



Negotiating Ethics and Power in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*

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Abstract:

Arjun (1971) by Sunil Gangopadhyay is one of the most important Partition novels in Bengali literature, which was translated into English under the title by Chitrita Banerji and published by Penguin Books in 1987. Its study doesn't merely focus on the incidents of communal violence but on its aftermath, its repercussions in the long run, and the consequences of refugee migration in the world of post-Partition Bengal as narrated by Arjun. The novel explores the complexities of morality, power, identity, and survival as lived by its main character Arjun Raychoudhury. In this paper, it is submitted that Gangopadhyay succeeds in deconstructing the category of morality as a historically and culturally porous phenomenon, and also in revealing the inequalities in the power relationships in the social and political processes of refugee life. The moral dilemmas Arjun faces, the institution of caste within the colony, and violence in society show how people struggle for justice when there are no instruments of security to protect them. Gangopadhyay illustrates the lack of absolutes in moral decisions in postcolonial societies through a modern reinterpretation of the epic hero Arjuna. Finally, the novel highlights the resilience of people as well as the examination of the system of domination that defines refugee lives.

Keywords: Identity, Partition, refugee, power, morality, displacement, postcolonialism.

Introduction

One of India's most traumatic events was the Partition of 1947. The partition of British India into India and Pakistan was the cause of an unprecedented migration, violence, and displacement. The Partition of Punjab has been given much attention by scholars, while Bengali Partition experience brought forth its own literary manifestation. One of these is particularly important: Sunil Gangopadhyay's own novel *Arjun* about the life of the East Bengal refugees who came to make a new life in post-Partition Calcutta. *Arjun* was first published in Bengali in 1971 and translated into English by Chitrita Banerji in 1987, and explores the social realities of refugee colonies and the ethical dilemmas arising out of being displaced. Explicit linking between the protagonist and epic hero Arjuna of Mahabharata in the translator's preface, drawing attention to the theme of moral conflict. "Unlike the epic warrior who receives divine guidance from Krishna, the modern Arjun confronts a fragmented world in which ethical certainty is absent" (Gangopadhyay 9–10). The morality-power connection is the novel's main issue. Refugee experience not only economic, social, and political marginalisation and deprivation but also, they live in an internal hierarchy they may have formed. Gangopadhyay shows how power affects institutions—and personal relationships and memory, and moral decisions—in Arjun's experiences. This paper considers Arjun's presentation of morality and power as joined forces in post-Partition society. The novel opens up a space of moral dilemmas in the context of refugee living, social violence, and individual conscience. Suranjana Choudhury observes that "These refugees often became unwitting victims of politicised state policies and strategic rehabilitation measures." (Choudhury 40)

The Legend of Arjuna and the modern hero as you begin to read the title *Arjun*, the heroic character of Mahabharata springs to mind. The translator tells us that it is an ethical dilemma when Arjuna is placed in the situation, where he has to fight his own kinsmen on the Kurukshetra battlefield. He is sad, and only after being encouraged to think of duty and justice

by Krishna in the *Bhagavadgītā* (Gangopadhyay 9–10) he ultimately decides to join the conflict. Discussing the parallel between Arjuna in The Mahabharata and Arjun Raychoudhury, Debali Mookerjee-Leonard observed, “In the epic the hero Arjuna is essentially what he was at its beginning; there is no shift in his consciousness. He is an embodiment of certain virtues of the community, and this is so even when he is on his solitary journeys gathering divine weapons and royal allies. This is because Arjun undergoes no ‘education’. In re-situating the epic in the present, Gangopadhyay tracks how modernity has altered man’s relationship with the community and thus reconstituted the structure of humanity. (qtd. in Roy and Bhatia 51) However, Arjun of modern times envisioned by Gangopadhyay lives in a very different world. There is no God-ordained power to settle his disputes. “No god can be invoked” to guide the “twentieth century” hero of the epic towards victory, the translator notes (Gangopadhyay 10). Rather, Arjun is left to make his own moral choices. This reinterpretation of what heroism is changed. Heroism in the modern world is no longer about glorious warfare, but is all about surviving through poverty, violence, and displacement. Arjun's challenge is not on the battlefield, but intellectual, emotional, and social. His ethical dilemmas arise from daily life, and he demonstrates the uncertainty that is typical of postcolonial life. The Arjun of modern times, thus, represents the predicament of values in modern society. In contrast to epic stories, in which there is a clear-cut triumph of good over evil, Gangopadhyay's world is a morally ambiguous world. Instead of certainty, it requires negotiation to be ethical.

