

Forging New Relations, Retrieving Humanity: A Study of Select Short Stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna



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Abstract

In the last two decades hundred of works on partition literature have appeared. All these works have tried to narrate the incidents that occurred after the announcement of partition. Almost all of the works narrate the violence that erupted during the partition; but even then the works does not seem repetitive; rather all the works seem to complement one another. Such was the magnitude of the tragedy. The narrative of partition describe the ways how the people of other community were exterminated by the violent mobs on both the sides of newly constructed/formed border between the two communities. The people who have live peacefully with one another became strangers. The violence was even more bewildering because the people who inflicted violence, abducted women were known to one another. These engulfing narratives of violence have drowned the humanitarian stories. If partition literature is site for showing how human changed into beast; then it is also a site for showing how some people maintained their sanity during such time. This paper tries to uncover how this horrendous tragedy also witnessed the shining examples of humanity. Mohinder Singh Sarna's short stories are remarkable pieces in the sense that he himself witnessed the mayhem, yet his stories show the triumph of humanity.

Keywords: Partition, Beast, Violence, Humanity, Demons.

Introduction

Mohinder Singh Sarna was born in 1923 in Pakistan. He is an acclaimed writer in Punjabi and is a recipient of SahityaAkademi Award. In a career spanning six decades Sarna produced several volumes of poetry, short stories and novels. Many of his books have been translated into other English language. His short story collection *Savage Harvest* (2013) was translated by his son Navtej Singh Sarna. Though Mohinder Singh Sarna is an accomplished writer who wrote on almost all the facets of life; yet his partition stories are the most appreciated ones. He himself tells:

Commentators and critics have appreciated my partition stories more than my other stories. Perhaps this is because I passed through that cataclysm unprotected. I was an eyewitness to those massacres, those acts of fanaticism and barbarity. The blows of barbarism fell more on my soul than on my body. I saw the blood spurting from the jugular vein of humanity; I saw humanity sobbing as it breathed its last. It shook my faith in mankind and in life. Deep inside, my resolve and direction wavered and my ideals dimmed. The earth had slipped from under my feet, the universe seemed in disarray. Joys and smiles were wrapped up in a shroud and buried in the soul's grave. Stories and verse made no sense. I did not want to do anything, write anything, be anything.

These words of the writer show that whatever he writes is a part of his personal experience. The statement of the writer show how he saw humanity withering under the stress of communalism. He himself was shaken by the incidents that were occurring around him. These stories are a cathartic experience for himself, he was shaken by fanaticism and barbarity that erupted around him; but even then he was able to dig out the positive experience of his life to achieve solace for himself. He portrays a

balanced account of the events to his readers. His stories show that there were people who withered under the stress of communalism; but there were also the people who remained human among the chaos.

Review of Literature

The researcher have come across many papers on partition. The latest paper that have been published on theme of partition is "Witnessing the Grave of India-Pakistan Enmity: A study of select partition stories" by Virender Pal published in Daath Voyage December 2018 issue. This paper also elucidates the positive events that occurred during the partition. One important book that has appeared on partition is AnamZakaria's *The Footprints of Partition* (2015). This books also unearths the positive side of the partition. There were so many people who were helped by the people of other communities. These people and incidences find mention in this book. Another important contribution to the field's "Partition of India: Representative Narrative, Relegated Discourses by NasibKumari and Divyajyoti Singh published in Daath Voyage (December 2018).

Aim of the Paper

So far the narratives of partition have concentrated on the violent aspect of the partition, but now the hidden stories about the triumph of humanity are also coming out. These new positive stories have the power to transform the relations between the two countries. This paper focuses on such stories.

