

Borders, Boundaries, Short fiction and Prejudice: analyses of Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi's "Parmeshwar Singh", Gulam Abbas's "Avtar" and Krishna Sobti's "Where Is My Mother"



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Abstract

The Indian tradition of plural culture, harmony and fraternity between different communities was dashed into pieces by the Partition of India. The genre of short fiction writing itself became the symbol of the partition of India because of its fragmentary form. Many creative minds were inspired by Partition violence to create literary/cinematic depictions of Partition. While some creations concentrated on the aftermath of the partition of India in terms of difficulties faced by the refugees in India and Pakistan, others depicted the brutal butchery, massacres, and violence during the refugee migration. In fact, millions of innocent people lost their lives during partition riots. The Sikhs and the Hindus died demanding their freedom and separate state on the basis of their religious principles and The Muslims lost their lives chanting the slogans- "Pakistan Zindabad". There are many short stories which have given reflection to the trauma of the partition of India but some short stories are communally charged. This paper is an attempt to analyze these short stories in the light of above mentioned point of view.

Keywords: Partition, Identity, Violence.

Introduction

In the sub-continental history, the partition of India in 1947 was a chaotic, tumultuous and restless event. In the history of India, this period was more terrible, chaotic and difficult than all the other times. This period was a time of vengeance, hatred, bestiality, violence, brutality, dislocation, death, defilement and destruction. Nowhere in the country there was peace and stability. This time was overpowered by bestiality, violence, chaos and inhumanity. Nothingness, sense of ruptured existence, meaninglessness and despair could be witnessed everywhere. Kindness, humanity, compassion and concern had completely disappeared. The partition of India wrenched those refugees or migrated people away from the land where they were born. These people were living in constant threat of loss, death and devastation and had lost all that was dear to them. Nothingness and violence are the two polarities, in the world of Partition. Vengeance and Violence were synonymous with life. To live was to face chaos, trouble, vengeance and violence. Shattered existence, Nothingness and meaninglessness are appropriate appellations for the enigmatic emptiness which lies beyond the irrational and illogical borders and boundaries of vengeance and violence.

The horrible picture of ghastly violence and vengeance flashes across the mind of the hearer, when the word partition is heard. The two words Violence and Partition have become synonymous with each other. The most important theme of the partition short fiction is the theme of violence, hatred, vengeance and its ramifications. Those short stories which were written in immediate reaction and response to the shocking acts of violence, vengeance and hatred which were perpetuated by the Indian partition present the partition violence in all its forms. In these short stories the ugly acts of bestiality, bloodshed and barbarism have been presented realistically. These short stories are full of horror and violence. According to Alok Rai rational behavior and aesthetic imagination are infected by the incomprehensibility of monstrous upsurge of violence and

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horror. And one of the consequences of this process, he says, is a kind of literary indulgence in describing the violence and horror, which he calls the *pornography of violence*. Representation of vengeance or violence was essential to extinguish the fires of violence and to curb further actions of vengeance so it can be said that it is not pornography of vengeance or violence. These short stories also deal with the plight and sufferings of those people who became victims of vengeance and violence during the Partition of India. All the acts of annihilation, sensational acts, utter chaos and scenes of carnage find an artistic and realistic presentation in these short stories. Even though these short stories about the partition of India had less artistic quality, they were as important and essential at that critical time as they are at present. While discussing about the artistic quality and its absence in Ahmed Abbas' play, *Main Kaun Hun? (Who Am I?)*, Ismat Chughtai comes to the conclusion that the burning times urgently needed only water and not fruit juice to quench the fire. 'This was the moment when writers provided ammunition in the form of plays, sketches, stories and poems, scattering them everywhere. Ahmed Abbas scribbled his play, *Main Kaun Hun?* in ninety minutes, rehearsed it, and that same evening arranged performances in several parts of the city. Abbas did not have time to consider the fact that his haste might compromise his art, that it might belittle the power of his pen, that a writer's greatness might be diminished. If he had thought about all this, he might have turned *Main Kaun Hun?* Into great art, but then it couldn't have doused the fire blazing at this time. This burning world needs dousing more than it needs works of art. The haste might not have compromised his heart but his art.