The novel does not address the day-to-day of the communal violence, but rather its effects on long-term displacement and rehabilitation. This is because the refugee colony of Dum Dum is a liminal place where people displaced from elsewhere are attempting to rebuild the lives that have fallen apart and are negotiating the issues of “belonging”, “identity” and “survival”. Kavita Daiya comments, “Refugees and their oral testimony in this period come to be seen as powerful enough to generate mass political violence. Narratives that bear witness to refugees’

experiences- their suffering” are denigrated as “tales” that become “more lurid” in their re-telling. (Daiya 110) The land on which the colony itself is being constructed came from a rich landlord, and later refugee families from the east Bengal came into this land. The story went on to document the settling of thirty-four families that gradually converted the abandoned estate to a place where people lived despite the fact that they had no legal ownership” (Gangopadhyay 14–15). The fact that their right to the land is unclear, to a certain extent, represents the situation of refugees physically settled, but not socio-politically or socially settled. Exile from one's home is only part of the refugee experience in *Arjun*. Partitions deprive people not only of their home, but also of their cultural environment, their social contacts and historical roots. Discussing mass displacement and a vast number of camps in West Bengal, Anusua Basu Raychaudhury in “Living Another Life: UnHomed in the Camp” says, “In fact, different types of camps in West Bengal were set up to deal with an unprecedented refugee influx in the state. The government mainly set up three types of camps, namely, women’s camps, worksite camps and Permanent Liability (PL) camps.” (Basu Raychaudhury, *Citizens* 13) When a people's homeland is lost, it is a psychological trauma that is difficult to overcome in resettlement. Arjun's recollections of East Bengal are testimony to the strong emotional connection which refugees have to the place they lost and remind him of the relatives and friends who were left behind. As he reflects on his childhood, he emphatically proclaims that he left his country at the age of eleven: “I left my country at the age of eleven. Yes, my country” (Gangopadhyay 33). Of great interest is the repeated use of the word “my country,” which defies the nationalist standards set by Partition. Homeland does not exist on a map of politics but in the memory, in the experience and in the emotional tie; this is Arjun's homeland. Memory is an important component of refugee identity. Arjun keeps coming back to the idea of rivers, fields, village schools, and childhood friendships throughout the novel. He vividly remembers crossing flooded rivers to attend school and the landscapes of rural East Bengal that shaped his early

life (Gangopadhyay 34). These memories show how the past doesn't end when a person becomes displaced and how the memory of past events becomes a mode of maintaining identity in an unfamiliar world. In this way, this remembering turns away from historical erasure. Even when political reality is that they can never go home, refugees bring their country with them. Having a partition also produces a situation of permanent exile. Refugees probably find new homes and establish new lives, but psychologically, they are split between past and present. This feeling of unavenged loss is sadly illustrated in the shape of Arjun's older brother, whose mental state symbolizes the trauma of displacement. He despairs about the realities of Partition and imagines a return to home and says "India and Pakistan have become one country again," owing to Gandhi, who has united both countries together (Gangopadhyay 28). In his delirium is the expression of his longing to set right a world that is lost and broken. But still there is no restoration possible. Return can only be experienced as nostalgia, and the negativity of historical violence is emphasized. Gangopadhyay also uncovers the changed social hierarchy and economic relations in the context of displacement. The refugees who reach Calcutta bear a smaller bundle of resources and have an uncertain future. In the colony, people fight poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. Their daily lives are dictated by financial suffering, and they must adjust to new methods of work and survival. "Biswanath's transition from an unsuccessful grocery business to a laundry service illustrates the precarious economic lives of refugees attempting to rebuild themselves in unfamiliar urban settings" (Gangopadhyay 18–19). Therefore, displacement rubs not only the geography of displacement, but also the process of rebuilding identity of class, which is extremely painful. Meanwhile, the refugee colony turns into a community space of unity and solidarity: "Residents depend upon one another for security, mutual aid, and emotional support. Figures such as Dibya and Sukhen patrol the colony during power outages to protect residents from thieves and danger" (Gangopadhyay 15–16). Community bonds formed in the midst of suffering are manifest in these acts. However

this romanticising of refugee communities is avoided by Gangopadhyay. There are divisions of solidarity beneath the surface of solidarity, by economy, by women, and by power. As members of a community vie for resources and influence, competition can lead to tension within the community. So, for Arjun, displacement is a multi-layered and complicated issue. The refugee identity is the product of loss/reliance, memory/adaptation, solidarity/conflict, and all at the same time. The book implies that the Partition had not yet ended when the borders of these countries were drawn but that it continued to have an impact on people's lives for some time after.

