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POST PARTITION INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KHUSHWANT
SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN, MANOHAR MALGONKAR'S A BEND IN THE GANGES,
CHAMAN NAHAL'S AZADI

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ABSTRACT

Partition of India after getting independence from British Empire made a significant impact in the map of Indian history. While on one hand India moves forward to making an independent nation through a bloody struggle, on other hand the partition of India and Pakistan creates an ambience of hostility, bitterness, turbulence and waning of human values, trust and love. The troubling history of partition and its corollary intolerance, communal riots, disbelief in the basic aspects of human nature left an indelible mark upon the literary writings of the post-independence era. The effect of partition had been so magnificent and deep in human mind and behaviour that most works produced in this era inadvertently focused on partition and its role in the development of human relationship and nation as a whole. This paper aims to focus on three mainstream Indian English writers— Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar and Chaman Nahal among others for their profound and epoch making contribution towards the way people look back at the era of partition.

Keywords: partition, hostility, turbulence, tensed ambience, lack of faith and trust, political consciousness, traumatic experience, communal riots, destruction, religious disharmony

Introduction

Literature is the mirror of society and the reflection of human actions, behaviours and emotions. Literary writings produced in a particular era not only portray an authentic picture of the then social ambience but also represent the political differences, communal disharmony, religious tension, historical values and cultural temperament of the entire generation. Apropos of this it may be said that literature as a whole or any specific literary work such as fiction, drama, poetry, prose or novel has enormous significance upon human mind and life. M. K. Naik rightly observes that the trend of writing Indian fiction in English started with the rising of nationalism and revolt against the British rule.

Up to the 1930's there was no Indian novelist who could claim sustained and considerable achievement in fiction originally written in English. Then came a sudden flowering, and it is significant that it came in 1930's a period during which the glory that was Gandhi's attained perhaps its brightest splendour. The Indian freedom struggle was already more than a generation old, yet with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi

it was so thoroughly democratized that freedom consciousness percolated for the first time to the very grassroots of Indian society and revitalized it. It is possible to see a connection between these developments and the rise of the Indian novel in English; for fiction, of all literary forms is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values. (Naik, 194)

Partition of India in August 1947 was the culmination of the socio-political process which began in 1857 when first war of independence broke out against British colonial rule. What was achieved by Indians on 14th August midnight was the pathetic cries of people being massacred, women being subjected to all kinds of cruelties, property being looted and those who survived were condemned to be refugees, running for their lives, finding ways to sustain themselves at any cost after being uprooted from their homeland.

It may be justified to say that before the people could understand the socio-political implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a devastating wave of violence that swiftly crushed them under its wings. Innumerable people were killed, raped and butchered on either side of the border, leaving a shocking impact on the surviving human race. Those who survived the catastrophe, the experience was so harrowing that the traumatic memories of those grief-stricken days haunted them for years to come. For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted. The atmosphere of unrest created during partition and its corollary trauma both in the internal and external zone remained a major concern of writers of Indian writing in English as well as in vernacular languages after Independence. For instance, Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, Attia Hussain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* are some of the major Indian English fiction writers in this trend while Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Bisham Sahni's *Tamas*, Kamaleswar's *Partitions*, Sunanda Sikdar's *A Life Long Ago* etc. are partition novels written in vernacular languages. The impact of partition culminates in wide spread massacre, rape, dreadfulness, aggression, rioting, hostility, distrust, religious enmity, attacks and counter-attacks all of which become the subject matter of the literature pertaining to the partition. However, there is also another dominant theme running through this whole literature and it is the restoration of humanism and propagation of communal harmony between the two communities. Among several themes, communal narrow-mindedness and religious fanaticism are deplored by most of the writers who vividly portray the evil consequences of religious intolerance and disharmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. What these partition writers desire to show is that human values are preserved by individuals in both the warring communities even in the midst of utter chaos, and that evokes a ray of hope amidst such dreadful and painful circumstances.

Khushwant Singh: Train to Pakistan

Train to Pakistan is undoubtedly one of the exquisite fictions of post partition Indian English literature. According to Bhatnagar, "Khushwant Singh was the first Indian novelist in English to write about the horror and holocaust of partition with great artistic concern in *Train to Pakistan*" (152). Originally titled as *Mano Majra*, the novel is an effort to fictionally recreate the socio-historical reality of partition period, experienced by the Punjabis in India. *Train to Pakistan* pivots on the story of, as rightly put by K. K. Sharma and B. K. Johri, "the brutal realistic story of political hatred and mass passion during the tragic days that preceded followed the partition of India. Trains were halted and the unfortunate passengers were ruthlessly butchered. Men, women and children were indiscriminate victims. They were molested and killed by armed bands of men" (64). In this novel Khushwant Singh focuses on the fact of the partition of Punjab and the question of subsequent violence on both sides of the border in a very effective, vivid and graphic manner. It was a period of great disillusionment, crisis of moral values, of disintegration and devastation. Giving vent to his anger and agony at the meaningless butchery of innumerable human lives in the name of political agenda, the novelist says:

The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man but the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country. I had believed that we Indians were peace loving and nonviolent that we were concerned with matters of the spirit while rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things.

