Probably these farsighted people like Kamalini's father, Sukhamoy, could guess that the situation would gradually worsen for them in East Pakistan. Therefore, whoever could manage to make a move among the Namasudra peasants, arranged their migration immediately after Partition. (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2014, p. 3). Some of them had even visited India beforehand in search of a safer space for settlement for their whole community. They were the ones who led the whole group to reach their destined place at the time of displacement. Debjani Sengupta (2016) also observes that the "worsening communal situation in Bengal" hints that they should arrange a place for their rehabilitation as soon as possible. (p. 117) Kamalini observes from the dialogue of So'teka that though the refugees lament for their dearest *desh*, they cannot deny the peace as opposed to communal violence they find after resettlement: "We don't have to fight Muslims in this country anymore, so that we would require collective strength further." (Charal, 2019, p. 11) Again, a massive economic crisis such as the falling jute price, the breakdown of the rationing system, the scarcity of basic needs, and the lack of employment opportunities for them— all these accelerate the mass migration of the Namasudra peasants (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2014, p. 6). Kamalini also substantiates the fact that cultivation of jute is the career option for some of the villagers. Therefore, it is possible that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between the collapse of the jute industry and the compulsion to leave the abode to settle down in a new land without any kin support for these fictional peasant people. Their dilemmatic state ensures their "tussl[ing] between the sentiment of nostalgia and the sense of trauma" and "[i]n this tussle, shared memory could be a powerful mechanism through which the shelter-seekers acquired a specific identity." (Basu Raychaudhuri, 2004, p. 5653)

While reading this novella, one may query, why did this displaced community choose that particular reedy grassy area for their resettlement? Kamalini notices that these are "the people from the land of water" (Charal, 2019, p. 58). They were surrounded by waterbodies in the East. The natural serene beauty of that place, the occupation of those people over there of fishing and

farming, their transport system— everything of their lives was intensely adhered with those waterbodies, and hence,

The people who have left such wide land full of water cannot settle down in a city wholeheartedly. That is why refugees from Sulte, Kauldanga, and Kalyanpur too searched for a place to take shelter where they could have a waterbody; and set up their new society centering around that. (p. 60)

The environment around the Andhar *bil* is suitable for their occupations making it an appropriate place to reconstruct their lives. When Kamalini asks her father about the logic behind choosing this *bil*-surrounded place to resettle, he replies,

One will not die of hunger if there is a *bil*. These waterbodies provide fish, and help in cultivating paddy. In heavy rain, *jagli* paddy will continuously grow up and will never be submerged, even though there is a night-long downpour. Again, you will get *na!* So, what else do you need to consume if you get rice, fish, and *na!* (p. 60)

Na! is a kind of herb that grows in small waterbodies and *Jagli* paddy is planted while the field is already submerged in water and could survive even in heavy downfall. Charal has referred to this specific type of crop, most likely to contrast the firmness of *Jagli* paddy and the indomitable spirit of the peasant refugees in their tough times.

On a broader aspect, one reason to select this location would be that it was the place that these people from Jessore came across shortly after crossing the border, as Nadia is a border district of West Bengal. Undoubtedly, these uprooted people need to settle first and fast, and probably that is why they did not want to spend much time searching for another place. Furthermore, one could argue that at an initial stage they have a latent desire to be back to their ancestral home and land if the situation would turn out to be so. It is revealed from the dreamy notation of Permatha, "If they do not arrange rehabilitation, we will go back to our land. What do you think, So'teka?" (p. 8) Therefore, they did not go so far from the newly-made international barrier and settled down at the border region. It may also provide them with a sense of contentment that they are not far from their own place.

