

GHOUlish ASPECTS OF THE SUB-CONTINENTAL ECCENTRICITY IN THE INDIAN PARTITION FICTION

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Abstract

A heavenly bliss, communal harmony is the basis of any society, especially as diverse as the Indian society. It is evident from human history that fear, hatred, greed and lechery have always resulted in crumbling of any society, and the Indian Subcontinent saw the worst phase of these traits put together during partition in 1947 that caused mass instability and ethnic violence. In partition fiction, writers gave gruesome detailed accounts of the times when the world saw inhumanity of one man towards another. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had lived together, followed and celebrated each- others' festivals and customs since ages but the 'divide- and- rule' policy of the British destroyed the brotherhood and love of centuries. Writers like Khushwant Singh, Saddat Hassan Manto, H.S. Gill, Bapsi Sidwa, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal and many more gave vivid accounts of the violence and mass destruction caused during the frenzy while others like Amrita Pritam, Attia Hossain, etc. focused on the plight of women and children who had to suffer because of the insanity of the menfolk. Uncountable number of people were stripped off all their belongings and had to migrate from the land that they grew up on and called their home to the far off places that they had never known. Interestingly, be it novels, short stories, drama or any other genre, writers go against the commonly perceived perception of religious differences being the root cause of the violence and trace the culprit in the power-hungry politicians and irresponsible citizens and agencies. K.S. Duggal and Bala Chandra Rajan present their fury at the newspapers that rather than acting as harbingers of peace added to the ongoing slaughter by reporting news from a biased points of view where they not only praised their own religion, or defamed the other but also incited people for conducting killing and arson. The gorge created by the incomprehensible hatred that people had mustered against each other still continues to widen. The present paper reflects the impermanence of stability created by the gory event and questions the percepts and ethics that we live by today.

Keywords: Indian Subcontinent, Partition, Violence, Arson, Hatred, Migration, Harmony

Literature is undoubtedly a museum of complex and confusing systems that provides its readers ample chance to explore varied lives and experiences. Also, it becomes instrumental in recording testimonial statements that become reflections of the agony of justice having been denied or rendered partially. Although Indian writing in English existed even before independence yet it was with the works on partition that specifically aimed at focusing on the events and experiences during or around the process of the Indian Subcontinent being fractured into two nations that it gained impetus. With illuminating insights into the moral and psychic formations that propagated violence during partition, novels and short stories in English and in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu bring to light the web of personal memories circumventing the historical experience of the near genocidal violence that marked the birth of two nations out of one womb. M.K. Naik even claims that the real Indian Fiction in English started only with the upsurge of nationalism around 1930 while R.P. Chaddha narrows down the specificity by quoting great fictions like *A Tale of Two Cities*, *War and Peace*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *From Here to Eternity*, *Doctor Zhivago* and *The Naked and the Dead* that were provided a base by events like the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution, and the two World Wars. He says, "A great national experience generally serves as a great reservoir of literary material" (34). In a similar vein the Indo-Anglian writers weaved the tragic history of the two nations—India and Pakistan. A number of writers brought the Indian National Movement and the grievance of partition to the forefront by recording the 'holocaust', the huge loss of men and property, and fathomless inhuman

sufferings. Mumtaz Navaz's *The Heart Divided*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* and numerous others inscribe the tragic plight of the people adversely effected.