After the experience of autumn 1947, I become an angry middle aged man, who wanted to show his disenchantment with the world.. I decided to try my hand at writing.

The novel opens with the premonition of an ill omen: "The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. No one could remember when the monsoon had been so late. For weeks, the sparse clouds cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins"(1). Symbolism, mordant satire and ruthless realism are the hallmarks of this novel. The maddening violence and the atmosphere of hostility become the undercurrent of the storyline which exposes how the Muslims and the Hindus continuously engage in the blame game of partition and victimize each other:

Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped.... The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people - Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs - were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror or in hiding. (1-2)

While the Independence heralded a new dawn to India, it also unleashed unprecedented destruction, carnage and shock. Khushwant Singh has effectively delineated this unpleasant chapter of our national history in the novel with artistic finesse and minute details. Praising Singh's excellence as a story teller, V. A. Shahane writes: Although Singh's consciousness appears to range from fiction to journalism certain basic qualities govern his creative talent and characterize the development of his art. His critical as well as creative, writing fall into a pattern which emerges from and is imperceptibly linked with, the primary characteristics of his creative mind. (21)

The balanced presentation of partition by Singh coincides with the way through which he introduces reports of violence and atrocities. Although brutal violence forms the plotline of the novel, the way Singh handles the subject with precise moderation, particularly at certain narrative points when excessive or premature description would mar the expectancies, is laudable. The version Singh presents is how the gradual revelation of atrocities coincides with the growing suspicion of the villagers and how the external hostile ambience is affecting the internal workings of human mind. In this regard it may be said that *Train to Pakistan* differs from other partition novels in its presentation of the three unities— unity of time, unity of place and unity of action.

Another important factor that makes Khushwant Singh's fictional work stand apart is the parallel portrayal of bloodshed and brutality on one hand and human compassion and love on the other. The carnage and cruelty unleashed by the partition are finely juxtaposed against the harmonious bonds of friendship and compassion in an unknown tiny village Mano Majra situated near the border and inhabited by only seventy families out of which "Lala Ram Lai's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims, about equal in number"(2). Rightly does Twinkle B. Manaver comment on this twin side of partition:

Partition touched Mano Majras at both levels—at the community level and at the individual level. At the community level it effects very badly the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, who have lived together for centuries. Yet feelings of brotherliness have not disappeared, and they meet for consultation in a scene that is both intensely humane and touching. (31)

The climax of *Train to Pakistan* is thrilling when Jugga saves the train at the cost of his life under the rumbling wheels of the Train to Pakistan. The scene carries an overtone regarding the permanent estrangement of the two communities, but Jugga's heroic defense of the Muslims of Mano Majra and his consequent martyrdom pinpoint to the inseparableness of the two communities of rural India. Through its spine-chilling climax, the story of partition comes to an end but the writer still searches a ray of hope in the goodness of human values in the midst of darkness. The real sorrow of partition as portrayed in this fiction is that it brought to a sudden unexpected end a prolonged and communally shared rich historical past and wonderful cultural heritage.

The mesmerizing portrayal of authentic rural India and magnetic power of Singh's writing conjointly make *Train to Pakistan* a true post-partition novel worthy to be read at a stretch. As Arthur Lall pertinently comments:

Its intrinsic qualities as a novel grip the reader. Throughout, the action sweeps one along. The characters are vivid and highly credible, and Khushwant Singh keeps them going magnificently on two levels: in their quotidian matrix compounded of their passions of love and revenge, their tremendous sense of belonging to a village community, and their insolence and heroism; and then again on the wide stage set by the tornado that breaks on their lives in the shape of the cataclysmic events of the partition of India in 1947.

