

Book Review

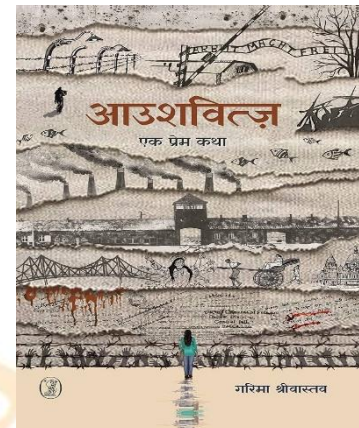
Title: *Auschwitz: A Love Story*

Author: Garima Srivastava

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Garima Srivastava's novel *Auschwitz: A Love Story* is not only a landmark example of anti-war writing in world literature but also a tale of love unfolding amidst war and violence. Written against the backdrop of memories of the Second World War and the Bangladesh Liberation War, the novel at times reads like an autobiography. It is a collage of memories, multi-layered in its structure. The novelist moves fluidly between history and the present. Multiple voices appear across different chapters, as if each character is delving into their own memories to write their own autobiography.

The inability of many women writers in Hindi to craft language and various subplots with coherence and legitimacy has been a recurring subject of literary criticism in recent years. This novel presents itself to readers in a well-structured form, both in its language and its craft, and this achievement deserves to be highlighted. Only a few works have been published in Hindi on violence against women during war, and this novel partially fills that gap. Garima weaves together multiple stories drawn from diverse socio-cultural contexts. Readers find it easy to travel from one country to another, thanks to her command of language and her depth in connecting the narratives.

It is also significant that the people of India never experienced the horrors of Auschwitz or any similar concentration camp. Yet the people of this country have repeatedly witnessed the division of nations in the name of religion and the massacre of millions through communal violence. The barbaric sexual violence faced by Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women during the Partition of India was no less than a Holocaust. This novel offers the opportunity to discuss war and violence from multiple perspectives. In the society we inhabit, the concept of violence is deeply embedded in our subconscious, and we, knowingly or unknowingly, become part of a violent social order. Whether violence is directed at an individual, a community or a nation, it is ultimately a heinous crime against all of humanity. The only response to it can be non-violent resistance.

The novel also presents readers with a choice between violence and love. It is the women who make love amidst war, who practise a form of non-violent satyagraha to protect their self-respect and dignity. They choose the path taken by the novel's protagonist, Pratiti Sen, who attempts to document the abhorrent treatment meted out to Jewish men and women in Nazi camps during the Second World War and to witness and experience the place now

known as Auschwitz at close quarters. The subtext, however, encompasses the journey of torture and loneliness endured by three women, and readers will recognise that this is the real story. At the same time, it is the story of all women who, no matter where they live in the world, suffer similar patriarchal violence.

The Holocaust, a festering wound left by the Second World War, continues to live on within Abhirupa in the form of Sen, within Rehmana Khatoon, and within Yakub inside Sabina—seething with pain like a spring of sulphur. Apart from these women, no one else feels their constant, simmering anger. It is true that war and conflict, no matter who they are between, are borne through the female body. The female body, symbolising the prestige of the community, is destroyed in every conflict. After the war ends, the remaining wounds may be healed, but the wounds inflicted on a woman's body and mind remain lifelong—especially when the effects of that war begin to poison her love relationships.

The heroine of the novel, Pratiti Sen, carries within her the body of Tia (alias Titli Sen), the daughter of Rehmana Khatoon. Pratiti is the product of the sexual violence that occurred during the Bangladesh Liberation War, and she remains oblivious to this reality until the end of the novel. From the moment she gained consciousness, she considered Amma her entire world and Hasanpur her home. Rehmana Khatoon, who at this stage of her life had become a stranger to herself (like a wooden doll) because of life's circumstances, kept the truth of Pratiti's origins hidden from her throughout her life, because she wished to keep herself alive through Pratiti. Sending Pratiti to Calcutta was, in a sense, her own return.

Later comes the memory of realisation: the lives of Rehmana Khatoon, Amma, Sabina and other women are bound to the never-ending pain and bitter memories of the past. Each one's share of loneliness was her own. Their suffering was the product of life's circumstances, which presented them with both love and violence. Each was a stranger to herself. Pratiti Sen struggles with her own failed love for Abhirup. Her self-respecting mind accepts Abhirup's rejection with complete dignity and moves forward. Despite being completely broken inside, Pratiti neither questions Abhirup nor requests him to return to her. This decision is her "satyagraha" against herself.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Pratiti encounters a horrific history of human suffering that completely alters her outlook on life. The very name is enough to send shivers down the spine. It was the most horrific concentration camp in the world, where, during the Second World War, the Nazis, in the name of forced labour, threw millions of Polish citizens—especially Jews—into gas chambers. Its main gate bore the words "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work sets you free"). For the Nazis, however, this motto concealed "the Final Solution."

The author specifically highlights the violence against women in these concentration camps and connects it to the broader theorisation of violence against women in situations of war and conflict globally. She argues that dominant hierarchical systems of oppression maintain patriarchal power relations in society, so that gender roles not only remain in place but also reinforce the dividing line between men and women. "Sexual violence" encompasses several distinct crimes, including rape, sexual perversion, sexual humiliation, forced prostitution and forced pregnancy. These crimes are motivated by multiple factors, one of which is war. Throughout human history there has been a common belief that women form part of the "spoils" of war. Deeply rooted in this belief is the idea that women are the property of

victorious warriors. Sexual violence was also used as a tool of military oppression; women were forced into sexual slavery. A major reason for sexual violence against women during and after war is to destroy the pride of the defeated male community. Men who have failed to protect their women are humiliated and weakened by this act.

