

Igniting Hope in Dark Times: A Study of Select Short Stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna

Abstract

In the recent decade's translation has emerged as major tool to bring many great writers in front of the world. One such writer is Mohinder Singh Sarna whose greatness was hidden behind Gurmukhi script. He has been resurrected by a translation by his son. His short stories translated into English have brought him into the focus of reading public internationally. His short stories show that all was not lost during the partition, but some remnants of humanity remained and those remnants have to be highlighted to present an example in front of the world.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Humanity, Religion, Communalism.

Introduction

India gained independence in 1947, but this independence was phoney event because it was accompanied by one of the gravest tragedies the mankind has witnessed the partition of India. The partition of the country into two parts proved to be a nightmare for the people who felt betrayed by the politicians. The people who had cherished great hopes for independence of the country were shattered by this new demon that was unleashed among them. One word 'partition' eclipsed all the ties with the neighbours and the people of surrounding areas and the people became strangers in their own lands. The lands that were made fertile by the blood and sweat of their ancestors became alien to them. Suddenly they could not relate to anything and the familiar faces turned in to demons. The tragedy was so great that hundreds of works have appeared on partition, but none of them has been able to capture the scale of tragedy. All the published works seem like episodes of the unfinished serial of epic length. In fact partition devoured humanity (Pal, Train 56). Each newly published work seems to complement the already existing huge body of literature. Infact, the literature covering "the single largest movement in recent history" (George 135) seems inadequate because none of the works could capture the crux of the tragedy.

Review of Literature

In the recent times a lot many works on partition have appeared in both India and Pakistan. The short stories written by Saadat Hassan Manto has dominated the scene. The latest translation of Manto has been by Aatish Taseer published in 2012. The researcher has not come across any other translation of Mohinder Singh Sarna's short stories.

Aim of the study

Partition of India was punctuated by violence, mayhem and tragedies, but there were sane voices also who tried to defend humanity against the onslaught of violence. The paper studies how Sarna has accentuated hope against hopelessness.

The "Whirlwind of riots, rape, pillage and killing" (Sarna, Navtej xi) that emanated from partition has influenced the relations between the two countries. Though sane voices have also been heard, but they have been drowned by stories of hatred. Many great writers have written about the partition on both sides of the border. Intezaar Hussain and Saadat Hassan Manto's genius has given a new shape to the partition related incidents on



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Indian side Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan has already achieved the status of a classic. Many other writers like Amrita Pritam, Sampooran Singh Gulzaar, Bhisham Sahni and Chaman Nahal etc. have written about partition. These writers gave a new dimension to the partition literature which was otherwise full of the narratives of hatred. Zaman comments about such narratives:

Unlike Manto who describes the atrocities on both sides and showed that when it came to cruelty, neither Muslims nor Hindus differed from each other, Aslam is intent on showing how Hindus and Sikhs barring a couple are villains of the periods. Abdullah Hussain, who also does not show Muslim atrocities, blurs the perpetrators of violence. (Zaman 62)

Ironically, Abdullah Hussain's novel *Udaas Naslein* that is referred to in the above quotation has already achieved the status of a classic. It is indeed a reality that the works which pictures the dominant community as a villain has been successful in both the country. The reason for the success of such work is obvious. By reading such works the people are able to feel the vicarious pain their ancestors had to undergo after the eruption of violence in both the countries. In other words, such works allow them to cultivate hatred and bitterness for the others and it is this bitterness that has led to three wars between the people who were once brothers, but now stand divided by religion and boundaries.

However, there have been writers who have blamed inherent frailties in human beings for the tragedy. One man who stands heads and shoulders above others in this case is Saadat Hassan Manto. It is indeed tragic to know that a genius of Manto's stature was born in such turbulent times that he had to spend his genius on the partition stories. Like all other eccentric geniuses he was censured in his own times. His genius was had to wait for emotions to get cooled to get recognition. Manto was censured during his life time on following lines:

Manto indulges in the obscene and the pornographic
Manto's stories are sex obsessed.
Manto's characters are marked by a sick and sordid inner disposition and are mired in fieth.
Manto's stories contain nothing beyond the dissolution and degradation of humanity.