When the western world was suffering from issues like isolation, the Indian Subcontinent was facing the diametric challenge of involvement that took form of chaos and destroyed the peace that had been celebrated since ages. *Ashes and Petals* records the brutal violence of the days immediately following the partition of the country, the days when at places no sign of human life could be found. In Santa Singh's hearing the scream of a woman and not being able to have even a glance at his fourteen year old Baljeeto sitting on 'the verge of death', 'calm', 'unruffled,' the ghoulish drama of rape, murder and arson is enacted. An exquisite piece of art articulating the national trauma, *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh explores the appalling issues that arose as a consequence of false nationalism humped with a sense of fundamentalism. The subcontinent had to pay a heavy price for its freedom. Arson, rape, loot, torture and death unpleasantly repeat themselves throughout the texts about partition. The novel brings to light how a single event chops off Mano Majra, a 'microcosm' of the whole India "into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through parts of butter" (127). Larry Collins' rendering of the unawareness of the innocent people affected by the partition in *Freedom at Midnight* is almost reproduced by Singh by mixing fact with fiction whose ironic tone seems giving vent to his wrath and vengeance. Though untouched by fratricidal strife "the dark clouds of suspicion and fear hovered over the Sikhs and the Muslims, who had lived together for centuries" (Hilal 73) revealed that "thousands of people have been killed, bereaved, disposed, demented and crushed" (Narayan 15).

Making references to history such as the famous 'tryst with destiny' speech by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on the eve of independence, he narrates how Prem Singh made his tryst with destiny when on his way to Lahore to bring his wife's jewelry he is killed by Muslim fanatics.. The sharp division in the Indian society that Forster might have witnessed during his visit to India propelled him to call it a "prophetic" novel for being "so innately realistic" (58). Singh traces not only the political theme of slashing people into two "like a knife slicing cucumber" but also exposes the greed, injustice and hypocrisy of the people. Major General T.W. Rees reported that "it was however, impossible to count the victims properly in the confused heap of rubble and corpses" (Collins 401).

The manifestation of the effect of partition can be studied at two levels—the thoughtless violence and the geographical dislocation—that left an unhealable wound in the deep recesses of the psyche of the two nations. The negative forces that existed in sediments gained force and made every attempt at establishing themselves in the ethos of the newly divided nations. The opportunist and manipulative contractors of the countries veiled the visions and ideals of independence with selfish motives. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, believed to be one of the best literatures written with the backdrop of partition of the Indian subcontinent, voices the perennial hatred the holocaust gave birth to in millions of hearts which in the past throbbled for each other. Puro, forced to live with Rashid as his wife after being abducted by him becomes symbolic of the plight of many a female lives that were ruined during the bloody fervor. The most disturbing story about the violence met by women is "The Return" by Manto where Sakina, a Muslim girl, is abducted and raped so often that in the hospital when her father is asked by the doctor to open a window she involuntarily moves her hands to undo her trousers. The father's cry of joy at his daughter's return from the other side alive is ironical. The forceful migration and a massive massacre devastated not one but many successive generations which till date have neither forgotten nor forgiven each other for the inhumane atrocities. The plight of victims is brought bare before us in *Ashes and Petals* with three men and an old woman suddenly beginning "scooping with their hands the dal that was not too badly stained with the blood patila" and go to their "part of the camp to eat in peace" (Gill 15).

Not only novels but short stories too mirror the anger, plight and disgust of innocent people. Authors like Saadat Hassan Manto, K.A. Abbas, K.S. Duggal, etc. bring out the trauma of the unusual time which forced people to ponder if the two cultures ever co-existed. Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" reflects his own state of mind. Bishen Singh re-enacts the insanity of Dicken's Dr. Mannette in *A Tale of Two Cities* revealing the indelible impressions that irrational destruction and killings leave. The hungry and frustrated Jat, in *Ashes and Petals*, presents a violent image of insanity pertaining to the prevailing scenario of violence and hunger. Attia Hossain's "After the Storm" focuses on the struggle of kids to keep themselves alive in the inferno created by the menfolk. Bibi, once a thin and small child with a smile on her face, finds it difficult to recall how many years of childhood was she robbed of. With

inevitable digressions and in snatches we learn that because of the ill memory of the past her mind refuses to fill the gap between the refugee camp and her adoption.

