

Surviving Partition through Compassion and Love

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Abstract

The Partition of India has been the theme of many novels written by Indian as well as Pakistani writers. Many of these writers had witnessed the Partition from very close quarters. It had left them bruised and scarred both physically as well as psychologically. The agony of being uprooted and being displaced from their homelands, the sudden outbreak of communal frenzy, the senseless bloodbath and merciless killing of innocent neighbors cannot be easily forgotten even today. The theme of Partition was dominant in the novels of the old masters but what is amazing that even in the new writings since 1980, Partition is remembered with the same agony and pain. Fifty years of Independence was marked by a revival of the Partition theme in the literary world. Among the recent writers who have taken up this theme are, Salman Rushdie, Gulzar, Shiv K. Kumar, Mukul-Kesavan, Manju Kapur, Shauna Baldwin, Ruskin Bond, Bapsi Sidhwa and several other prominent writers.

Keywords: Agony, Displacement, Communal Frenzy, Predicament of Women, Emotionally Bruised, Psychological Trauma.

Introduction

The trauma of partition is an issue that seems to continue even in contemporary times. The agony and senseless violence is still fresh in the hearts of the people. The painful experience has been recounted with utmost grief, that even the new generation which has not witnessed it knows how brutal it actually was. The paper offers an insight into the post 1980's writings on the theme of partition.

Objective

The aim and objective of the paper is to give a sympathetic treatment to this major historical catastrophe. It seeks to establish peace and build bridges between communities, rather than seek revenge and vengeance. It aims to view the horrors of partition with a fresh insight that would help in making a new beginning and resolve the barriers of caste, creed and religion.

Review of Literature

The theme of partition has been taken up by many writers and poets, who found a catharsis in writing about the communal frenzy that gripped India and Pakistan. But when this theme re-emerges even after fifty years of Independence it draws the attention of the critics and readers to analyse the recent novels in all-seriousness. The works of recent writers like Gulzar, Manju Kapur, Bapsi Sidhwa Shiv K. Kumar, Mukul Kesavan have been studied and analyzed with a fresh understanding of the grave problem.

Literature keeps alive historical, political and social issues. It offers a panoramic view of events that shape history and culture. In the present context the advent of the British and the colonial rule has been the theme of many novels and short stories in Indian literature. Among the most remarkable stories is Premchand's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. Premchand brought realism to Hindi literature. He wrote on realistic issues of the day, like, communalism, corruption, zamindari system, poverty, colonialism etc. Through his fiction he portrayed the social scenario of that time. *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* describes the politics of colonial expansion in the province of Oudh. The story was adapted into a film by the same name by Satyajit Ray. It is by far one of the most impressive stories that depict the annexation of Oudh. Wajid Ali Shah was the ruler of this independent state. He was a poet, singer, composer and dancer and spent his time in the pursuit of arts. He was indifferent to the matters of the state. Mir and Mirza are wealthy landlords possessing ancestral property. Like the king they too are oblivious of their responsibilities towards their family and state. They are addicted to the game of chess and turn a blind eye to the intrusion of the British army in Oudh. By

playing a bigger political game, the British gain their strength in India. The British checkmate Wajid Ali Shah and he surrenders his kingdom without any resistance. Premchand draws an interesting parallel between the chess game of Mir and Mirza and the shrewd and calculative moves of the British to capture Oudh. This basic theme of the story is dramatized in the film that skillfully shows that how the indifference and detachment of India's ruling classes assisted a small number of British soldiers and officials captured Oudh very easily without facing much opposition.

Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons* is based on true events that took place in Shahjahanpur during the revolt of 1857. Once again a real life incident of a significant historical event forms the subject matter of a novella. The novel is based on the life of Ruth Labadoor, whose father was killed but the other family members survived the mutiny. According to Ruskin Bond the novel describes the politically charged atmosphere which was caught in the grip of religious and communal frenzy but above all it focuses on humanity, love and compassion. In the 2002 Viking Penguin edition of his novel, Bond has introduced it as follows: "In retelling the tale for today's reader I attempted to bring out the common humanity of most of the people involved for in times of conflict and inter-religious or racial hatred there are always a few (just a few) who are prepared to come to the aid of those unable to defend themselves." Ruth and her family take refuge in the house of Lala Rajmall, who is their father's friend. Their hideout is soon discovered and Javed Khan takes the family under his control. He has fallen in love with Ruth and is intent on marrying her. He abducts the family and confines them to his house. Marriage with Ruth is impossible as he faces opposition in his own family. Since Ruth is an Anglo-Indian she cannot acquire the status of being Javed's second wife. Her mother Miriam too, keeps delaying this issue on some pretext or the other. However despite this complexity, the women of the house are compassionate towards the lonely English ladies who have to seek shelter in a Muslim household because of the outbreak of the mutiny. The novel describes the predicament of the defenseless English ladies who are protected by Hindu and Muslim families. Later some Sikh soldiers also come to their rescue. Ruth and her family move from one house to another, from one village to another till they reach their English relatives in Bareilly. The haunting story is told with Ruskin Bond's trademark simplicity and deep humanity.

Shiv K Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* is a story of revenge and love presented against the backdrop of communal frenzy that broke out after the partition. Kumar captures the pain and suffering of the migrants with great authenticity and imaginative power. The novel has both beauty and power. It recreates in a language that glows with fragrance and color not only the trauma that one associates with partition but also love compassion and forgiveness that is evoked even in the midst of communal violence. The blurb reads that the novel portrays some poignant aspects of the communal holocaust that followed the partition of India, in August 1947. The mammoth exchange of refugees from either side of the border led to an unprecedented upsurge of

violence-killing, rape and arson. Gautam Mehta, a journalist in Delhi, manipulates his divorce from his adulterous wife (Sarita) through conversion to Christianity. Emotionally bruised, he allows himself to be talked by his close friend, Berry, into spending a night with a call-girl. But Gautam falls in love with this Muslim girl, Haseena, who has been kidnapped from Allahabad by a gang of abductors, headed by Pannalal-. As Gautam helps her escape from Delhi to Allahabad, he is pursued by Pannalal who catches up with him on the banks of the Ganga. But in the duel that follows, it is Pannalal who gets killed. Gautam gets himself converted to Islam in order to marry Haseena.

Gautam, faces personal crisis at home and has the added burden of rehabilitating his parents who had recently migrated to Delhi from Lahore. His parents had arrived after many harrowing experiences on their journey from Lahore. They had been anxious to meet their grandson, Rahul, but the impending divorce of their son made them feel unhoused. Gautam's mother called it their second partition. Gautam's father, Shyamlal Mehta had been known for his zeal for the Hindu Dharma. He had held several rallies against the British missionaries who had tempted many Hindus into Christianity. But now he watched helplessly as his son converted to Christianity in order to seek divorce from his wife.

The novel describes the anguish of Gautam as he has to separate from his son and leave his house which he had designed so passionately. The mood of separation and loss pervades the entire novel. Both at the personal and national level, people were painstaking at the sudden loss of property and their homelands. The partition not only unhoused the people it also separated them from their friends and relatives and shattered their sense of safety and security.

Gautam and his friend Berry watched helplessly as mobs hurl a spear at a kafir cow. As the cow bled bellowing in pain, almost a heart rending human cry the faces of the rioters glowed with demonic rage. Their lust for blood was fulfilled by butchering a 'hindu' cow. Gautam and Berry were helpless spectators and felt frustrated at their own inability to intervene in the midst of such satanic butchery.