Kamalini perceives that immediately after resettling in this alien land, these Dalit people lived like a joint family. They arranged, cooked, and consumed together until they started separate familial dwellings. It was because practically securing collective habitation was their primary concern before constructing their individual space. When some of their community shifted to Dandakaranya with the hope of betterment, Permatha expressed his dejection and worry to So'teka:

Uncle, our neighborhood will be empty. Only the vacant abodes are left behind. I am not sensing well ... We came together. Now if everyone runs off here and there at their own convenience, then we will be fragile. (p. 11)

From this utterance of Permatha, one can observe the reasons behind their allied domiciliation at the initial stage. People like them who were compelled to forgo their traditional homeland and flee to a new place to save their own lives from severe violence ought to sense ominousness in every aspect. Togetherness strengthens their moral convictions in resisting the untoward situations, demonstrating the trauma of Partition that they have yet to overcome, and this

emptiness at the back of their minds often poses a state of anxiety for an impending threat of homelessness. Therefore, whereas the refugees resettled in the colonies of Kolkata struggled among themselves regarding 'land distribution' and resources (Sengupta, 2016, p. 126), these Namasudra people were evidently cooperative.

The Partition historians, such as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhury (2014), confirm that the contemporary government had forcefully sent off the lower-caste refugees to Dandakaranya after 1956 as "there was not enough vacant land in West Bengal to rehabilitate these agriculturists." (p. 8) Dalit leader Jogendra Nath Mandal was against this Dandakaranya scheme. Although Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, the Guru of Matua Mahasangha and a Congress MLA, supported the governmental policy of sending refugees outside West Bengal and personally "persuade[d] the Dalit refugees" to opt that (p. 14). A literary representation of this political dissension is forged in Charal's novella, through the dialogue between So'teka and Permatha regarding some of their community's shifting to Dandakaranya. Whereas for Permatha this shifting to another place is immoral and unethical as they are bound with an emotional promise of cooperation in struggle and is also a step towards vagabond life, elderly So'teka seems somewhat advanced as he replies back to Permatha:

It is also necessary to try an alternative. One should know every possible way to survive. How could one arrange a job by staying in one place? What will one eat without any trade? And how will one feed their own family? (Charal, 2019, p. 11)

Being influenced by the incompatible stances of the political leaders, they possess different positions and act as the fictional voices of the non-fictional thinkers and fashion this literary piece into a social science fiction. Though his reasoning seems quite convincing at once, both So'teka and his historical allusion P.R. Thakur have failed to foresee the consequences. Dandakaranya is a wide "inhospitable unirrigated land in the tribal areas of Orissa and Madhya Pradesh" (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2014, p. 8) and therefore, many refugees like the elder brother-in-law of Sukhamay could not succeed in coping up there and returned to West Bengal. Furthermore, in the process, they lost the place they had acquired earlier. This appropriates Permatha's prognostication about the redeeming into a permanent vagabond identity for these people, whose identities the state is indirectly but compulsively determining. Now, they have to start again in a comparatively inferior place, and that too by forcefully occupying a place which is evident as Sukhamay instructs Permatha to remain ready for a capturing mission. Besides, as only the lower-caste refugees were pressurized to populate over there, Thakur's spiritual followers themselves announced that they opposed Thakur's support of the Dandakaranya plan (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2014, 14). This predicament is also touched on in Charal's novella as Kamalini perceives:

A debate is prevailing all over regarding the nomination of Thakur as a candidate in the election. There is no guarantee that all the Matuas will vote for Thakur. (Charal, 2019, p. 48)

It widens a distinct gap between following a political leader and a spiritual leader. The advent of the Left Front in the politics of West Bengal as a prospective alternative to the inconsiderate attitude of the Congress government is also referred to in this novella as Kamalini's mother reads

Communist books like Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* and *Mother* by Maxim Gorky. It is also mentioned that Kamalini's maternal family has joined the Communist Party.

The reader must note that the innocent and inexperienced narrative of Kamalini accentuates all these crucial events in Indian politics neither by directly mentioning them nor by declaring the years of those events in particular; the events are only hinted at. Probably it is due to the presence of the juvenile storyteller, who is generally regarded to be weak at remembering dates at such a tender age.