In her novel, Garima weaves this history, connecting every small and large incident related to the camp with the help of authentic documents. She is unparalleled in this regard. The novel's uniqueness lies in the psychological connection it creates between the violence that occurred simultaneously in Poland and in Kolkata, India, and between the women of both countries. By the end of the story, the reader is shown in detail the lives of these women and the many unspoken sufferings hidden within their complexities.

Draupadi had everything—a complete world: a loving husband, little children, mother-in-law and father-in-law. She was the mistress of a complete household, proud of her own fortune and wealth. She never even dreamed of the tragedy that lay ahead: that a day would come when Birajit Sen himself would cast her out of his life like thorns pricking his feet. The one she loved so much, the one she claimed as her own, had cut the very thread of love that Draupadi had dreamed of holding onto for the rest of her life. What hope can one have from someone who was never truly one's own? Once he left, he left. Their last meeting took place under the big clock on Howrah Bridge, when he came to take Tia home. He did not even look back to check on her. The man with whom she had applied vermilion to her forehead and vowed to stay for life was gone forever. Birajit Sen was no longer the person with whom she had shared a bond of love and passion. He had become a stranger who could not bear even to hear about the recent loss of life between Draupadi and Tia. He slid some Indian currency towards Rehmana Khatoon. His face darkened with humiliation and anger. It was futile to expect such a desperate, alien person to return home with her.

If only Draupadi Devi had not gone to Hasanpur that day with Birajit Sen, taking Tia with her to visit her relatives. That mob would not have attacked her, and they would not have done all that to Tia. If only life could go back to normal—but past times and journeys cannot be relived; only memories keep them alive.

What did Birajit Sen say while leaving after that last meeting? “Bhalo theko” (Stay well). He promised that arrangements would be made for them to live in Sealdah without anyone knowing, and that their monthly expenses would be covered. The only condition was that they would never be able to live in the house again. Is religious conversion a simple matter? Draupadi could not fully understand some of the other words he spoke. Draupadi Devi opposed the decision to impose lifelong exile upon her despite her innocence. She accepted it with self-respect and dignity. No questions, no requests, no answers to her husband. Closing all hope of returning home, she said simply: “Don't worry about me; take care of Tia.” Rehmana Khatoon returned to her home in Hasanpur—forever. Draupadi did not change her religion, but she certainly suffered the consequences. She chose loneliness over dependent and compassionate companionship. It was a woman's insistence on her own truth that lasted a lifetime.

If only Pratiti had understood Amma's silent yearning while she was still alive, she might have found that house. By the time she realised it, it was too late. The owner, the address and the layout of the house had all changed. Amma had worked tirelessly to secure Indian

citizenship for Pratiti. The day she received her citizenship, Rehmana Khatoon slept peacefully. She felt as if she were returning to India in Pratiti's form, with valid citizenship. Pratiti Sen was not Bangladeshi; she was the Indian daughter of Tia, or Titli Sen. But how could she have known this until then? When she finally did, she had already been torn apart. Her sense of "I" had been scattered far from her. Sometimes she would become Rehmana Khatoon, sometimes Fatima, and sometimes Sabina, who had found her husband Renata as the only heir of her grandfather-in-law Yakub. The emotional impact of the persecution faced by the Jews and the loss of each member of his family, one by one, remained with him throughout his life.

Pratiti sometimes finds herself in Sabina's mother, who had been betrayed by men all her life and kept seeking the company of different men to escape her loneliness and advancing age. Sometimes she remembered her forgotten aunt who had yearned for love all her life. But who had ever found the love she desired? *"Flowers may die, but Basu does not die."*

Had her aunt truly never found love? This question constantly flashes through her mind. Each time she reads the Auschwitz documents, she finds herself standing among Jewish women whose hair the symbol of beauty and dignity had been shaved off, who had no means to support the weight of their heavy breasts, their shoulders sagging with pain. Even the brassieres sewn from sacking rags did not escape the soldiers' attention. This was a sign of rebellion that the German army did not approve of. All those women were killed in the name of *"Work sets you free."*

In her novel, Garima has not only preserved these histories but has also given herself space to explore them amid changing life circumstances. The lives of the women in this novel are like a spiralling river; at every turn they have to let go of something and grasp a new thread—with which they are not alone even when they are alone. Love often comes in many forms in the lives of these women, but every love ends in separation and grief.

She travels to Kolkata one last time to find her mother, Titli Sen (Tia), who is in Canada. Seeing Birajit Sen paralysed in bed, Pratiti lacks the courage to tell him the news of his wife's death. Upon attempting to find her mother's address, Pratiti, who wants to see her mother one last time, once again tightens her heart and decides not to enter her mother's happy world. She also frees her mother from the responsibility of having given birth to an unwanted child as a result of sexual violence.

Along with Abhirup, Amma and Sabina, she must keep a corner of her heart empty for Titli Sen forever. This is love. Who can forget their first love? Birajit Sen, too, is singing lines from the song "Vitan" in a faint voice with a faltering tongue for his teenage daughter. Love returns to everyone's life as a memory, carrying with it the burden of deep sadness and loneliness. This is not just a novel but a deep, river-like account of a peaceful life a non-violent account of the experience of pain. It is a philosophy. Garima's female characters provide a glimpse into the journey of life, ascending and descending through peaks and depths, ultimately becoming part of the flow. Such sensitive and readable works not only touch readers' hearts but also create history.