In exploring the refugee experience, Arjun illuminates how the consciousness of refugees as displaced persons can be altered when entering into exile from one homeland and moving toward another future, as well as how the physical space can be altered. Refugees – as the survivors of historical violence – also reproduce hierarchies in their own community. The colony mirrors the overall patterns of domination in postcolonial society. The one authority, informal in nature, is Dibya. His strength, his physical strength, gives him influence with people. In a clash with a taxi driver, he drives the crowd to believe that he has the authority to inflict violence without fear of repercussions (Gangopadhyay 19–20). Physical force may be more determinative of authority in the colony than law is. Crowds are also the depiction of collective power in the novel. Gangopadhyay notes that the people take fun in beating up one person because “the guilt would not fall on an individual” (Gangopadhyay 19). This understanding brings focus to the role of collective violence in diffusing responsibility, and thus importing aggression. Economic power also influences social relationships. It's only because outsiders without debts (others) have to ask Biswanath that his laundry business is so successful. When there is not enough, it generates tensions which can tear and challenge the communal solidarity. The refugee colony is therefore a miniature of society where power is an outgrowth of privilege, power, and social force. For Gangopadhyay, there's always power; it

just takes a different form. Ethical questions are not always unambiguous and sometimes provide no moral guidance at all. Moral ambiguity, defined as moral options that do not lend themselves to easy differentiation between good and bad, is a central theme in Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*. The novel does not "blacklist" or "whitelist" its characters and themes, but rather reveals how the past, poverty, and inequality continue to influence human behavior in profound ways.

In a post-Partition Bengal, *Arjun* paints a picture of a people who are negotiating moralities for survival in a context of power relations. Gangopadhyay illustrates how moral decisions are not always made with reference to universal principles but simply due to the material constraints in the case of refugees and marginalized people. It is an ethical complexity that is exemplified within Arjun himself. Whereas literary heroes are often figures of unconditional confidence, Arjun is characterized by doubt and introspection, of compassion. The officer survives the self-same brutal attack and interrogates the man multiple times for any all possible enemies or suspects. But Arjun refuses to point the finger at another, stating, 'I trust everybody I know' (Gangopadhyay 26). It is not simply a statement of naivety, but a statement of a deep worldview which is extremely humanistic. The fact that Arjun puts his faith in others may indicate an ethical obligation to trust even where suspicion and hostility are rampant. Yet throughout the novel, at the same time, the idealism is undermined by a culture of violence and political strife. He shows moral strength in that even he doesn't suspect others, but also an element of vulnerability that shows there's a conflict between morals and the society.

Gangopadhyay frames and brings up the issue of justice vs. survival in the refugee experience over and over again. The people of the colony at Dum Dum have been struggling every day to face poverty, unemployment, and insecurity of life. Suranjana Choudhury comments, "Sunil Gangopadhyay's novella *Arjun* highlights an altogether different dimension of rehabilitation experience." (Choudhury 25) In such circumstances, there may often be conflicts between

ethics and economics. Because deprivation has a profound effect on human behavior, the novel implies that issues of behavior are inextricably bound up with the economic factors of a given society. This often forces refugees who have lost their homes, livelihood, and social standing to sacrifice values to survive. In this way, morality is not a universal rule but depends on the historical situation. What may seem like bad ethics under normal circumstances can be a necessity in a situation of displacement or scarcity. Collective violence, another aspect of social life, is another complex and ambiguous element in the novel. Gangopadhyay notes that “the more beat the more people are pleased” (19) in the scuffle between the cabbie and the mob; “the guilt could not be assigned to anyone in particular” (19). This is an unsettling bit of mob psychology, as the responsibility of each member of the crowd is diluted. People who may be reluctant to single-handedly engage in an act of violence are likely to do so if their fellow members of the group are on board. This scene depicts the workings of power as it is rendered collectively and thereby allows ordinary people to rationalize actions that they themselves may be appalled by. Arjun's passages commenting on his childhood offer some of the most insightful moments in the novel on the nature of morality. Recalling much of his formative experiences, he notes that children have “an intense and direct sense of right and wrong” while adults tend to rationalize out or ignore the injustice (Gangopadhyay 37-38). Through this contrast, perspectives of the moral debasement of social life emerge. Arjun believes childhood is the time of a more pristine view of morality as children sense injustice without all the considerations of power, status, and self-interest present in an adult's world. Frequently, however, the world of adulthood calls for adaptations to unequal structures: injustice is normalized. The red and blue pencil episode is a strong symbol of violation of ethics and social inequality. “When Yaqub takes away Arjun’s treasured pencil, the adults around him dismiss the incident as insignificant, urging him to forget about it” (Gangopadhyay 36-38). But for the child Arjun, it's a huge injustice. The pencil isn't so much an object as it's a symbol of dignity,

