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## “Postcolonial Disaster”: Purdah, Precarity, and Hunger in Abu Ishaque’s *Surja Dighal Bari* (*The Ominous House*)

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### ABSTRACT

The 1943 Bengal famine had severely changed the social landscape in rural Bengal. Thousands of peasants who mortgaged or sold their lands to the economic elite to migrate to Calcutta for food had to start over landless and precarious. Married women who were forcibly repudiated by their husbands (“talaq”) during the famine had to abide by the religious law of purdah (of keeping women at home) and accepting death by hunger. Abu Ishaque’s 1955 novel, *Surja Dighal Bari* (*The Ominous House*) evocatively captures these harrowing moments of hunger and poverty in the majority rural population through the life-events of Jaigun and her family. The novel shows how a resilient single mother’s will to work and provide for her children is crushed by the male elite through religious injunctions and social alienation. In this essay, I will comment on the intersection of land, hunger, purdah, and patriarchy, reading them together as an instance of “postcolonial disaster,” which conspires to produce an endless condition of precarity for the socio-economically vulnerable in post-independence rural East Pakistan, and consequently a raw aesthetic of realism in the postcolony.

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In Mrinal Sen’s acclaimed film *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*; 1982), we come across a rare cinematic example of how lower-class and lower-caste populations in a rural district in postcolonial West Bengal, once devastated by the 1943 Bengal famine, have struggled to negotiate with the post-famine conditions of landlessness, socio-economic backwardness, and widespread hunger. For Sen, class-, caste-, and gender-based violence has continued unabated despite India’s liberation from colonial rule and its constitutional abolition of landlordism and untouchability. Abu Ishaque’s novel, *Surja Dighal Bari* (*The Ominous House*, 1955/2019; my translation throughout) offers a rare literary example of how the intersecting oppressive conditions of religion, superstition, and patriarchy have controlled the lives of a widowed woman,

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Jaigun, and her family in a rural Muslim-majority area in East Pakistan at the crucial juncture of the country's independence from colonial rule in 1947. After the premature death of Jaigun's previous husband, she was remarried to Karimbaksh who forcibly divorced her during the famine and left her to die with her son and daughter from both husbands. As Jaigun and her family survive the famine and come back to live in an abandoned house property to her, their survival is only made worse by the ruling elite in the village who force the single mother, Jaigun, to bow down to the patriarchal laws of "purdah." Widely appreciated for its raw realist representation, this slim novel manages to affectively convey through the struggles of Jaigun the tremendous impact of food crisis and precarity on rural women who had lost land and family due to the 1943 famine and could not go out to work in public because of purdah. In this essay, I will read the socio-ecological coordinators of gender and religion manifested through purdah, landlessness, and popular customs which, the novel compellingly shows, deeply controlled and debilitated post-famine living conditions for the rural poor. In so doing, I will also argue that liberation from colonial rule was widely understood by the poor as a transcendental horizon in which the price of rice would substantially decline, and people would be able to eat their bellyful.

*Surja* is set in the early months of 1947, four years after the famine, as survivors who had migrated to Calcutta for food and survival, have now come back to their villages. It begins with a long acknowledgment of the devastations and the ongoing impact of the famine:

Those who had returned came back with their bosoms full of hope. They trudged back slowly, wiping off their tears of the past. They did not look humans any longer. Their spines were crooked. Their bellies had disappeared in their backs. Their bodies were bent like bows, dry and pale. Still, with those broken backs they have tried to straighten the spines of their society and civilisation. With their exhausted hands, they have begun to flourish life into the soil and worked on empty stomachs to provide food for others. The limping nation from the 1943 famine has begun to stand up askew on a walking stick. (7)

This quote precedes a description of the contrasting picture of wealth and poverty in Calcutta during the famine which recalls Bijan Bhattacharya's play *Nabanna* (2004) or Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel, *So Many Hungers!* (1964). But unlike these celebrated works by two Indian writers, this novel, the above section makes clear, is not about how people suffered during the famine. It is rather a story of their return and survival. There is sarcasm in the narration for what they had lost for "the struggle for rice," but there is also hope for those who came back to start over. They do not look like humans any longer after years of fighting with animals for food and dying starved and diseased. Yet they cultivate soil and produce food which the cities depend on and which these cities have failed to give back to them in their times of need. The final sentence uses at least three metaphors of uneven balance—"ছুঁচেট খাওয়া" (limping), "টলতে টলতে" (askew) and "লাঠি ভর দিয়ে" (walking sticks)—suggesting that the health of the nation is substantially disabled by the famine. Notwithstanding their irony and anguish, the sentences above are hardly steeped in bitterness and malice. That people are struggling to stand up on their feet, and yet our society and civilization must depend on their limping back is a calm, controlled, and incisive reminder of raw hope from Ishaque. This above reading may point to the broad interpretive