Past v/s Present: Deconstructing Idealization and Dismantling Irrationalism

In the partition fictions we read or watch in general, the first thing we could observe is that the characters are carefully nurturing the 'nostalgia of *desh*' within their hearts, as Anasua Basu Raychaudhury (2004) remarks:

Although the 'past' of these people remains in many ways, their present, their *desh* is nowhere in sight. [...] They live with their memories—the memories of happier days in their *desh* and the unbearable agony of losing their friends and relatives during communal tensions and riots. (p. 5653)

The refugees were forced to leave their habitation as they became the scapegoat of political interest due to what all of a sudden, their inherited abode—the place which was theirs own for generations after generations, became a foreign land. It is practically shocking and unbearable as "the migration turned out to be a traumatic experience that brought a permanent rupture with their past." (Bandyopadhyay & Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2016, p. 67) The realization that their own beloved birthplace is no more a safe place for them and they have lost their 'Paradise' ever since makes them miserable and traumatized. Therefore, what these displaced persons could only do is reminisce and mourn for "the land of abundance, but a land of no return." (Basu Raychaudhury, 2004, pp. 5655-58) The same thing happens to the characters like Bengi *pishi* (paternal aunt), Sukhamay, So'teka, Permatha, Maoi in Charal's novella too. At every utterance, they lament for "their 'irreplaceable' loss." (Basu Raychaudhury, 2004, p. 5659) Moreover, they belong to a low-caste community, and as historians and sociologists, including Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (1997), Debjani Sengupta (2016), and Firdous Azim (2021), corroborate in their writings that the state remains indifferent to the arrangement of proper rehabilitation for the low-caste refugees. Hence, the community has to organize their restoration by their own. They have to start their lives anew. Therefore, according to Firdous Azim (2021), it will not be illogical if these uprooted people perpetually yearn for their prosperous past as their "loss of a homeland is accompanied by a sense of economic displacement." (p. xxiii) Hence, their dialogues "are full of nostalgia for a pristine rural life, and accounts of greater prosperity" (p. xxiii) as one can find in the novella that the largeness and the sanctity of the *bils* over there, especially of the Ichhamati *bil* are repeatedly referred to in their conversations. They oscillate between "formal citizenship" and "emotional belonging" (Azim, 2021, p. xvii): independent India and East Bengal. Thus, they are always engaged in comparing two places—the prosperous one that they lost and the inferior one where they are residing at present, which is perfectly captured in the following paragraph:

Permatha often talks to So'teka. They continue to compare the food items, clothing, yarn of cloth, and atmosphere of the two nations. Things in the left country are always the best

for them. The nostalgia gnaws at all of them— from So'teka, Permatha to Bengi *pishi*, Laxmi's mother, Subhadra, Makhan's mother. (Charal, 2019, p. 9)

Subsequently, *Andhar bil* becomes a substitute for their favourite *bils* of East Bengal, though a somewhat inferior substitute, or what Anasua Basu Raychaudhury (2004) observes, as "a distant caricature" (p. 5653). At one point in the novella, Permatha reveals his regret, "Would the water of the *Andhar bil* be ever similar to the water of the *Madhumati bil*?" (Charal, 2019, p. 8) Though they settle down in this new land with their family and familiar community, they prefer to remain as the "prisoners of the past," as for them "[t]heir *desh* may not be reinvented and remains only in their memory" (Basu Raychaudhury, 2004, p. 5653). In the Bengali language, the word 'desh' has a culture-specific connotation that does not denote the nation which has a distinct physical outline, but a specific spatial space with which one is culturally connected. Therefore, the refugee children too, who are born and brought up in India, are continuously reminded that it might be their nation but is not their *desh*. Their roots are implanted somewhere else, even though the newfangled politics declares the land a foreign country for them.

However, in Charal's writing, one can observe a stark contrast between the emotional outlook on the homeland of this uprooted generation and the generation immediately following them. Whereas Sukhamay who was the first-hand victim of the forced migration is much obsessed with the superiority of his *desh* in East Bengal, his daughter Kamalini who was born and brought up in India is not in similar spell. Her generation is not so nostalgic or mesmerized by that ancient abode, and 'nation' and '*desh*' are not two distinct ideas for them, unlike their elders. Of course, "[t]he 'other' side is always an object of curiosity" (Azim, 2021, p. xxiv) for them; and that is why Kamalini repeatedly asks her father about their past inhabitation, and the local girls often request Maoi to recount the episode of their migration. At the same time, they are fascinated with East Bengal by listening to the continuous comparisons that their parental generation formulates. However, the comparisons act as a series of signifiers for them, and the meaning they decode through posing binary oppositions creates an image of East Bengal as a wonderland to their innocent psyche. For them, the other side of the border which they never visit, becomes a utopian land where everything is different and better than their familiar surroundings. Hence, Kamalini becomes surprised when she comes to know that there is hardly any difference between the two sides of the border. When her mother takes her to visit a *Mahotsav* (grand religious festival) at a place closer to the Bangladesh border, and the local children take her to a wide field and point at a distant village as Bangladesh, she wonders,