Manto turns his back on mankind's most majestic prospects etc. etc.
(Azeem 81)

A similar kind of genius existed in India but his greatness was not stunted by censure but because his writing were in a regional language Punjabi. His genius was brought to the world by his own son who translated his stories into English and presented a great short story writer to the world. In his published work his short stories on partition stand out. These short stories are remarkable achievement for Sarna not because his technical prowess, his ability in the genre of short story but also because of their content matter. His short stories showcase hope for humanity which is lacking in most of the works of partition. He himself writes:

Despite all these satire, I am not without hope. Hopelessness leads to death and destruction and it has never been my intention to put foot on that path. A writer who is without hope has no right to be satiric. I did not lose faith even when faced by the barbarity of partition. My partition stories pass knee deep through the dark quicksand of flood and crushed bone, but they keep their head, on which they carry their bundle of hope, clearly above the quicksand. This hope is kept intact even the whirlwinds of barbarity and brutality. (Sarna, Navtej XII-XIII)

His statement sums up the themes of his short stories written on partition. These partition stories are a remarkable achievement for the writer who himself was directly affected by the mayhem of partition. He was uprooted by partition from his ancestral home in Rawalpindi and came to India with a "Guru Granth Saheb and a few belongings. All these incidents did not subdue his hope, optimism and belief in humanity. His short stories are a testimony of his belief in humanity, his faith that humanity will be restored and peace will prevail in the world. This paper studies a few his short stories published in anthology *Savage Harvest*.

His short story "Sikhism" is remarkable in this sense. The story tells about Sikhs of village Mughal Chak. The Sikhs who lived in Mughal Chak were landlords and Muslims in the village were landless labours who tilled the lands and harvested the crops of Sikh landlords and their tillers were extremely cordial and even the announcement of Pakistan could not dent these relations. The Sikhs of the village are assured by the Muslim tillers "There is absolutely no need for you to leave the village. No one will dare to touch you while we are around." (120). This statement by the Muslim tillers show the relations that existed

between the two communities. The other stories written on partition show that with the announcement of partition, the poor Muslims in the newly created Pakistan started cherishing the dream of becoming rich overnight and these dreams poisoned the relation between the two communities. One such case is depicted by the ChamanNahal in his novel Azadi. The Novelist shows how Abdul Ghani was transformed with the announcement of Pakistan:

So there was utter harmony among them, and the fact Ghani was Muslim and LalaKanshi Ram was a high caste Hindu never entered their heads. They spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes and responded to the weather, to the heat, and first rains in an identical manner. (Azadi 45)

Abdul Ghani's mind was poisoned by the announcement of partition, but there were instances where partition could not poison the mind. The Sikhs in the village were also hopeful about their lives in newly formed Pakistan. A ray of hope was flickering in their hearts that they could remain in Pakistan and will continue with their life as it is: Their hope is strengthened by incidence that after the creation of Pakistan Zaildar Chet Singh is asked to unfurl the Pakistan flag (120):

This gave some relief to the village's worried Sikhs. Their minds began to harbour a new possibility. How did it matter that Pakistan has been formed? So what if the Muslims had become rulers? After all, hadn't Hindus and Sikhs lived the Muslims for many centuries? When power changes hands, there is revolution, there is violence. But that was over now. Bad things had happened, but now that there was a legitimate government it would surely be a just and fair one. (120-21)

The Sikhs were able to harbour such dreams in their hearts because of the good intentions showed by the local Muslims. The things remained well till the outsiders did not enter Pakistan. The violence against the local minorities was not done by the local majority people, rather the violence erupted because of the frustration of the people who became paupers overnight. The people who had to leave their homes, ancestral properties, established businesses and above all their motherland overnight after the announcement of partition. They were feeling extremely frustrated and angry at the politician who decided their fate without even consulting them. This anger erupted in violence. The minorities in both the

countries become prey to this misdirected rage of the dislocated people. The heat of this misdirected rage reached MugalMajra also. The local Muslims were alarmed at the development and they warned the Sikhs:

Now you are in danger here. Thousands of Muslim refugees; ravaged and looted, have come from other half of Punjab and settled in the surrounding villages. They are see things for revenge. Take your cash and valuables and go to the Gurjanwala Refugee camp before they decided to start settling scores. From there, you can get across the border by train or in one of the large caravans. (121)

This incidence brings out the another aspect of partition. Here the individual will did not matter. The Sikhs of Mughal Majra were not willing to leave the village, the Muslims of the village were not willing to send remained intact, but it was role of the outsiders that was important. The fate of the local people was important. The fate of the local people was decided by the outsiders. This was probably the only example in the history where the locals had to bow down the wishes of the outsiders willingly. The marauding outsiders killed the locals at will and the local people of other community saw helplessly. Half of the people were killed from the convoy of Sikhs from Mughal Chak were also killed. The remaining were taken to India in military trucks. The scene of the violence on the way was distressing. While moving towards India they watched the remnants of violence committed by their own community:

On the way we encountered such a foul smell that the woman covered their noses with their hands, and the children began to vomit. I looked out from the truck and saw hundreds of bodies on both sides of the roadmen, women, children, old people. These unclaimed bodies were swollen with the water of the rains and have been rotting for God alone knew how many days. The military trucks ploughed through the bodies for an interminably long time. The entire two-furlong-long caravan of Muslim refugees had been massacred. (123)

This scene shows that whatever happened in Pakistan happened in India also. Virender Pal rightly comments that these massacres were "the result of bitterness and helplessness that emanated from dislocation, personal losses and hardships they faced

in refugee camps" (95). Whatever may be the reason this mayhem was a result of frustration that was the mood of the majority of the people who were dislocated in both countries. These scenes of violence are only the tip of the iceberg; the reality was much more horrible. In fact many people have commented that the word partition is in fact a mild word that hides the reality of the event in which more than a million people were killed. Frances Harrison rightly comments:

Partition is term that suggests an easy and peaceful division of territory. Instead, India's partition on 15 August, 1947 resulted in a holocaust. One million people in the northern India were killed in brutal and primitive ways. The largest two-way and land migration in history ensued, uprooting hundreds and thousands of long entrenched people and transforming them into refugees overnight. (94)

Almost all the works written on partition concentrate on this violence, but even then they are not repetitive. The tragedy was so enormous that the violence of so many kinds were practised by the people. Human beings were transformed into beasts and these beasts put humanity to shame. The violence erupted and continued for a long time, but what about the future, will the same voices be heard by the mobs. Those who suffered in this senseless violence, will they be able to forget the bitterness, will they be overcome the personal losses which were inflicted on them by marauding mobs. Mohinder Singh Sarnashows that humanity shown by one person is enough to erase all the memories. Human memories are selective if something bad occurs to them then these memories remain in his/her mind for long time. But if something good happens after the bad incidents then human mind foregrounds the good memories and the old memories are kicked out. This probably happens because the human beings are essentially optimistic creature and they have evolved to be hopeful about the future. This is what happens in the story also.

The Sikhs boys who were coming back after getting their swords sharpens come across an old man who did not run away after seeing Sikhs boys with swords in their hand. On the other hand his two companions ran away. When they asked the old man why he didn't run away after seeing the Sikhs; the old man replies: "Baba Nanak and Sikhs are all good people" (125). The old man tells this with a smile that lit up his entire face (125). When the Sikh boys asks that then why his companion ran away after seeing them. The old man tells them: "They are complete

idiots. I, on the other hand, know that your Guru gave your swords and they are never raised against an innocent man" (125). While going to India in a military truck when the young Sikhs see the scene of violence, it is obvious that these Muslims have been killed by the Sikhs. Here these young Sikhs recall the words of old man and realise that the old man had much better understanding of Sikhism than those who massacred these people.

The reaction of these people shows that they have understood the crux of the religion. They have been through their epiphanic moment and recalling that the incident enlightens them. This means that they will not be bitter afterwards. Everybody needs to undergo such incidents to reaffirm their faith in humanity. This incidence shows why the people of Punjab whether Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs always enjoyed strong relationships with another. The problem always raised their heads, but vibrant Punjabi spirit always crushed the problems. Rajmohan Gandhi commented on this particular trait of the Punjabis:

Normal life usually prevailed on the ground, and cordial exchanges took place during festivals, though the century old tension between purity of belief and purity of birth was present even in the 1930s and 1940s. If this tension remained part of Punjab's climate, the Punjabi's ability to put it to one side was a stronger point (365).

Partition was the worst test of this Punjabi spirit and the spirit triumphed also, but the triumph was selective. The major hurdles in the triumph of this spirit were the outsiders who had unwillingly uprooted from their homes. These people who were the victims of callous political decisions took out their frustration on the helpless and vulnerable minorities. In this mayhem the people who wanted to save their friends were outnumbered by the refugees and the locals had no other options left except letting the people go.

The stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna are unique in the sense that they capture myriad problems that emanated from the catastrophic partition. In the other stories "EkOnkarSatnam", he brings out the psychological trauma associated with the partition. Towards the end of the story the theme of psychological trauma merged into the major theme of the story the triumph of humanity.

