Ethnic Violence In Indira Goswami’s Jaatra

Mithu Dusad¹, Sonai, Silchar²

¹Assistant Professor Deptt. of English Madhab Chandra Das College.

Introduction

An ethnic group or ethnicity is a socially defined category of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, social, cultural or national experience. Membership of an ethnic group tends to be defined by a shared cultural heritage, ancestry, origin, myth, history, homeland, language, dialect, ideology, symbolic systems such as religion, mythology, and ritual, cuisine, dressing style, physical appearance etc. Ethnic violence refers to violence expressly motivated by ethnic hatred and ethnic conflict. It is commonly related to political violence. This paper is exploring the theme of ethnic violence through a reading of Indira Goswami’s well-known short story ‘Jaatra’ (The Journey). ‘Jaatra’ is often classed as a story set against the backdrop of militant violence in Assam. This paper illustrates how different temporal modalities of violence are mutually imbricated with each other. For analytical clarity, let me distinguish three forms of violence that are depicted in the story. First, there is the sheer contingency and eventfulness of terroristic violence, epitomized by the sudden appearance of the militant Konbap towards the end. Then, the critique of gendered violence sublimated in the figure of Konbap’s sister, Nirmali, whose legs are broken by the people of her village because she dares to fall in love with an enemy Indian soldier. Moreover, Nirmali is kicked brutally by her brother later and is also berated by her parents when she makes her appearance during the last few pages of the story. These two forms of violence are woven in with a subtle exploration of the banal, invisible nature of slow violence—the recurring degradation of life worlds and ecosystems in Assam, and the attendant public and governmental indifference towards such repeated destruction. Goswami does not reduce one form of violence into a simplistic, causal explanation of the other; instead, in the space of a few pages, she manages to capture the complexity of the devastation and decrepitude wrought on a specific life world by the coalescence of these different forms of violence.

The story operates through the codes of realism, ‘Jaatra’ opens with the unnamed female narrator and the mainlander Professor Mirajkar, returning to Guwahati in an old Ambassador from a trip to Assam’s famous tourist destination, Kaziranga National Park. The narrator and Mirajkar are colleagues at Delhi University. They decide to get back to Guwahati before darkness sets in as the car is an old one. Mirajkar is not afraid of wild animals, but is terrified of terrorists due to personal loss during the Punjab insurgency. Interestingly, the narrator lets slip an interesting detail that he has a hereditary curiosity about guns and ammunition, even though he is mortally scared of terrorists. On the other hand, the
narrator is spellbound by the natural beauty on offer during the return journey. The space within the car functions as a sheltered enclave in its own right as the narrator can look at the speedily shifting view outside without coming close to anything. The narrator describes the stunning natural vistas unfolding in front of them in lyrical passages like the following [I follow Dhirendranath Bezboruah’s (2009) translation throughout this essay]:

‘We sped on the highway cutting through forests full of simolu, khairaas, sisu, hollong, pomaa, bogipomaa, bokul, jamun and teak trees. The last rays of the setting sun disappeared in the forests. The patches of light were like a silken drape. It was as though this drape had got shredded, and the bits had wriggled into the forests between the trees. The teak trees that seemed to have taken the bits of silk looked speckled like the skin of a deer in the fading sun.’ (106-7)

Far from functioning simply as a passage that conveys an impression of sheer lyrical beauty, picture-postcard descriptions like the above introduce a thematic that is slowly deconstructed during the course of the plot. Time is on the move, but its passage is experienced as something the viewing subject can control and contemplate from a safe distance. The sense of safety offered by distance and the attendant felt experience of the slow passage of time ushers in a recognizable romantic trope: the narrating subject desires to bridge the gap with the external, natural world imaginatively. The enclave of the car’s interior is also comparable to the specific locale from where the narrator and Mirajkar are returning. Like the zoo, the museum or the exhibition, the national reserve park is also a managed space. Both Mirajkar and the narrator can contemplate the natural world from a distance in this managed space. Possibly Mirajkar is not afraid of wild animals because of the safety offered by such touristic distance. The terrorist’s bullet, on the other hand, can potentially cut a swathe through this safe space and promises a gruesome intimacy.