Aim of the Study

The trauma of those refugees has been recounted in the partition short stories, who became victims of communal violence, hatred and horror. There are very few short stories, which express the view that the community which follows the religion is good, that only the members of a particular community had become the victims of the attacks of the other communities and that a particular religion is pure and good. These are short stories which are devoid of any ethical, humanitarian or moral principles. Dr. Alok Bhalla has classified these types of short stories as communally charged stories. He has included three short stories which deal with this issue in his edition— *Avtar: A Hindu Myth*, *Parameshwar Singh* and *Where is My Mother?*—and is of the opinion that such short stories are communal narratives because they have denied the claim to purity and goodness of all religions, except the one which is the religion of the authors themselves. They don't mention what their own communities did during those days of the Indian Partition. They present those people who are related to the same religious community as the story-tellers as victims of atrocities by the members of the other communities. They suppress historical facts so they can be considered as simple short stories. They claim compassion only for the plight of one community and demand that it be

withheld from others which are equally distraught. So they can also be considered as graceless short stories. Such short stories propagate codes of fraud, instead of upholding the principle that in the future correct remembrance alone can be the foundation of a just society. Dr Asaduddin says: "A small number of the stories offer the contrary view. They dramatize the past as one of distrust and discord. These stories are predicated upon the supposedly essential difference between the Muslims and the Hindus and Sikhs. The endeavor of the writers here is directed towards showing the superiority of their own religion over the others."

"Parameshwar Singh" by Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi is a story of a Muslim boy, Akhtar. He is 5 years old and in the caravan, he gets separated from his parents on the way to the new land. The borders of this new land are 15 miles away. Akhtar keeps wandering and finds that a group of Sikhs has surrounded him. For killing Akhtar, one of those Sikhs pulls out his kirpan but Parameshwar Singh, another sikh, who has lost his son Kartar, pleads for mercy saying that Akhtar resembles his lost son and is the creation of the same Waheguruji. Parameshwar Singh finds that there are many similarities between Kartar and Akhtar. Finally Parameshwar Singh is allowed by the Sikhs to take Akhtar to his house and to bring him up as his own Kartar. The house of Parmeshwar Singh happened to be the house of a family, which was Muslim and which migrated at the time of the partition of India and after that this house was allotted to him.

At first Parameshwar Singh's daughter Amar Kaur and his wife do not accept Akhtar as their own Kartar. Against Parameshwar Singh's feelings of humanity, they hate other religions and are not ready to accept them. Akhtar's reciting of the Koran make Parmeshwar Singh's daughter and wife afraid. Though Parmeshwar Singh's wife softens and changing her attitude gradually, began to treat Akhtar well. But Parmeshwar Singh's daughter, Amar Kaur does not soften and change her attitude towards the boy till the end. Even Akhtar began to like turban, comb and long hair. After some days, Akhtar looks like a Sikh boy.

Parameshwar Singh loves Akhtar as his own son Kartar. Parameshwar Singh is taken to have lost his mind when he plead with the group of Sikhs for not to killing Akhtar, in his befriending him, in his sobbing for his safety, and in his zeal to bring him up. But Parmeshwar Singh is cautious enough to take precautionary measures to hide Akhtar. He hides him in the sugar cane fields of Gyan Singh, when the army officers come there in search of Muslim girls, who were abducted during partition. Although Parameshwar Singh loves Akhtar so much, he fails to change his mind or to overcome Akhtar's longing for his religion and his mother.

Finally Parmeshwar Singh realizes the powerful and true love of a mother towards her child. He carries Akhtar to the borders, leaves him there on the other side of the border towards the direction of the village from which call for prayer (the azan) is being heard. Then Akhtar goes towards the village and though Parmeshwar Singh was hurt by the

shooting of some Pakistani soldiers, he follows Akhtar to give Akhtar's religion back to him by cutting his long hair.

According to Dr. Alok Bhalla "the child, Akhtar, knows his prayers and rituals, and is set up as a brave and innocent representative of the Muslims going towards their new homeland. For Qasmi, he is innocent because he is a Muslim, and not because he is, like all other children, 'a moralist with no pretence'. The Sikh children in the story, with whom he plays, are brutes.... Parameshwar's ferocity is tamed and humanized by his encounter with Akhtar's natural religiosity.... They [his wife and daughter] are terrified when they hear Akhtar recite a few verses from the Koran, unable to recognize holiness. At the end of the story, Akhtar walks towards Pakistan, in the direction from which the morning azan rises into the sky—his mother, his nation and his true spiritual home await him there. Qasmi's story is not only a bit disingenuous, but is also cynically manipulative. The last gesture of humanity by the child, when he runs towards Parameshwar after he is injured by the border police, merely adds to the halo surrounding him. Parameshwar, on the other hand, remains a caricature throughout, and the sarcasm directed towards him, given his name, is always a little heavy handed. His wife and daughter are hysterical representatives of their tribe who not only find Islam incomprehensible, but are hostile to it—they are refractions. Qasmi wants us to believe of the ancient antagonism between the Sikhs and the Muslims... It is apparent that by making the child an embodiment of Islam and then having him waylaid by fanatical and murderous Sikhs, Qasmi not only wants to evoke sublime pathos for the Muslims as victims of an unthinking faith, but he also wants to conceal facts. Qasmi refuses to acknowledge that in the 1930s and 40s inhumanity wasn't the exclusive right of any one community."