Manohar Malgonkar: A Bend in the Ganges

According to D.H. Lawrence, fiction or novel is the finest medium for revealing the changing rainbow of our living relationships. In his literary writings Malgonkar portrays the varied colours of human relationships and makes them enjoyable with different techniques of narration like the first person point of view or omniscient author. His story telling art is so mesmerizing and realistic that leaves an indelible mark in the readers' mind. As H.U. Khan observes:

His novels and short stories mark a reaction against social realism and romanticism in their keynote. His novels and short stories are rooted in authenticity and sound historical sense. *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) serves as an interesting illustration of his vision of human nature. As regards violence, Malgonkar views it as the essence of human nature. His novels depict outdoor life, action, adventure and violence. A major element that contributes to continuous external action, violence and adventure in his fiction is the theme of revenge. It is a recurrent feature of his novels and it ultimately acquires the status of a major motif in them. (28-29)

His greatness lies in his originality of presentation and lucidity of interpretation, as V. S. Naipaul, aptly points out:

Malgonkar is outstanding for his fondness for outdoor life. Other writers might sound bookish or imitative, but Malgonkar does not. Though most of his recent works tends to thrillers and entertainers, his popularity as a novelist is already established on a sound footing. It may be that, for chronological, historical and other related reasons, he does not rank with —the Big Three in the field of Indo-English fiction, but he is still a force to reckon with and not to be forgotten by the posterity. (Naipaul, 284)

A Bend in the Ganges (1964) by Manohar Malgaonkar has as its central theme the partition holocaust, the freedom struggle and the accompanying trauma. Meenakshi Mukerjee applauds this novel in following words: "*A Bend in the Ganges* is panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration, crowded with events from Modern Indian history beginning with the Civil disobedience movement of the early thirties and ending in the post-partition in Punjab". The story of the novel begins in 1930's and extends up to the dawn of Independence in August, 1947, surrounding the history of a saga presenting the communal situation during the movement for Independence, the World War and the Partition of India. The author elucidates on diverse issues like humanity, non-violence, aggression, disintegration and communal disharmony and depicts how personal vendetta mixes with political bloodshed, reaching its climax in the partition holocaust.

The novel opens with the ceremonial burning of the foreign mill- made cloth under the impact of the Swadeshi Movement with the sole intent of boycotting British products. Instead of a single central character, Malgonkar introduces double hero, chosen from two different layers society—Gian Talwar from simple peasant stock and Debi-dayal from a high trading class. Gian becomes a supporter of Gandhi's creed of non-violence while Debi and Shafi are active members of a group who strongly believe that only with violence they can get the things done. The novel depicts powerfully the horrible developments post partition which results in an era of disorder and anarchism, communal atrocities and merciless killing: "Mobs ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing, dishonouring women and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other communities became the legitimate targets of reprisals"(341- 42). Towards the end of the novel, through Debi, the novelist raises a question, "Who had won? Gandhi or the British?" This issue becomes highly debatable and generates multiple responses from the critics. Suresh Kumar comments that "by raising this question at the end of the novel,

Malgonkar hinted that the achievement of freedom through militant action would have been a better and honest way than the path of non-violence”(158), while Rajagopalachari remarks “Mahohar Malgonkar, does not, however, uphold violence as a way of life. In the death of Debidayal, Malgonkar discards violence by revealing its self-consuming nature”(58). *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) serves as a luminous illustration of his vision of human nature. Malgonkar’s style of narration is crystal clear, while his portrayal of the then socio-historical and political circumstances is vivid enough to take the readers back to the era of partition. N. S. Pradhan admirably says about Malgonkar’s art of writing: “In fact, so powerful and precise is his historical vision that at times his novels read like documentary, true -life accounts of the tempestuous events described. Quite often, his focus shifts from the individual to the event the presentation of which is marked by sharp detail, epic dimension and genuine authenticity” (139).

Chaman Nahal: Azadi

Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* shines out as a brilliant example of historical and political novel in its treatment of the theme of partition: “It is a modern classic which presents a comprehensive vision of life demonstrating the havoc that partition played on the people of the country both at the social and individual levels. It depicts the realistic historical record of the horrible incidents caused by the partition through literary perspective...Chaman Nahal himself was a refugee, he writes with remarkable penetration and realism” (Gunasekaran & Perulalluthi, 46). *Azadi* is deemed as Chaman Nahal’s best novel. Nahal was stimulated to write this novel from his personal experience of having lived in Sialkot at the time of Partition. He himself acknowledges the autobiographical nature of *Azadi* by calling it “...a hymn to one’s land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of the Partition”(10). Known for his Gandhi trilogy, Chaman Nahal is famous for portraying and analyzing Gandhi’s personality, philosophy and principles in his works. In his novel *Azadi* the writer deals with the theme of partition and its aftermath upon people at the wake of Independence. The forced migration and its corollary frustration, the massive massacre of human lives and the pathetic scenario of people suffering have been dexterously presented by Nahal. M.K.Naik aptly considers Nahal’s portrayal of mass exodus and adversity faced by the refugees in an alien land as “...one of the most comprehensive fictional accounts of Partition holocaust in Indian English Literature” (Naik, 232).