Time, to paraphrase Hamlet, is soon thrown out of joint. Significantly, this scenario of temporal non-synchronicity is inaugurated when the car stalls midway. The two passengers get out of their protected enclave and stand before a row of small shops. As the driver, Ramakanta, makes inquiries about repairs, the narrator suddenly sees a figure approaching them. The approaching “manavmurti” introduces an element of temporal non-synchronicity with the narrator’s present—a point of disjunction which is further accentuated when the narrator looks at him closely: “I observed him closely and noticed that he had tied up his long hair in a bun. He was an elderly man very likely in his seventies” (109).

Further on: “The bun on his head came undone and his long hair fell to his shoulders. With his long hair and his dhoti stopping short of his knees, he looked like an oja from our oja-pali” (109-10).

There is something distinct, otherworldly and ancient about this “manavmurti.” He seems to emerge almost as a figure from a tableau. In contrast to the immediacy of the narrator’s response to this “manavmurti” whom she soon begins to address by the honorific Aatoi, the description of his wife’s physical appearance is slightly delayed in the narrative. As soon as the narrator and Mirajkar sit in Aatoi’s decrepit shop, she makes her entrance with a kerosene lamp. Gradually, as she struggles to make tea, the narrator notices her “blouse full of patches” and her “withered flesh” (111). While Aatoi is difficult to classify, his wife is presented directly as a victim of poverty.
Aatoi and his wife begin to assume two distinct roles in the ensuing conversation. The wife represents the harsh, insistent note of an impoverished and terror-scarred present. From her, we learn that one of her sons, Konbap, has joined the militants, while one of her daughters, Nirmali, had her leg broken as punishment for conducting an affair with an Indian soldier. She lives in constant fear that her son will fall prey to the bullets of the Indian military. She repeatedly keeps on haranguing her husband to go and see if Konbap, the son who has joined the militant group, has been seen near the railway tracks. Moreover, we also learn from her that the annually recurring floods have gobbled up most of their land and also killed their eldest son. The utter destitution caused by the slow violence of the floods and the consequent public and political apathy towards this problem is a constant thread running through the conversation and is mentioned by both Aatoi and his wife at different points of time. The wife’s criticism of slow violence reaches its apogee in the following passage: “I have suffered for seven years. You should look at our plight once and tell the government about it. When you go to see the animals in Kaziranga, you should also see the plight of our villagers”(113). Aatoi’s wife’s utterance signals the commencement of the process of weak claims impinging on the narrator and Mirajkar’s time in the story. Recall that the narrator enjoys and contemplates the unfolding natural scene from a distance. The wife’s statement is a scathing indictment of this distanced, touristic gaze’s blindness. The beauty of the natural landscape is visible, but the destitution of the human inhabitants of this landscape remains invisible.

In contrast to his wife, Aatoi seems to exist almost entirely in the past and is even referred to as a fossil by his spouse. Besides the descriptions of the physical appearance of this “manavmurti,” his tales about the past and his lineage, his songs, and even his behavior he refuses to accept money after performing several songs composed by Vaishnavite saints seem to indicate a gaze fixated on the past. But is he a relic who has no connection with current realities? Is he just a mournful chronicler of times past? Let us attend to his speech carefully. A little while after his wife’s scathing and direct critique of the distanced touristic gaze, Aatoi says:

‘But did you see any tigers in Kaziranga?…I hear that there were only twenty tigers there in 1966, but there are about sixty now. Even the number of rhinos are said to have gone up from 300 to about 1500, and I believe there are over 500 elephants…

‘Herds of elephants have stopped coming this way due to the bustle of the traffic. Earlier, we had to take turns at chasing them away from the fields of crops…but there are tigers sometimes. Only the other day, there was quite an incident. The elephant of the Dimouguri mahant was tethered near the roadside pond. It was a very docile elephant. Whenever they took it for a bath in the Difaloo, it would play with the children there. In the afternoon, the elephant was sleeping by the pond. No one knows from where the tiger emerged and scampered with a large chunk of the elephant’s behind between its teeth.’ (114-5) The crucial point about the initial half of this passage is that the distanced touristic gaze directed towards a managed space is subtly critiqued and simultaneously conjoined with a melancholic awareness of the violence wrought by the work of time on a rapidly disappearing lifeworld. If the wife critiques the blindness of the distanced gaze, Aatoi’s pronouncements ironically supplements these harsh, insistent notes emerging from the realm of necessity with a mournful comprehension of devastating historical change. The number of rhinos and tigers has gone up as a consequence of the conservation
efforts made by the state and the public. But, the devastation wrought on existing human life worlds by slow violence remains unacknowledged. The increase in the number of tigers seemingly leads to unprecedented incidents like the one with the elephant above. Moreover, rapid modernization the bustle of the traffic the management of space results in the gradual disruption of an existing collectivity. Earlier, “we” took turns chasing elephants away; now, “no one knows” when a predator comes and takes something away. Things fall apart, the centre does not hold.