Dr. Alok Bhalla's classification of communal short stories and his classification of Parameshwar Singh as a communal narrative is not accepted by Shashi Joshi. She reads these short stories in terms of cultural symbolism and stereotypes. She says:

In my reading of the story, the bond between the Sikh and the Muslim boy is palpable. The love Parameshwar offers to Akhtar, though initially rebuffed by fear in the child's heart, gradually breaks through to the child and the child begins to trust him. Yet, he cannot replace the child's lost world—the cultural world of his socialization of the Azan and the Koran. Nor can he substitute the child's mother, whose memory is not an abstraction for Akhtar but a warm, sensuous memory of a woman who read the namaz and gave him a drink of water with a bismillah.... Parameshwar's wife, who cries for her own lost son, is as real as Akhtar in her rejection of the child. Instead of her Kartar with hair in a bun, with a comb in it, she has a child reciting 'qul huwallah- ho-ahad' under her roof. Gradually, as the child's hair begins to grow, she begins to soften, and feels happy when she touches his hair, bringing out the strong physicality of the mother and child bond. They day he can tie his hair in a bun, she says, they would name

him Kartar Siagh. Nevertheless, she weeps: "Kartar is that wound in my heart which will never heal". And seeing the wildly powerful love between a mother and child in his neighbour's house, Parameshwar begins to move towards the finale of his story in which he walks Akhtar to the border so that he can find his mother. At one level, the cultural stereotypes embedded in the situation are too strong to be overcome easily, at another, the cultural symbolism that pervades our senses as we seek our emotional sustenance in the familiar sounds and images, is conveyed by the story.

Shashi Joshi's reading of Parmeshwar Singh is justified by Dr. Asaduddin : "As is evident the story has been structured on the beliefs based on stereotypes. ' You're a Musalla,' yell the Sikh boys and Akhtar retaliates by shouting Sikhra at them. These are not simple or innocent invectives, hurled by children against each other, but carry with them the baggage of cultural alienation and prejudice accumulated over generations."

Whatever are the arguments about the short story, Parameshwar Singh, as a background, many issues of the Indian partition— migration, rape, displacement, separation of parents and children, killing, humanity and harmony—are built into this short story.

Gulam Abbas's short story Avtar: A Hindu is a about the Muslims who were massacred by the Hindus, , the struggle of the Muslims for survival, the plight and suffering of the Muslims, the repeated their refugee colonies attacked repeatedly by the Hindus and their final salvation. In the first part of Parmeshwar Singh, Gulam Abbas has given a graphic picture of violence, irreligion and vengeance, at the time of the partition of India:

"... There is no religion left anywhere in the world. The darkness of sin has spread over it. In every city, in every town, in every village, innocent people are being slaughtered. Villages have been reduced to ash, unborn children have been plucked out of the wombs of pregnant women, impaled on spears and brandished in the air. Breasts of women have been cut, noses of men have been chopped off, and people have been roasted alive in fire. Human beings have become more ferocious than the beasts."

Abbas takes sides with the Muslims from the second part of the story and presents the horrible atrocities and cruelties committed on the minority Muslims by the majority Hindus. Most of the Muslim men, children and women were killed by the armed gangs of Hindus. They burnt down their houses and looted their property. Though hurt, only a few could escape their lives. It all happened in Sambhal, a town in Moradabad district. There is no difference between Sambhal and the other towns in India. The whole country was burning in the flames of communalism. This thing appears to make Parmeshwar Singh non-communal and general. But the sentence 'Death awaited the Muslims everywhere' makes this short story one-sided. Then Abbas has described in Parmeshwar Singh how the Muslims faced many difficulties at the hands of the Hindus. There was a deserted valley, a few miles away from the town and