What's that! That nation looks like this nation... same trees [...] Alas! Dreamland Bangladesh! Kamalini imagines that it would be red, or blue, or any other color. (Charal, 2019, p. 43)

Along with this kind of revelation and realization that there is apparently no such dissimilarity between the two nations, the progeny of the uprooted generation may doubt that the superior and extraordinary image their elders have constructed about their lost land is probably quite fanciful, though not fully so. Anasua Basu Raychaudhury (2004) observes that while talking about their "foundational home", the migrated people recollect it from their memory, and "their visualisation of this flashback is in the form of a reconstruction. As they reconstruct their past, they idealise." (p. 5657-58) Thus, there is a possibility that just as the way they exaggerate their bravery,

everything they pronounce about their earlier habitation, the “memories of happier times, memories of abundance” too is an overstatement and “somewhat imaginary.” (p. 5653) Therefore, sometimes young children directly express their distrust as it occurs in the novella.

Moreover, education broadens the differences between the generations as it helps the second-generation refugees to acquire radical thinking and reject the idea of incarnation that, as Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (1997) observes, the Matua philosophy is gradually incorporating to be assimilated into the mainstream (p. 211). Whereas the scientific outlook teaches Kamalini that neither the *prasad* (divine leftovers) which she swallows with extreme disgust, nor the blessed dust of the *thakurs* (Matua priest) with which she brushes with intense detestation could be able to restore her health, Mrinmayee (her mother) has firm faith that the *prasad* and the dust have the supernatural power to heal the weakness of her daughter:

The elderly *gnosain* (Matua evangelist) gives a handful of rancid rice. Kamalini consumes that with utmost repugnance. That is why she could not get well. *Maa* (mother) did not understand that the devotion she had, her daughter possessed an equal amount of intense dislike for the rice smeared by the elderly *gnosain*. (Charal, 2019, p. 22)

While all devotees at the Baruni *mela* (fair), the annual fair of the Matua- devotees, including Mrinmayee, bathe in the same pond with complete dedication, Kamalini cannot even get the slightest contentment from bathing in that dirty, smelly water. Likewise, Kamalini’s logical outlook questions her father’s blind faith in the remedy of *Gnosain* to cure cholera. While school-going Kamalini has learned that diseases like cholera are spread through water-borne germs and that people should vaccinate themselves to avert the danger, Sukhamay has expressed his unshakeable confidence in the medication prescribed by Thakur.

The uneducated parents are not even aware of the necessity to consume fresh and pure water, which is evident in the quick reply posed by Sukhamay when Kamalini queries about the source of drinking water in their ancient village in East Bengal:

Why did we need a tube well? The transparent water of *bils* was enough to bathe, or drink, or cook, or serve, or cow-bathe in. God sends human beings with everything they need; and that is enough for them. (p. 44)

The elders hold superstitions and fail to reason about any physiological complications. They believe that *Pirburi* (an aged lady with occult power) has the supernatural power to solve the problem of infertility in women and could also save the lives of the little children from *pancho* (a harmful supernatural being). It is only educated child Kamalini who enquires why this powerful lady does not captivate all *pancho* at once. In this way, the educated young exhibit a dichotomy of reasoning with their elders. The elders, too, are not always ready to accept the shortcomings of their beliefs. Thus, when Kamalini laughs at her maternal grandmother’s explanation of her suffering from pox by, the old lady expresses her dissatisfaction with that.