Time begins to speed up after Aatoi finishes narrating his stories about the past and singing songs composed by the Vaishnavite saints. Things slowly come to a head after the narrator ruminates on what the wrinkles on Aatoi’s forehead signify—“Worries, a quest for answers, grief and…” (120). The sentence remains open-ended as the narrator realizes that Aatoi’s inscrutable face represents something elusive which words cannot capture. The narrator and Mirajkar offer the couple some money before they depart. Meanwhile, a limping young woman—Nirmali—slowly enters the shop. She is berated by her parents as a “miserable pest” as she limps inside (121). However, attention is focused on her just “for a moment,” possibly implying that her state of abjection has been transformed into something mundane, repetitive and unremarkable in poverty-scarred world (122). She is noticed only for a short time before she slinks into a corner where they wash utensils. However, Nirmali’s muteness and veritable invisibility indicts both parents because it seems that they have accepted the violence her body has been subjected to as part of the natural order of things. Moreover, the fate of the militant son seems to be the focus in the earlier exchanges between husband and wife. Nirmali is hardly mentioned. The brief instant of “for a moment” however is speeded up even more when a “human tornado”—Konbap—suddenly jumps into the scene in a manner “akin to an explosion” (122). Konbap is described as a “young man with terrible gunshots on his lips and a part of one eye” (ibid.). A strip of his flesh was torn below his eyelid to the corner of his eye. This “ghastly” person kicks Nirmali on the stomach calling her a “miserable slut,” and rushes away with the money with the purpose of buying two U.S. carbines from poachers who hunt rhinos, despite his parents beseeching him to stay and return the money to the narrator and Mirajkar. The three forms of violence I isolated above, thus, coalesce in a single, chaotic scene. The “slow” nature of the narration earlier seems to be upstaged by these two sequences that speed up the experience of time.

While the wife pleads with Konbap, a “hint of a smile” hovers on Aatoi’s face. This smile haunts the narrator. “I,” the narrator says, “never knew that a human smile could so sear a heart” (123). With seared hearts, the two representatives from enclaved bourgeois worlds travel in silence to Guwahati in the enveloping darkness. In an earlier analysis of this story (2012), I over hastily suggested that “seared hearts” and “silence” illustrated an ethical re-orientation of the way in which the two middle-class characters view and navigate their worlds. I don’t think the text gives us such a clear answer. I think it would be far more useful to think of this scenario in Nixon’s terms of slow violence being brought “emotionally to life.” Earlier in the story, the narrator mentions that Mirajkar has a “wrong” impression that terrorism had not yet ended in the north-eastern region. The narrator also says that “terrorism would slowly come to an end” if it had not ended already (106). However, the two middle-class characters probably realize that the term “terrorism” only contends with the speedy, sudden nature of violence which, like
Konbap, enters the scene chaotically and seems to leave only devastation and chaos in its wake. Far more important than that, though, is the emotional connection that gradually takes form between the two middle-class observers and the impoverished couple. If we look at the story carefully, we notice that this connection develops through a simultaneous process of stepping out of an enclaved space and in slow time. We learn that the pair listens to Aatoi’s songs for nearly an hour—the conversation before and the events with Nirmali and Konbap add up to a sufficiently long halt in front of Aatoi’s shop. This process of recognition that unfolds in slow time parallels the gradual revelation of the effects of slow violence on the impoverished couple. While seemingly mimetic and unilinear, ‘Jaatra’ shows how different experiential categories of time combine in complex ways to reveal the effects of multiple forms of violence on a specific life world.

**Bibliography:**