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The Muslims began to live there. These Muslims cleared the land, erected huts, for pulling water from the well, made ropes of grass. The new skills of making toys, baskets, brooms, clay pots, mats and ropes were learnt by these Muslims. Then they sold these articles in town. That is how they earned their livelihood. They were repeatedly troubled by Some Hindu hoodlums who burnt their huts. Then these huts were rebuilt by them patiently. The Muslim women labor with men, giving up their purdah. They also learnt how to weave cloth. Gradually, life was built up. A male child who was born to Ibrahim and Ameena was named, Hamzah. Hamzah seemed to be a child of uncommon and special talents. Hamzah grew up and he left his place, disguised as a Hindu. When Hamzah comes back after one year, he gives a miserable picture of those Muslims whom he saw everywhere and it seems to be a plea for making the readers understand the Muslim life:

“ . . . the Muslims everywhere in India were neglected, victimized and helpless. They always seemed to be afraid of something. Their mosques, their graves, the tombs of their apostles had been destroyed. They were too weak to protest and to defend themselves. Hardly a single day passed without there being an attack against the Muslims in one city or the other of India. In these attacks thousands of men, women and children were killed. The homes of the Muslims were looted and burnt. Those Muslims who survived were subjected to the worst kinds of atrocities and were forced to live a life of misery and degradation. God alone knows how much blood of the innocent Muslims has mingled in the waters of the Ganga, Jamuna, Narmada and Tapti.”(p.201).

for making the story balanced, the torture and violence, which was suffered by the Muslims can be taken as the Hindus also faced the situations and difficulties. This short story must be read by exchanging the words Muslims and Hindus. The evils and drawbacks which are listed below can be attributed to the Muslims as well as to the Hindus:

You are not human beings. . . .You have violated every law of goodness... You have spilt so much blood in its (religion's) name. You have raped women; stripped them naked and paraded them through the streets of the city; chopped off their breasts and noses; burnt them alive. You have pierced their children with your spears and flung them in the air. You claimed that you committed these crimes in the name of your religious duty. (p. 204)

The questions that are asked by Kalki from the Hindus can be asked from the Muslims as well:

What crime had your victims committed? That they believed in a different form of worship than yours? That their style of life was different? Is that such a big crime that they should be exterminated?... Don't you know that the final goal of all religions is the same? (p. 204)

Dr. Asaduddin says:

Gulam Abbas in Avtar: A Hindu Myth, uses the Hindu myth of Kalki to highlight the debased state of the Hindus as oppressors of innocent Muslims. The story is rather one-dimensional in its depiction of

reality in the absolute terms of black and white. The rhetorical questions that the narrator asks of the Hindus are those that any sane person would ask of all perpetrators of violence. The implicit answers and the awareness they display have the power to place a misguided humanity back on the rails.

The story Avtar: A Hindu Myth is called a communal story by Dr. Alok Bhalla. He says, “*Abbas invokes Hindu myths to suggest that since the Hindus had over millenniums betrayed their gods by indulging in the most reprehensible forms of killings, their gods had now decided in disgust to abandon them and send a new avtar on earth in a Muslim household. There is, of course, no hint of the history of massacre by the Muslims.*”

Shashi Joshi who was stunned by reading Bhalla's comment on this short story says:

The story, as I read it, poignantly brings home a truth that within the God-filled cosmology of the Hindus there is no barrier of b untouchability between Hindu Gods and Muslim victims. The evil unleashed into the midst of the Muslims in the lonely valley ends in a fantastic, messianic dream-fulfilling sequence of the new Avtar Kalki, born to a poor, besieged Muslim. It is an imaginatively constructed story that encapsulates the heart-rending cry of Muslim grief. The entire story could well have been narrated to us by Mohandas Gandhi and no one would have called him communal. Must Abbas, because he is a Muslim, square the circle of history by trying to balance his account of Hindu violence with accounts of massacres by the Muslims?”

Literature should be committed to humanity and impartial as it reflects the society and life as a whole. The attitudes which are partial and one-sided are always dangerous and It is true that in Avtar: A Hindu Myth there is partial and one sided view of the violence which occurred at the time of the partition of India.

“Where is My Mother?” by Krishna Sobti is a story about Yunus Khan who is a Pathan and who has lost his sister Nooran. Nooran's memory is always green in Yunus Khan's heart. He has been roaming across the country for killing each and every Kafir. He wants to destroy their name and existence from the earth and has taken an oath that he will annihilate them completely for the establishment of a new Muslim nation. He is ready to sacrifice all his self for his people and his country. His love for his new nation is more than his love for himself. He is full of violence and hatred against all the Kafirs. His blood starts boiling at the thought of kafirs. He wants to kill each and every kafir and wants to be sure that no one of them is left alive.