trajectory of the essay: that we are dealing with a text and a historical moment that may be together understood as an example of what Anthony Carrigan calls “postcolonial disaster.” Postcolonial disasters are a compound of civil strife, famines, genocidal activities, epidemics, and large-scale displacement and movement of refugees conditioned by extractive colonialist conditions which have made certain regions of the world more vulnerable and prone to natural disasters than others. Carrigan writes, “Postcolonial and environmental humanities research can obviously foreground these concerns by exploring how writers, intellectuals, and artists working in non-western contexts theorize and represent specific experiences of disaster in relation to distributions of power” (2015, 123–124). For Pallavi Rastogi, another important interlocutor in this context, because of this longue durée impact of disasters on postcolonial lives, postcolonial literature inheres in a “Disaster Unconscious” in which the Story may sometimes mute the Event of the disaster to serve a pedagogical agenda (2020, 85). For a Story close to an Event, the agenda may be rather explicit. In Ishaque’s novel, we will note that a compound of socio-ecological vectors such as the intersections of patriarchy and religion manifested through purdah and landlessness (precarity) will prove instrumental for the debilitating life and living conditions for Jaigun and her family. Ishaque, I will argue, uses a realist narrative that serves to expose the rationale behind the oppressive conditions for the poor and the vulnerable and manages to offer through its restrained and peculiar style a slice of the cultural idiosyncrasies of the village, hence indicating at the expansive capacities of realism in the “postcolony.”

After these expository famine remarks, the novel introduces its main setting, the “Surja Dighal Bari.” It belongs to Jaigun, whose great grandfather bought it at a cheap price, but the property remained unsold, even during the famine, for the popular belief that the house and its surroundings were haunted and cursed for its east west facing rather than the conventional north south. Having been forced a “talaq” by Karimbaksh (the Islamic law of divorce or repudiation of a spouse by their partner—a religious privilege traditionally enjoyed by men), a returnee Jaigun has no other way but to settle in the house with her son and daughter and her aunt, Shafi’s mother’s family (much against the aunt’s wish). They clean up its premises and continue to live here without much “supernatural” fuss. But Jaigun has to go out to work to provide for her family against the laws of “purdah” which summons raised eyebrows from amongst the male elite. This novel is about the social conflict between biological necessity (hunger) and religious law for gender norms (purdah). Ruminating on her current conditions, Jaigun thinks through tidal metaphors which compellingly capture the nature of “postcolonial disaster” in the novel: “Jaigun had been floating helplessly with Hasu and Maimun. Then, she finally managed to find a shore in the wide ocean. Giving up on shame and guilt, she jumped into work. She had to live, her children had to be saved” (20). She was lost in the tidal wave of refugees for food and shelter during the disastrous period of famine, insurgency, and riots. But she had to survive with her little children and thus had to find work. Consider the use of tidal metaphor here: “ঝাঁপিয়ে পড়ে কাজে” or jumps into work. To jump into work is to allow one to be lost in the oceanic assembly of workers. This is however different from the floating metaphor (“ভেসেই চলছিল”) as the latter means not to have a springboard to rest on,