Like a authentic partition novel, *Azadi* presents “the deep psychic disturbances and emotional transformation brought about by that traumatic experience in the inner lives of individual men and women”(Ramamurthy, 131). The central story of *Azadi* revolves around the partition that brings a nightmare of horror for months and left a phase of extraordinary bitterness and everlasting misery for those people who suddenly feel uprooted from their homeland and find themselves in an appalling situation of swearing enmity and religious intolerance. As Lakhmir Singh states: “*Azadi* is in fact the story of millions of people uprooted from their homes for no fault of their own and this story is symbolized in the person of LalaKanshi Ram and his family and the pain that they go through during the process of upheaval in their lives and their own homeland” (226). LalaKanshi Ram, the major character in the novel, was not literate enough but an experienced person. He and his wife, Prabha Rani with their son, Arun live a quite and peaceful life. The declaration of partition crushed their lives. In communal frenzy and rage, the Muslims started to humiliate and torture the Hindu minorities. Taking out a procession the Muslim people warned the Hindu and Sikh population that they should quit as they did not belong to this land. Harmony existed between people belonging to different religion in Sialkot before partition:

There was utter harmony among them, and the fact that Ghani was a Muslim and Lala Kanshi Ram a highcaste Hindu never entered their heads. They spoke a common tongue, wore identical clothes, and responded to the weather, to the heat and the first rains, in an identical manner. If they worshiped different gods, it was in the privacy of their homes...No, thought Lala Kanshi Ram, they were not Muslims or Hindus, they were Punjabis-or at least they were till the other day. (Nahal, 40)

But once the declaration of partition set in, the situation completely changed, as S. Bhagwat Goyal painfully observes, post partition, “Religion, which is supposed to be an embodiment of human and spiritual values, became an instrument of hatred, rapaciousness, evil, exploitation, sadism, torture, murder, rape and wholesale destruction” (124).

The plot of the novel is well organized and structurally symmetrical. Nahal precisely divides the entire story into three parts entitled 'The Lull', 'The Storm' and 'The Aftermath' — all suggestive and symbolic of the three distinct stages in the narrative. The first part describes the peacefulness and communal concord among the people of Sialkot before the idea of partition comes into light. The next part is truly entitled as the storm which takes place after the announcement of partition. In rage and hostility, the Muslims started to torture the Hindu minorities, forcing them to migrate from their homeland. K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger wonderfully delineates the picture: "The leaders had sowed the wind of communal suspicion and partition was the result; like a whirlwind, the mad act of partition was uprooting masses of humanity, mangling them and throwing them across the border heap after heap" (Iyenger, 498). The Aftermath section attempted to depict the problem of refugees with the government's policy. LalaKanshi Ram though started to live in free India but soon he realized the futility of his freedom in his own homeland. Such freedom appeared to him as totally ineffective and hollow. His condition became more critical, when officers demanded him bribe for the house.

Azadi deals with various aspects of the traumatic and harrowing experiences of people post partition. Though the overtone of the novel is tragic, it is epic in its vast canvas. The greatness of Chaman Nahal's description of partition lies in his balanced, authentic and detached picture of the Hindu-Muslim in their embittered and hostile relationships and the ambivalent relation between Indians and British people in a very realistic manner. Parvati Rao comments on this issue in a very diligent way: "What makes *Azadi* memorable is the faithful, realistic and sincere documentation of the situation in the Punjab during the time of partition. Among the numerous partition novels in Indian English literature, *Azadi*, with all its structural and other flaws is easily one of the most outstanding" (Rao, 51).

Conclusion

The catastrophic partition between India and Pakistan is the darkest phase in the history of undivided India. The effect of this partition did produce a negative impact upon human mind, apart from creating turbulence in the outer world with its history of violence, hostility, disintegration, mistrust, agony and pain. A comparative analysis of the writings of three major novelists Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar and Chaman Nahal shows how partition and its aftermath culminate in the destruction of human bondage and corrosion of moral values. All of them tried to highlight the fact that partition accentuated hatred, disappointment and distrust, cynicism and communal riot among people belonging to different religions. In portraying a grim yet realistic picture of dividing India and cultural conflict, all the writers are superb and authentic in their own way. While Singh is a brilliant and sardonic spectator of the catastrophe, Malgonkar is a keen observer and engaging story teller but Nahal's carefully chosen images and authentic presentation of human nature in general and political behaviour in particular makes him nonetheless important as a writer of post partition novel. In fact, the dramatic portrayal of traumatic migration in the post partition era, the authentic documentation of religious violence and the belief in the goodness of humanity above all bind these three writers in a common thread.

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