An important aspect to be noticed about the writers of partition fiction is that none of them blames the commonly perceived reason of religion for the evitable violence but it is assigned to the power hungry politicians who ruined millions of lives in order to make their selfish ends meet. People like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Nazrul Islam, Tagore and many more had always encouraged mutual support and respect among all the religions. No doubt, the coexistence of the Hindus and the Muslims was not always peaceful but the abrupt end brought to the centuries of communal harmony became the real reason for the sorrow. The distrust and the rejection of the practices and habits of one group by the other always existed and had even led to harsh conflicts but the madness and the frenzy of 1947 was unheard of. The communities had created a mechanism to quickly suppress the violence and return to normalcy as is evident from the fact that despite times of skirmishes neither the Hindus stopped paying homage at 'dargahs', nor Muslims ceased their participation in Hindu festivals. Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* probes deep into the genesis of partition to trace how gradually communal poison soured and embittered the lives of freedom fighters like Shafi Usman who carried with him the belief of the revolutionaries like Chandra Shekhar Azad, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and others related to the Freedom Movement that "anyone who represented that rule British or Indian, was their enemy, anything that represented that rule was their target" (71-72) but eventually converted them into communal fanatics.

Another reason for the frenzy that some writers come across is the irresponsible coverage and presentation by the then newspapers. Perhaps the only South-Indian novelist to write about partition, Bala Chandra Rajan, despite dwelling far away from the scene of action, in *The Dark Dancer* (1959) provides 'local habitation and name' to the information about the events that he mainly collected from newspaper reports and other documents. Like *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *Midnight's Children*, in *The Dark Dancer* the protagonist's personal strife is integrated with the country's struggle for freedom. Some scenes in the novel share a close resemblance to the originals. "The description of the partition riots at Delhi is almost verbatim from A. K. Azad's *India Wins Freedom*; and the effects of Radcliff awards are portrayed in a way these have been depicted by Larry Collins and Dominique La Pierre in *The Freedom at Midnight*" (Hilal 83).

Kartar Singh Duggal, too, in *Twice Born Twice Dead* does a post mortem survey-of newspaper reports and brings out the times when they reported the dark event with a shared prejudice against each other. The Muslim newspaper of Lahore reports "How Muslims can risk their lives" by quoting an incident about an orderly who "mounted guard on a Sikh young girl and her aged father the whole night with his master's revolver" (107). The heroic act of the Muslim orderly is appreciated by the Muslims as "even the sight of his Muslim brethren being slaughtered did not make this noble Pakistani flinch from the path of duty" (107). The Hindu and Sikh newspapers also added fuel to the fire that already had taken form of a conflagration: "Hindus and Sikhs have been again challenged by the Muslim League. Will we sulk with bangles on our arms? Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab arise and avenge the massacre of your brethren" (107). Duggal blames newspapers and other forms of media for instigating people and propagating mass slaughter. These reports had effects no less than the actual sights of horror and terror. Bapsi Sidhwa exemplifies the degradation in *Ice-Candy Man*. The ice-candy man is enraged and says, "I'll tell you to your face- I lose my senses when I think of mutilated bodies on that train from Gurdaspur... that night I went mad, I tell you, I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I'd known all my life! I hailed their guts" (156). Many historians trace the inevitability of the partition to the Muslim fears of being dominated by the Hindu rulers but it would be unfair to blame any one side for the mass destruction. "The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped" (Singh 9) which resulted into a flux of refugees fleeing across the Radcliff Line, away from the land that they had called their own.

The richly interwoven fabric of multiple religions, ideas, customs and traditions was tattered by the utter bewilderment that accompanied Partition. Most of the writers found themselves unable to justify the need of houses being reduced to rubble, bloodied streets and heart-wrenching hatred for the brethren. Their works question the percepts and ethics blindly inherited by man. They reflect the impermanence of stability as an illusion offered by such events. Years later, the countries continue to suffer from collective hatred as even a cricket match between the two gains the stature no less than war. The common concern of the partition fiction is to reflect the inner recesses of the sensitive men to whom partition was an unwanted event that bloodied a large chunk of Indian Subcontinent's

history. It also evinces that in order to maintain stability in South Asia the two nations need to contemplate about their relationship with each other calling off the previous individual and national experiences.

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