Agency of Overt Womanhood and Widowhood

There are indeed some instances of a patriarchal mindset among the Namasudras in this novella, such as wife-beating, and the desire for a male child as a true descendant, but protestation against those injustices can also be found. “Since the notion of ‘private’ does not exist” in a Dalit populate, therefore, whenever a gendered oppression takes place in a family, “public outrage becomes an

instrument" in that 'democratic' set up which Kancha Ilaiah finds as a "positive aspects of Dalitbahujan law" (1996/2002, p. 40). Besides, the lower-caste community is much more liberal about female sexuality, and thus polygamy or extramarital affairs is not an offense in the eyes of their society, just as they accepted the unusual relationship between Subhadra and So'teka or the cohabitation of both wives of Haran *kaka* (uncle). Their financial obligations in a way facilitate the women to be emancipated as they have to step out of the house to arrange their expenses for sustenance and for the education of their children. Even the widows of the community, too, earn for the expenditure of their household on their own (as Sabitri and Pireni do) and engage in the venereal act too (for example, Sufala and Suren's widow), and are not ostracized for that. Hence, as an abrogation of gender discrimination and the implementation of equal rights for women among the Namasudras are encouraged by the Matua sect (Sarkar, 1323 BS, p. 107), the gendered position of women within the family and in the community is not 'completely bifurcated' from the primacy of men (Ilaiah, 1996/2002, p. 46). Celebration on the occasion of attaining puberty is also customary in Dalit communities across the country, and that festivity is never limited within the families but observed in the presence of all women of the locality. Similarly, in the Namasudra community of this novella too, one can find that all women have joyously taken part on the day of the final marriage of Angurbala after she matures to puberty.

There are adequate references in Charal's writing that though the Namasudra families are continuously stalked by poverty, and an uncertainty of the next meal remains present there, they prioritize education above all, even for the girl child of the family. By gaining consciousness of the ideology of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, which advocates women's education, the girl children of Namasudra families are encouraged to study. Kamalini's father always prioritizes education over feeding and never discriminates between his sons and daughters. As a result, the Namasudra women gain consciousness, which ultimately expedites the mass mobilization of the whole Namasudra population. In this liberal setup, the refugee women get the opportunity to share their nostalgia and concomitant trauma with one other as they spent ample time of a day in their groups:

The aged and veiled women spend their days sharing snuff powder and talking about the old days. Some sew quilts, someone goes to husk with basket-filled paddy. The stitching is continued for the whole night under the light of a lamp. And the verses of poet Jasimuddin share the pain and joy among friends beyond the embroidered quilt. (Charal, 2019, p. 9)

In the process, they evoke a sense of collectiveness to delineate a gendered space for them. The women folk of this Namasudra community form the 'Mahila Matua Sangha' (Matua Sangha for women) in their locality, where the women themselves arrange *Harisabha* (devotional gathering) every Wednesday evening. The troop also starts participating in the Baruni *mela* where only women play the instruments for their *kirtans* (a devotional and performative art form of Bengal) in the mass gathering, defying the patriarchal premonition that if women beat the drum, it will bring destruction.

Probably, the reason why Charal has designated a Dalit girl to write the history of a particular Dalit locale is similar to what Nazes Afroz (2021) notes while conducting interviews with the progeny of partitions for their research,

It is clear that the women respondents have more stories to tell, and their narratives are more graphic. One can guess why this is so. In South Asian societies, as girls and young women spend more time at home with their grandmothers, mothers, or other female relatives, they tend to hear more stories and become repositories of family history. (p. xiii)

Charal's novella has portrayed a unique friendship of unequal ages between pre-teen Kamalini and aged Subhadra. She provides indications that they spend qualitative and quantitative time together when Subhadra goes out in search of combustibility for her daily chores. Again, Kamalini, Shyama, and Noni are all willing to know about the lost land, the arduous journey, and the challenging resettlement in this land experienced by their elder generation. They insist Maoi to tell the story of their migration almost every night. Yet, the writer does not provide any such references to boy children from that community in her fiction. Again, when Sukhamay reminisces about his childhood in East Bengal in front of all the children, it is only Kamalini who interrogates him about their time. Therefore, girls have exhibited both the opportunity and interest to learn and recapitulate more inherited memories than boys. Hence, the writer presents the juvenile observer Kamalini who alludes to the broader nationalistic politics and also puts remarks on the local inhabitation simultaneously. By employing a girl child as a spectator to present the historical times and its impact on a Dalit community, the writer has fostered the agency of Dalit womanhood further.