They experienced the same distress and helplessness as they become mute spectators as young woman is assaulted in the street by a mob of unruly rioters. Gautam is dumbfounded as he peers through the curtains and witnesses the gruesome spectacle. "For the first time Berry realized that such a public exposure of nudity could kill all sexual urge in a man. Ordinarily, he would have felt aroused to see a young woman striped but now he felt as though he'd himself been abused and humiliated."(60)

When Gautam meets Haseena it seems that he got a new direction in life. He took on the responsibility of saving Haseena and returning her to her family in Allahabad-. Gautam had witnessed the gruesome killing of Haseena's father in the streets and was determined to save the family from further humiliation and harassment. For Haseena's mother it was not easy to leave India and migrate to "another country" she feels that "leaving Allahabad would be

the greatest wrench. But there is no alternative." Her sorrow can be assessed by the poignant utterance "it appears we will have to move to Pakistan... Oh the pain of getting uprooted from one's native place after generations. But there is no alternative." (118)

Most unnerving is the depiction of the incident where Gautam is accosted by rioters and made to undress in order to prove that he is a Hindu. He stood stark naked, like a pale sacrifice offered to some demon. For him that moment was the desecration of his body and soul. Even as he dressed up afterwards his eyes filled up with tears blurring everything around him. "He knows he'd now have to carry this scar on his soul all his life."(211)

The setting of the novel in Allahabad is symbolic in many ways. Gautam visits the fort that was once raised by Emperor Akbar. It had witnessed the rise and fall of several dynasties. Most impressive was the Ashoka pillar and the edict on which was engraved the noble vision of the ancient emperor. The English translation read as follows:

"True religion does not recognize any barriers Between one human being and the other. It embraces all living Creatures - man, animal and bird. Compassion, endurance, understanding and love are man's greatest treasures." (157)

It is ironic that the same city at that time was engulfed in the flames of hatred and anger. The city had become an arena of violence. But hope was not lost because there were people like Gautam and Haseena, who still honoured honesty and compassion even in such turbulent times.

They spent some time at the banks of the holy Ganges and found themselves drawn instantly to the mysterious Saraswati that is supposed to form the triveni along with the Ganga and Yamuna. Gautam is attracted to the mythical Sawarwasti which is supposed to be white in color, signifying purity and chastity. Saraswati is invisible, thereby signifying that after the communal violence, all that was pure, noble and chaste had also vanished. Ironically Gautam who had believed in communal harmony had to kill Panna Lal on the banks of the Ganges in self defense. His killing further aggravated clashes in the city and Gautam was filled with guilt to see that he, who had

believed in tolerance and peace had become the cause of tension in the city.

In the final section of the novel Haseena's family boards the train to Pakistan but she chooses to stay back with Gautam. When she says that now she has become Haseena Mehta, Gautam tells her that they must make a beginning by cutting across barriers of caste and religion. He wants to call her just Haseena Gautam - only their first names should be their identity. He dreams of starting a new race – sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality. The note of pessimism that is noticeable at the beginning of the novel where Kumar describes the sky as murky grey and emphasizes the fact that. "There had hardly been any rain during the entire month of August, as though nature had deliberately smothered the monsoons to provide a grim backdrop to the drama of hate and violence being enacted in Delhi during the cataclysmic year 1947."(17) But now as Gautam and Haseena have provided emotional comfort and support to each other there is optimism in their vision. They have pledged to make a new beginning and the novel ends with this hope which is reflected in nature as well. "The sky was now covered with mountains of clouds of all sorts of fantastic shapes.. Suddenly, a flock of birds shot into the sky, and began to circle joyously over the maize fields, as though scornful of the happenings on the earth below. Their spangled wings, poised securely against the wind, glimmered in the morning sun."(214)

Thus there is a concern for human suffering in these novels which is essential to build faith and trust in humanity.

Conclusion and Findings

On the basis of a review of novels like Shatranj ke Khiladi, A Flight of Pigeons, and particularly Shiv K. Kumar's, A River with Three Banks, it can be concluded that a humanistic approach can offer the desired peace and tranquility. The trauma of partition can be overcome through compassion and love alone.

References

1. Kumar Shiv K. A River with Three Banks. UBSPD Publishers and Distributors 1998 New Delhi. (All references from here are given in parenthesis).