to barely survive the waters. Jump is a voluntary decision which also means the resolve to fight and stay alive, an active and willing intervention to change the course of one's life. But "jump" comes once she has given up on "লজ্জাশরম" or shame and guilt. She has to ready herself for the working conditions in the public which includes coming out of the shame of purdah—there is either purdah which means imminent death or the "bepurdah" ((বেপর্দা)) of working to live. Purdah adds to the compound nature of the postcolonial disaster here: either Jaigun embraces it in this disastrous period with no opportunities for income for the landless and the poor and dies of hunger, or she evades it and faces off the consequence of shame and alienation in society. Despite her heroic plunge into work and survival, Jaigun has not managed to forget her "shame and guilt." She thinks of her guilt everyday: "She feels guilty. She goes out of her house and walks amongst the men in streets. She rides the train with countless people. She knows what happens to bepardah women. Her first husband, Hasu's father was a Munshi. He would read out the punishments handed to sinners on the judgment day" (19). The narrator then shares a few lines from the Script dietetically through Jaigun and ends with Jaigun's fright at the sin. Here the narration is not only of her intimidation but also of remembering her Munshi (religious teacher) husband's beautiful face and appearance, and that on Hashor or the day of judgment he would certainly not accept Jaigun as his wife. In just a few lines, then, Ishaque manages to convey the various dimensions of her decision of jumping into work catalyzed by the disastrous period. Not only has she not managed to give up on her shame and guilt and painstakingly counts her punishments, but she also fondly remembers and feels rejected by her husband—this is a conflict that is able to suggest how patriarchy in the rural world worked to contain women's sexual, physical, and psychological energies. Jaigun has been made to believe that a tremendous punishment is waiting for her on Hashor. And yet, she reminds herself that she must work for her children. It is this conflict between survival and guilt, of care for her children and shame of breaching divine laws that marks the compound nature of disaster in a postcolonial, post-famine rural society for divorced, widowed, and precariously located women.

Land and work, thus, are intimately tied to gender and religion in a Muslim rural society with "purdah" being the most significant enabler for discrimination which rightly becomes Ishaque's key concern in the novel. Purdah or the practice of veiling and restricting women to the zenana (domestic sphere), Patricia Jeffrey notes, began to be documented from the tenth century onward in India to protect Hindu women in the wake of Muslim invasions. While purdah is often interchangeably used with Muslim women, it is a popular custom in South Asia spreading across religions and cultures (2000, 25–26). After the British rule in India and the ostensible decline of Mughal and Muslim cultures, Hindu societies gained from the advent of western modernity leading in key sectors such as education, landowning, bureaucracy, and legalities. Dagmar Engels (1996) argues that until partition, Hindus, a minority in Eastern Bengal, held the majority of landownership and important bureaucratic posts (7–8). Hindu customs are, Engels contends, patrilineal and patrilocal in which women's role is understood in her restraining of sexual energy and her dedication to the domestic sphere (16, 18, 19). Indeed, the nineteenth-century Hindu revivalist writer

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay turned female abstinence and nourishment of children as the most admirable and absolute of values for human society. It was of course the domain of the privileged and the wealthy to observe strict female restraint often evidenced through self-sacrifice and *sati*. As the leading social reformer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain noted of purdah in her 47 anecdotal reports in *The Secluded Ones* (1929/1988), “aristocratic breeding” was marked by stricter forms of purdah which were understood as the most cherished values for the female sex (49–50). When the Swadeshi movement broke out in the early decades of the twentieth century, leaders exhorted to women to come forward in the nationalist struggle to lead by their motherly nature and self-sacrificing example. While Gandhi and Jinnah had both succeeded in courting women to nationalist politics—a direct result of the nineteenth century social and religious reforms—Sarah Ansari argues that these calls were returned only by urban, educated, and middle-class women (2009, 1442–1449). Working class and subaltern women were at the bottom of sexual and economic hierarchy (Jeffery 2000, 29). As Engels comments, “In the cities or countryside most low-caste women who worked outside their houses and could not observe strict purdah, nevertheless appeared to have accepted its associated value system” (1996, 19). Ishaque’s novel offers a powerful literary example of how these long-term, historical and gendered patriarchal value systems from upper- and middle-class Hindu and Muslim women had trickled down to the working classes and were battled with guilt and necessity on an everyday basis, as suggested through Jaigun’s torments above. Resolute as Jaigun is, she is however, forced to submit to the system during her daughter, Maimun’s marriage. A landowning key figure in the village, Godu Pradhan, a Hindu elite who forces strict purdah on her womenfolk (note the historical link suggested above), earlier intimated to Shafi’s Mother his wish to marry Jaigun and “save” her from the scandal of “bepurdah.” But Jaigun refused him and hurt his prestige. When Maimun was married, the occasion demanded key figures to approve of the marriage including Pradhan who raised the topic of “Tauba” with the Qazi (pardoning Jaigun of the guilt of bepardah) and forced her to accept it for the safety of her daughter. To Jaigun’s question of who would feed them, Pradhan’s and Jahiruddin’s tacit response was, “God will feed you. He has given you mouth. He will provide too” (82). The marriage did not last, neither did God feed them. Indeed, when Kasu fell ill, she nursed him and brought him over to her house, refusing to take food or financial help from Karimbaksh. She began to sell most of her clothes and savings including trees in the precinct to hide their poverty and hunger from Kasu. But none could save them from sinking into destitution. In short, she is asked to have a sterile faith in Allah by the society’s ruling male elite who conspire to avenge them of her daring to challenge their rules. If she and her family die of hunger because of purdah, their deaths will be regarded as higher forms of self-sacrifice adequate to absolve her of sins and to seek a place for her in heaven (while their property and resources will be seized by them). There is no political platform to speak of their rights here, of their everyday battles with food and dignity. While in the newly formed country of Pakistan, women organizations based in urban areas and run by upper- and middle-class female leaders were debating in newspapers about women rights and the right to wear and not wear a hijab, as Ansari carefully