Childhood Swinging between Magical and Maturity

While depicting the quotidian existence of the second-generation refugee children, Charal has drawn a picture of childhood that masters in balancing between idyllic childhood and materialistic liability or encumbrance. Kamalini and her coevals rejoice in their limpid and unadulterated childhood inexpressibly with their arcadian play habits. They take part in rural cultural programs, visit village fairs, and enjoy friendly competition with neighboring communities. They are also aware of their economic limitations, which pose an impediment to their incessant exultation and amusement. They are encouraged to collect fruits and vegetables, and sell them at the market or station to alleviate the monetary extremity of their family. There is also a reference to Kamalini getting delayed in going to play because she is assigned to perform household chores. She feels anguish and discomfiture, but her advanced mature responsiveness alerts her to adjust her own gratification for the sake of the family. As a result, these Dalit children are wavering between childhood and adulthood.

Again, through her domestic duties, Kamalini dismantles the stereotyped gender role as she carries out so-called masculine activities like trading, cultivating fiber, or carrying paddy for husking, and also runs an errand for her elder brother. However, at the initial stage, she was ashamed of doing it in some cases, but Kamalini would shake off the shame being inspired by her father's gender-equal standpoint, and later on, achieve mastery over the jobs. Although she admits that she feels self-satisfaction by imagining herself as a boy, there are several instances in the novella where she is blessed with motherly compassion at such a tender age. Hence, the Dalit girl blurs the distinction between social femininity and masculinity with her masculinized name, 'Kamal'.

Developing a social cognitive understanding that advances the "interpersonal sensitivity" and "social competence" of a child in a complex social world (Thompson, 2006, p. 26) is best exhibited

in the character of Kamalini. Her autonomous and individual experiences construct her induction of absorption as a Piagetian constructivist model to recognize the maintaining of reservation by a teacher of her school in which students are of poor caste and the polarity between her impoverished lifestyle and the luxurious position of the Biswas-daughters. She herself has experienced embarrassment because of her residence at the bank of *bils*. She also finds out that refugee resettlement in their locality had a particular pattern guided by ghettoization on the basis of caste (along with their previous topographical habitation in East Bengal), and that system prevails in the educational institutions as well, as Kamalini observes that mostly the girls of the upper-caste family read in the girls' school on the other side of the rail line, and the Namasudra children are the students of a nearby school. She could discern her elder sister's boasting about befriending girls of higher-caste as an attempt to be posited in the same place as them while entailing "internal caste cleavages" (Ram, 2017, p. 54) with her own society. Kamalini also questions why a Dalit disciple has to go through humiliating punishment on behalf of the Brahmin guru, who has committed the sin of slaughtering a cow. It is her education that blesses Kamalini with self-pride and radicalism, due to which she can apprehend that the century-long casteism has been rooted in the hearts of these rural people, and the Dalits are so tied up with these casteist practices that they could not realize their dishonor. Social reality forces her to curtail her greenness and grows her consciousness about the inveterate and stratified societal configuration at an early age.

Casteism in Indian society instills a derogatory notion against the Shudras through the Brahminic scriptures that also affects the names of their children. Scriptures like *Manusmriti* or *Vishnusmriti* prescribed that the names of the Dalits "should denote something contemptible." (Ambedkar, 1987/2014, p. 38) In Charal's novella, most of the children are called *Kanule*, *Jangule*, *Sangale*, *Kulthe*, *Byang*, *Peti*, and many others, which neither own any respectable meaning nor are in their original admiring form.

Conclusion

Hence, the present article becomes an epigenetic study on a group of fictionalized Namasudra population of a particular locality in West Bengal as captured by the observer little Kamalini, who is the representative of the second-generation refugee children. As the paper focuses on the nationalist and state-level politics of the eastern part of the newly-shaped India, a pattern of the refugee rehabilitation of this Dalit group, their lifestyle, customs, and culture are also dealt with. It further catches the attention of Charal's depiction of the regular lives of the refugee-progeny who are not spared from the impact of the long-term mass escapism named Partition as the commotion and its concomitants affect their childhood by accelerating the process of psychic maturity for their refugee-children. The study also concentrates on how the perspective of the educated and rational second-generation differs from that of their earlier generation, which is engulfed in blind belief in supernaturalism and engrossed in dreams for their lost land.