The first story of the collection *Savage Harvest* for instance shows the savagery of a son through the narration of his father Dina and his mother. The story shows that Bashir has become a monster and even his father Dina is afraid of him (4). The story at once brings out torment of Dina who is ashamed at the actions of his son. Bashir has abducted Preeto, the daughter of a Hindu of the village. Sarna visualizes her torment:

A horrible scene appeared before his eyes-Preeto wailing and clutching at her father's corpse; Bashir pulling her away by her hair: Imploring him wailing and screaming, she had been dragged away. And then she had gone silent, just like a lamb in the moment before its slaughter. (9)

Dina is helpless; he cannot help Preeto; but his response to Preeto's abduction; his torment shows that he is still a human. The people around him; his son Bashir may have become a demon; but he remains a human being. This story is probably coloured by the memories of "rioting and bloodbath" (Memon 380).

Mohinder Singh Sarna while revisiting or re-reading the story would have realized that the message it conveyed is too pessimistic for the humanity and for the people of both the countries. That is why he wrote the second part of the story that is "The crusader". The second part of the story shows the triumph of friendship and humanity. In the story, Reshma, a childhood friend of Preeto approaches Khalil with the news of Preeto's abduction and requests him to get her freed. Khalil ponders over situations and wonders "what sort of a Pakistan was

this that had entered their village like some maddened bull? trampling humanity under its hooves and turning everything upside down?" (96). In his quest to free Preeto, Khalil is helped by Fazlu who is "religious and honest" (96). On the other hand, Khalil addresses Bashir as an "insult to our faith!" (99).

By declaring Fazlu as a "religious" man and Bashir as an insult to his faith; Sarna makes clear that religion did not allow such violence. Moreover, when Khalil confronts Bashir "the alcohol in his veins turned to water" (99) Drinking of alcohol is banned in Islam, so the people like Bashir who inflict violence in the name of religion are merely imposters. They use religion as a shield to cover their misdeeds. Truly religious people are persons like Khalil who help the people like Preeto who re in distress and treat them like their "sister" (100).

The partition of the subcontinent divided the landscape, but it could not divide the population: Stephen Alter rightly asserts:

Partition seems to be one of the most enduring legacies of the British Empire. Former colonies were divided along religious and ethnic lines, as if the colonial administrators took the wisdom of solo man at face value, cutting the disputed infant in half before its mother had a chance to intervene. The problem is that the cartographer's pencil became a two edged sword and there is no line on a map that can cleanly demarcate a population, particularly when that population is already raven with hatred, and distrust. (94)

What ever, Stephen Alter asserts is true in the context of the partition of the subcontinent. The people of the subcontinent became apprehensive and most of the people got driven by greed and lust. These people became demons to usurp the lands and businesses of the profiteering minorities. Suddenly the hidden atavistic urges came out on the surface because these people knew that nobody will be held accountable for the crimes committed. The sufferers of these crimes will have no other option than bearing the wrongs of the perpetrators. One of the most important fact about this violence is that it was not due to communal tensions that prevailed for long time, rather the violence erupted overnight. The people who were living together for centuries started murdering one another overnight. Was it the greed of people or something else is the question that has to be answered? The narratives that have been published offer different reasons for the violence and even their perception about the violence is different. In case of Bhisham Sahni, for instance, familiarity with a person indemnifies against the violence. On the other hand, in Sarna's stories the readers come across so many cases where the people of the same village, same *gotra* and same extended families kill one another.

The treatment of violence by these two writers show that a blanket theory for the partition violence is not enough. The violence that erupted at different places was guided by different reasons.

In this charged atmosphere the people who were sane became a minority. Chaudhary KhudaBaksh is one of those saner voices who were lost in this mayhem. He tells Khalil:

I tried what I could son. But I am old now. My days are over. When I had first got the news I went to Gondlanwala village I beseeched the Gondals to desist from violence and looting I begged them in the name of God and the prophet; and I begged them in the name of this white beard. I put my turban, the honour of my ancestors, in the dust at their feet. But they paid no heed. (97)

In ordinary circumstances, Chaudhary KhudaBaksh's request would not have gone unheeded to; but in this atmosphere of communal frenzy; nothing remained as it was. For the people here in the story violence brought an opportunity to get rich and to abduct women. What would have been a loot in ordinary circumstances became a religious work during the partition, what would have been considered a rape or abduction in the ordinary time became a pious work. If the people would have adhered to the requests of people like Chaudhary KhudaBaksh then they would have lost an opportunity of life time. The opportunity of some people became the worst tragedy for the humanity. The people became demons and even the animals were scared of the actions of these demons:

Even the dog was scared of going towards the village where happy homes had been brunt to ashes; and covered stools were still shouldering; where half-burnt human bodies lay rotting; where in the corners of houses and in ditches in the lanes lay pathetic piles of old bones; and where, in the doorway of thakurdwara a handsome man lay on his side, his intestines pulled out by some sharp hooked weapon (26).