shows in her essay, precarious populations like Jaigun never existed in those pages. For them, there was no social or political escape from their patriarchal society and its male-dominated religious injunctions.

The only escape lay in independence from colonial rule. When Jaigun could ride the train to buy and sell rice from neighboring provinces, she would hear people talking about liberation as the utopian horizon. As some passengers had mentioned there could be an even more horrible famine in the next years, some protested that liberation would help forget their sorrows and pain, there would be no tax to pay, and most importantly, “the price of rice will fall”—a part which most pleased Jaigun. But this did not happen. Four years later in 1951, the price went higher. According to the narrator, “Those who could eat only twice a day began eating once. They mixed rice with rice water and made a pudding out of it. Those who were half starved cooked *jau* from mixing rice with wild vegetables. The number of hungry people was higher now. They went out to beg on burning stomachs ... But who would offer them alms in the days of famine?” (117). Like its 1943 predecessor, this famine in the immediate aftermath of independence was also man-made. Hasu tells Jaigun that he heard in the streets that the magistrate had set up a controlled price limit, and so hoarders and jotdars decided to hoard back rice from the market until the limit was lifted (120). This is historically true as Badruddin Umar writes in *The Emergence of Bangladesh* that the food crisis and famine conditions of 1947–51 was:

(V)ery extensive and caused great hardship and misery to millions of people in East Bengal. Hundreds, and even thousands died during that famine and people in very large numbers lost their land and homes ... Added to this was the disillusionment of people in general, and the peasantry in particular, who had dreamt of a happy, trouble-free and peaceful life during the Pakistan movement and were now facing annihilation and the threat of it in the new homeland for the Muslims. (26)

While Umar explores the causes in administrative inefficiency, political corruption, and communal interests, he hardly offers any informed commentary on women, especially from the landless and subaltern classes—which critic Imran Khan rightly argues through the case of “internal colonialism” for postcolonial post-famine populations (2019, 36). Ishaque offers another powerful instance of the desperation of everyday hunger for subaltern classes through Jaigun’s tremendous affection for her son and her failure to provide for him:

But how long will it go like this? When day breaks tomorrow and she won’t be able to provide a handful of rice for him, won’t Kasu get to know of their indigence? Impatient with hunger when he cries out for rice, what answer will she have for him as his mother? Without getting a comforting response, won’t he realise that his mother is a nincompoop, can’t even provide for her son? Jaigun thinks of these things with anxiety: If she cannot manage to feed him, Kasu won’t value her affection and love for him. Her son won’t trust his mother. He was once restless to come to her mother’s house and enjoy her affection and love. He will now be impatient with hunger to leave for Karimbaksh and to have a bellyful of rice there. (119)

Here is Jaigun in an independent country, a resolved and stubborn woman who does not submit to patriarchal injunctions and yet a soft, thoughtful, and loving mother who tries everything to protect her children. God has not fed them, and nor have liberation from colonial rule and the establishment of Pakistan given them a bellyful of rice. Life

has been as harsh and vulnerable as it was before; indeed harsher for the full implementation of purdah on her now. However, her motherly anxieties of losing Kasu again force her to stand back this time. As a friend proposes, “God has given you hands and feet for what? Hands for working and feet for earning a living” (120), she decides to join the nearby paddy mill. The narrator speaks through her: “Jaigun has realized that saving lives is the main and only true principle of religion. She is ready to battle attacks and counter-attacks from religion to save life. She is not scared to jump into the fire of Dojakh to save from the fire of hunger” (121). Notice the use of the metaphor “jump” again for her heroic plunge into work. If that means the fire of hell, she would not flinch as she had to survive and protect her children, a key moment for Jaigun’s psychological transformation. Here is a rational narrator who does not seek in purdah and self-sacrifice a higher value in life but rather in work and taking care of one’s family. This controlled and secular take by Ishaque, who was an inspector of rural schools in East Pakistan, an important bureaucratic instrument for postcolonial distributive governance, one could argue, would provide further ammunition for the struggle for liberation from religious and linguistic orthodoxy for Bangladesh in 1971, only a few years from the book’s publication.