Though she emerges lately, Kamalini has learnt about all those past incidents, both delighting and disturbing, transpire before her physical presence through the memories she inherits; and closely observes the long-lasting trauma of partition and the impression it has made in the life of the parental generation just as the titular static and silent *Andhar bil*. Besides presenting the collective loss of a whole community, Kamalini exhibits the loss of an individual level too while sharing

different stories associated with local people, such as the heartbroken state of her maternal uncle, Soda *kaka* (uncle), the son of Malo *dadu* (grandfather), and his wife, the wife of Kokila *dadu*, for being departed from their respective close or beloved one, and all from the point of view of Kamalini, a child-observer, where “[t]he political and the personal merge, adding to the notion of new modes of historicizing, where what constitutes the ‘truth’ of these pasts is indeed what we hold in our memories, in the stories we tell each other.” (Azim, 2021, p. xxviii) Kamalini comprehends the events she experiences in her own way, and what she recalls and reflects constitutes the novella.

Thus, the novella becomes more like a collage of events that a pre-teen girl from a Dalit refugee family minutely observes and recounts, and the retelling of those events to the reader “form[s] a mosaic or tapestry of what families hand down as memories.” (Azim, 2021, p. xxvii) In the ‘Foreword’ of the novella, Charal writes:

Partition, Rehabilitation, Independent Bangladesh, the livelihood, nostalgia, despair, and poverty I have perceived closely of countless relatives and neighbors from Bangladesh, numerous floods— all these have been depicted in fragments. (2019, p. 5)

She thematically divides the whole novella into tiny chapters that describe several interconnected events. Moreover, Charal composed short sentences to proffer a sense of fracture. Therefore, the narrative justifies what Debjani Sengupta has observed for the Partition literature of Bengal that it “use[s] fragmentation to index the fracturing of narrative representation that the partition brought in its wake.” (2016, p. 3) Yet, as a sentient spectator, Kamalini does not only delineate what she perceives but also unfolds her own interpretations and evaluations as well, and wraps the narrative with a stream of consciousness device.

It is noteworthy that though Kamalini could recall the psychic pressure that the refugees had gone through due to communal tension, the little one has not referred to any such significant violence against women. From the field researches on gendered violence at the time of Partition conducted by sociologists and historians, Urvashi Butalia (1997), Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998), Jasodhara Bagchi and Subharanjan Dasgupta (2003) in particular, it is beyond any doubt that the refugee women, especially, those who were from marginalized backgrounds had become the victims of physical as well as psychological persecution on both sides of the borders. The Partition fictions and non-fictions from West Bengal too confirm the same, though the gendered torment that Bengal exhibited due to Partition is considered as “soft violence” (Basu, 2013, p. xxiii) in comparison to the grim brutality that the women of the western part of the country had undergone (Menon, 2004, p. 5). Aligning with the opinion of Firdous Azim (2021), it can be stated that familial censorship may be in action due to the fact that probably the children are not informed about those shameful events in their family; rather, more emphasis is put on the economic struggle of the women along with their emotional encounter (pp. xxvi-xxvii).

Eminently, Charal has implied a promising mobilization of the population generations after generations — from the lamentation by illiterate Bengi *pishi* to the attainment of an elite education by her grandson; from the arrival of uprooted Mrinmayee to this place for survival, to the volitional departure of Mrinmayee’s daughter to a city to get a better opportunity to create an identity of her own. On the foundation of futuristic and equalitarian exposure, the daughter of the Dalit refugees initiates the endeavor to create an identity for every individual of the Dalit

community, irrespective of gender. Thus, Kalyani Thakur Charal has portrayed the triumphant present of the refugee-children of a marginalized community on the tattered lives of their refugee ancestors from the point-of-view of a Dalit girl in her novella *Andhar Bil O Kichhu Manush*.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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