Krishna Sobti has given a very horrible picture of the partition violence:

Yunus Khan watched the flames as they leapt up from the villages burning all round. He had heard those screams before. People always scream when their houses are set on fire. He had witnessed other fires before. He had seen children thrown into fires... and women and men. . . .He had seen neighbourhoods burn all night and had seen charred, bodies in every street . . . cries of 'Allah-ho-Akbar' and

'Har-Har Mahadev' could be heard at a distance. 'Catch him, kill him,' 'No, no, please...' Yunus Khan heard all of them. (p. 135-36)

But all this does not disturb and distract him from his aim.

On his way, Yunus Khan finds an unconscious and wounded girl. Yunus Khan shows pity towards the girl in spite of having killed many children, men and women and having seen innumerable corpses. Seeing this girl Yunus Khan remembers Nooran and caresses her. The irony of the situation is that the girl does not know that Yunus Khan, who is caressing her so lovingly, has killed so many of her brothers. After taking her to the hospital he requests the doctors to save her life at all the costs. Even though this girl happens to be a kafir, Yunus Khan looks after her as his own sister, Nooran.

Though this girl is unconscious, she shouts with fear, for her innocent mind and heart have been terrified by the arson and killing of her brother. Yunus Khan wants to take her home as soon as she regains her consciousness but she is afraid of him. She thinks that she will be killed if she stays with him So she requests him to send her to the camp. Though Yunus Khan gives her assurance that she will not be harmed in any way, no one will kill and he will treat her as his own sister, she is not ready to be convinced by whatever he says. The girl begins to strike Yunus Khan with her fists, saying 'You are a Muslim... You will kill me', (p. 139) and began to scream 'Where is my brother? Where is my sister? Where is my mother?' (p. 139).

Dr. Alok Bhalla is of the opinion that "Sobti 'plays upon the popular Hindu fear of the Pathan as a mindless killer in order to weave her tale of sorrow... Her narrative structure... doesn't permit us remember the fact that one of the gentlest of Gandhi's disciples was Khan Abdul Gaffurr Khan, a Pathan and a Muslim." But Shashi Joshi is not convinced with Bhalla's view and says: "The Pathan is shown to be in the grip of ideology—fighting to create a new country for which the self had to be sacrificed: he was tearing across the country, with no moment to look at the moon and stars, fighting a revolutionary war, a jihad. Where is the mindlessness? In fact, Sobti's Pathan is a stereotype ingrained as a deathlike fear in the girl whom he rescues. It reveals the power of the stereotype and of prejudice, despite the care the Pathan lavishes on her....To my mind, Sobti's Pathan is the counterpart to Parameshwar Singh and the denouement of both the stories leaves them equally tragic figures longing for relationships they have lost." Dr. M. Asaduddin also analyses 'Where is my Mother?' in terms of cultural stereotype, cultural alienation, and prejudice. According to him, *the girl's 'You are a Muslim...' is not just a child's simple or innocent invective but carries with it the baggage of cultural alienation and intense prejudice.*

Although 'Where Is My Mother?' presents the deeply ingrained cultural prejudice and alienation as analysed by Asaduddin and Shashi, it highlights Yunus Khan's humanity and compassion which takes over his communal vengeance and hatred. Also one thing which should be noticed is the plight and

suffering of the innocent girl because of her brother and mother's death in the partition violence.

Conclusion

The incredible suffering that partition caused in some areas through exchanges of population has become a favorite topic for Indian, Pakistani, and Sikh writers. Dealing in various ways with the human tragedy endured by people on both sides of this newly created border, these writers, argues Alok Bhalla (editor of one major collection of these stories), share a theme. There are different views by different people but "There is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment"(Partition.1). Most of the writers who have written about partition, had themselves witnessed the holocaust and the violence, blood and terror it caused. perhaps this is the reason that they have given us a painful but honest perspective of what the politics of borders can do to human lives and civilization and They want to propagate the message of peace and prosperity to the people, by showing them the way that leads them to a land, where there is no division in the name of religion, where liberty, equality and fraternity predominates and where wind blows only to disperse the fragrance of Shantih, Shantih and Shantih(Thakur 221).

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