Jaigun’s decision, however, does not go well with the ruling people, as Godu Pradhan takes revenge by hurling stones at her house on the night to teach them a supernatural lesson. As a changed Karimbaksh looking for love from Jaigun comes to plant a few protector nails around Jaigun’s house to save them from ghosts and monsters and catches Pradhan red handed, he is strangled by Pradhan. Found dead in the morning without death marks, people decide “the ghosts of Surja Dighal Bari have strangled him” (124). Jaigun rues for Karimbaksh who has never received love from anyone, and she will never get to know that Karimbaksh, an ill-tempered and ill-mannered man, came to save them out of love. We know from the final lines that homeless and precarious again, Jaigun and her family will walk ahead rekindling the popular belief that none could live in that house. This element of chance and co-incidence that holds the tragic tone of the novel together, however, does not undermine the realist representation of the rural belt in Ishaque’s work. We are made to believe here that these strange encounters happen in this world of mysteries and legends. Questioning rural psychology is not Ishaque’s aim in the novel—rather, his aim is to show what happened in a remote village to a divorced and landless woman in the aftermath of a famine, and what further damage purdah could do to her life. His purpose is to find a style that can narrate this painful chapter of her life without distorting the cultural peculiarities of the place—a style that is marked by social and moral contradictions of “magical” elements and post-famine pressures on livelihood, exposing the coeval and composite nature of postcolonial literary realism (Anjaria 2012, 15). The only solution he could offer is a feisty and resolute protagonist in Jaigun. But he knew that she was also too small to tackle the immense pressures of patriarchy and religion. So, she must leave in search of food and shelter and accept her precarity in this characteristically unchanging “postcolonial” world. This is the everyday reality for landless, rural, and subaltern populations like Jaigun. Some may read it as magical, while it may only evoke anger and rage in others. Standing resolute to this enormous reality is temporary, and yet submitting to it means hunger and death. The result is to leave one’s own land and start back again from where the novel began in the



immediate aftermath of the famine, serving as a parable of tragedy and resistance for the poor and the vulnerable.

In a review of Sheikh Niamat Ali and Masihuddin Shaker's widely acclaimed film on the novel (1979), the first government funded feature film in independent Bangladesh (available with English subtitles on YouTube), noted writer and critic Akhteruzzaman Elias wrote in *Chalachitrapatra* (2018), for the first time the poor and the vulnerable who had appeared quite often on screen were not given sentimental, colorful rebel lives of unfeeling middle class imaginations: "The strong and deep ardor in the directors who had felt through all of their senses the pain, rage, and humiliation of the poor motivated them to be sensitive to human behaviour" (reprinted in *Film Free* 2018, n.pag.). The same could be said of Ishaque; or it is because of Ishaque's brilliance in controlled narration that such a sensitive rendering in the film could be implemented. To conclude, the late 1940s was a disastrous period of riot and partition followed by a famine in independent East Pakistan which together killed millions and forced many to migrate to uncertain pastures. The most vulnerable population groups were the landless peasantry, subaltern classes, and widowed women. Not much is written about them in "official" historical narratives apart from passing remarks by stalwarts like Umar. Ishaque's novel is rich and provocative in suggesting how these groups fought everyday socio-ecological injunctions of purdah and landlessness with hunger, and how popular faith and masculine deliberations thwarted any possibility of restoring "normal" life to them. His focus on these vulnerable groups and his ability to write a realist tale without sacrificing the psychological complexity of characters and the cultural idiosyncrasies of the region is an accomplishment of the highest caliber and should be celebrated as a significant literary-historical document in the birth of the postcolonial nation.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on Contributor

*Sourit Bhattacharya* is Lecturer in Global Anglophone Literatures at the University of Edinburgh. His research and teaching interests include colonial and postcolonial studies; famine and food studies; South Asian literatures; and critical theory. He is the author of *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel: On Catastrophic Realism* (Palgrave 2020) and *Postcolonialism Now: Literature, Reading, Decolonising* (forthcoming with Orient BlackSwan). Sourit co-edits *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*.

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