aspiration, and emotional attachment. More importantly, adults not only illustrate to Arjun that power is not necessarily someone who looks after you, but they also teach him that those with power need not be held responsible. Like many other things, the pencil had been stolen from him, he says later; it represented “many other kinds of deprivation” that shaped social relations (Gangopadhyay 38). Thus, the incident provides a telling glimpse of the processes of inequality and domination that are reflected in seemingly unimportant acts. In doing so, Gangopadhyay illustrates the moral complexities that can exist in the light of social reality. Human consciousness has its own ethical ideals, which are constantly jolted by poverty, displacement, and power structures. At the end of it, Arjun proposes that moral life is not fluid but always a process of negotiation. The novel is a powerful reflection on the challenges of ethical living in modern times, through the lives of characters who are fighting to maintain humanity in the face of historic upheaval.

In *Arjun*, violence is given a pivotal role. The novel shows violence as not being simply physical, but as a social process for the exertion of power. Arjun is attacked in the climax of the novel. He is found severely wounded with blood all around by Labonya, whose dismal dog is still there. It is a scene of the weakness of intellectually and morally valiant people in bloody societies. The novel offers numerous instances of violence as being related to insecurity and competition. From the outside, there are threats encroaching upon the colony's existence for reclaiming lands or asserting supremacy. Thus, refugees form defensive power in them that, in some cases, may be oppressive. Dibya's approach to his brother, who is mentally impaired, is another aspect of violence. Dibya thinks, he is mad since the condition he is suffering from is nothing but laziness, and she gets up and punches him (Gangopadhyay 32–33). This incident illustrates that there is a lack of understanding of different colours of society. Arjun realizes the reason for his brother's suffering. He realizes that he had not only been ill, but also had been the victim of social cruelty. He says, “it was 'society that drove him mad with a vengeance”

(Gangopadhyay 33). Here, Gangopadhyay condemns the collective intolerance and uncovers the rather gentle violence of day-to-day life. Violence becomes a cause and a tool for power. The major sufferers are people who do not have power. A discussion of memory, identity, and resistance: Arjun is the personification of resistance: memory. Refugees have to cling to their memories of their childhoods and homes that they have lost in order to maintain their identity. Arjun continually claims, "I remember everything" (Gangopadhyay 24). His fixation on memory is a rejection of the lack of memory brought on by displacement. Memories are a must for survival. After sustaining head trauma, Arjun is more concerned with losing his memory than dying. "Without memory, I would be a vegetable" (Gangopadhyay 25), he says. In memory, the relationship between selfhood is stressed. Memory, yet again, is also bound up in collective history in the novel. The experiences of refugees are often not a part of official discourses of nationhood. Gangopadhyay's preservation of these is histories that might otherwise disappear. Thus, memory functions as a type of power. Remembering is about withstanding and resisting erasure. By preserving the memory, people who experienced displacement are able to take control of their own historical experiences and lives.

Conclusion

Arjun by Sunil Gangopadhyay is a deep delve into morality, power and displacement in post-Partition Bengal. Overall, the novel challenges the stereotype of the refugee as a passive victim and hero by providing a nuanced portrait of refugee life. Rather, it leads to a depiction of the complexities of the ethical and social nature of the relationship between history and trauma. Along the way, Arjun depicts the struggle of individual people trying to stand out in the midst of violence and injustice. His moral problems arise out of the struggles with, tensions between, and conflicts regarding his responsibilities with himself, his families, and his communities. He is not as lucky as epic Arjuna, for whom guidance from the divine is available, and must deal with uncertainty on his own. The novel also illustrates how power works in a variety of

institutions, communities, and interpersonal relationships. Refugees face oppression from outside the community and continue to manifest hierarchies within the refugee community. All experiences of violence, memory, and identity are negotiated and contested places of power. Finally, *Arjun* is important for it speaks to universal questions of justice, dignity and survival. Gangopadhyay's picture of the displaced brings to mind that morality is never abstract, but has to be defined by history, material conditions, and human relationships. In tackling the theme of conflicting ethics and authority, *Arjun* is one of the most important literary works to respond to Partition and its lingering effects.

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