The story centres on a Muslim family who had migrated from India to Pakistan. The family has migrated from Puraqazi in the modern-day Uttar Pradesh to Pakistan. The story shows how trauma of dislocation travels through generations. The narrator tells about the troubles of the BaqirHussain whose mother could not adjust in Pakistan:

She continued to consider Pakistan a foreign land during the year and a half that she lived there after crossing over. BaqirHussain had tried to convince her that Pakistan had been made through Allah's will and that true believes should consider it their good fortune to live in this country. He was amazed that neither his other nor his wife could understand that simple thought. He had driven himself mad dealing with his mother and now had to do same with his wife (129).

The psychological trauma of BaqirHussain is visible in the story. She suffers from "bloody dysentery" (129) and no remedy works on her. She keeps on telling Baqir that "the water of my well" (129) in Puraqazi can cure her, but Baqir is helpless because her well is now in different country. The psychologist may call this as "placebo effect", but it can also be called association with the motherland from which she was uprooted. Unable to get water from her well, the mother dies; but daughter in law inherits the problem. The writer further accentuates the feelings of the mother of BaqirHussain:

Even when his mother was at death's door, BaqirHussain thought he could hear wheezing 'Puraqazi' in every dying breath. Her death rattle, too sounded like 'Puraqazi, Puraqazi', and her silent lips seemed to call out to Puraqazi even when she lay wrapped her burial shroud (130).

This incidence again reinforces the association of human beings with land. The psychological impact is visible on the females. One thing emerges in the story is that women are more emotional when compared to the males. Fundamentalism is also the domain of the males. BaqirHussain could not even find a decent employment in Pakistan. He tries to find the solution to his problems by offering "a Chaddar to the tomb" (133). In other words, instead of looking at his problems practically, he tries to find his solution in God. This shows how males try to circumnavigate the issue; they lose their temper very soon and try to find solutions in fundamentalism. In following the fundamentalist ideologies and trying to find solace in extremist ideologies they slip into fundamentalism where they start hating people of other religions. This is the first step toward violence. This happens with BaqirHussain also. Plagued by the financial problems and health problems first of his mother then of his wife. He thinks that his problems are plaguing him

because he has not been extremist enough. He starts thinking that all his problems are occurring because "words EkOnkar Satnam-1935 (God is one, His name is True-1935) were carved in the Gurmukhi script on a marble plaque fixed above the entrance" (134). He muses that Muslims used to carve "Rahim Manzil, RasulManzil or Ya Allah" on their newly constructed houses to keep away evil spirits and misfortune" (135). He thinks that the Sikhs who had made this house "had had his God's name carved into it to keep misfortune and illness away" (135).

This thinking of BaqirHussain makes clear how fundamentalism has eaten into his brains. His thinking has been clouded by fundamentalism. He forgets that if God is one then how the God can be compartmentalised into "his God" and "my God". His compartmentalisation of God shows that he has become insane. In this fit of insanity, he comes to the conclusion that all these problems he is facing are because "he, a true Muslim believer in the Prophet and the Holy Quran, was living here the inscription had become a curse. For a year and half, he had suffered misfortunes and tribulations because of this inscriptions" (135).

In this fit of insanity, he could take only one decision that is o "fetch a lantern, an adze and a chisel' to strip away the "infidel inscription" (135). His wife retains her sanity and tells him not to destroy the inscription because "that is the name of God" (135) only to receive a brusque reply from the husband. "But the God of the infidels" (135). His wife is more enlightened as she knows that the Gods are not different. The wife stops Baqir by hitting chisel on her head. She is badly wounded and "it took ten stitches to close the wound on her forehead". Ironically her fever goes after this incidence and she is healed, but Baqir is astonished to see her forehead:

What he saw when looked up at her shook him to the marrow of his bones. The scar on the forehead formed the shape 'EkOnkar'. The stamp of the infidels had been rubbed off the face of his house and implemented on his wife's instead (137).

The message of the story is clear 'EkOnkar' was not a curse as thought by BaqirHussain, rather it was a benediction. It appears as the forehead of his wife and she is healed of two months long fever" (137). It is not a mere a coincidence but a proof that God is indeed one. BaqirHussain's bad fortune was due to his poor decisions of migrating to Pakistan and that decision too was taken under the influence of extremism.

Conclusion

Thus, Sarna's stories stand among the partition stories as the beacon of hope. Humanity always triumphs at the end of the story. The violence remains in the background, but what is foregrounded is the shining deeds of humanity. These individuals who remain human even under the most trying circumstances are to hope for whole of humanity. Their deeds give hope to all and sundry.

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