In such an atmosphere, Chaudhary KhudaBaksh stood tall; his humanity intact. He tries his best to save the minority communities but he is turned away by everybody. In his old age he tells the people about the planned attack of the mob Sarna further describes:

He had helped them tie up their bundles, dismantled their cots and pack them, and stitch up sacks full of kitchen utensils. He had negotiated with the potters to sell donkeys at reasonable prices to those who did not have horses to carry their things. Then he blessed the women of the families, bolstered up the spirits of the young men and, holding back his tears, bidden farewell to the old man, apologizing for not being able to do anything to help them. (25)

The above description shows that Chaudhary Khuda Baksh's Character has not undergone any change due to partition. His character, his humanity remained intact. He even tried to restore

the humanity of the others; but was unsuccessful. Chaudhary Khuda Baksh's goodness remains ineffectual but his humanity, his goodness, his character gives hope that all is not over for the humanity. Goodness of Chaudhary KhudaBaksh will trickle down to the coming generations and may be they will restore the relations that existed prior to partition. Partition shattered the relationships and created mayhem among the communities. Sarna's stories tell how the blood relation between the people of two communities were snapped. In his story "Gondlanwala" he tells the story where the Muslims and Sikhs belonged to one extended family:

Gondlanwala couldn't be called either a Sikh or Muslim village; it was a village of GondalJats, and they could be Sikhs as well as Muslims. For centuries, they had lived like brothers But now the country's partition had given a new meaning to their identity. They were no longer GondalJats, only Sikhs or Muslims. (75)

The description clearly tells that both Muslims and Sikhs of the village were a part of an extended family. Their gotra "Gondal" confirms that. Their origin was the same; over the generations a few of them became Muslims and others remained Sikhs; but the common blood they shared never thinned and their brotherhood remained intact, but partition changed all their identities and they became Muslims and Sikhs instead of just Gondal Jats.

The story "Gondlanwala" shows how the relations between the people were snapped. In the story, "Basant the Fool" he shows how the new relations were forged among the strangers. The story narrates the incidence where a person named Basant sacrifices his life for a total stranger. His mother is left alone and destitute. She sustains herself by eating in a langer in a Gurudwara and hopes to get a job of "cleaning dishes" (39) in some homes to make her ends meet, but the narrator of the story adopts her as his mother:

May your enemies was dirty dishes, Ramu cleans our dirty dishes and will keep on cleaning them. You've called me your son. Now come to my house like my mother. Find a wife for me find a sweet, pretty daughter-in-law for yourself. I cannot take Basant's place, but I will definitely try (39-40).

Another story that is central to building a new bridge between the two communities is "A New Taj Mahal". The story narrates the incidences where a gentleman who has relocated in Delhi after partition visits his ancestral home in Rawalpindi and is surprised to see how the soul of the house has been kept intact by the owners. Virender Pal comments about these stories:

The[se] partition stories foreground humanity in the background of violence. These stories make it clear that madness that engulfed the sub-continent was momentary; the people may have diverted temporarily from their

real nature; but they have regained their humanity. These stories which accentuate humanity can build the bridges between the two estranged countries and pave the way for a peaceful prosperous sub-continent. (103)

Conclusion

Thus the partition literature is not about communal frenzy, violence and mayhem that erupted during the turbulent times. The partition literature is also about human beings who are shining examples of what humanity stands for. These are the narratives that will remain; the disturbing memories will only remain locked in the unconscious. These narratives will remain alive and continue to inspire the coming generations to forge new relations and prosper together.

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