



Literary response to partition in India

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Abstract

The partition of the Indian subcontinent on the communal basis into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan on the eve of her freedom after a long period of slavery and indescribable hardships on August 15, 1947 caused one of the bloodiest upheavals in the history of human race. It provides immense material for fictional treatment. Both Indian and English writers artistically recreate some important politico - historical events of the past, while providing, at the same time, the novelist's interpretation of a historical moment. The misery displacement, the huge loss, sufferings that was experienced by the people was recorded. Some writers have directly suffered due to partition. *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidva, *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgokar etc. are taken for study. All these novelists taken for the study had lived, witnessed and experienced the nerve of India during partition and declaration of independence and partition tragedy etc. have been projected in their novels with full reliability.

Keywords: partition, displacement, riot, suffering, rape, violence etc

Introduction

Events of historical significance often serve as well-springs of inspiration for literary artists. India's culture, as well as her glorious past too has always been a source of fascination even to the foreign writers, who have found interesting subject matter for their novels in the annals of history. The value of such novels is recognized as both works of art and historical source documents. The most significant events that proved to be the turning points in the Indian history are: The First War of Indian Independence, civil disobedience movement, Jallian Wala Bagh tragedy, Quit India Movement, the declaration of Independence and lastly the partition and its aftermath. All these historical events that occurred during 1857 to 1947 are the materials of current study. The Indian National Movements provide immense material for fictional treatment. Both Indian and English writers out of their fervour for the freedom struggle and nostalgia for the Raj have written novels on these themes. These novels are set in some historical period. They artistically recreate some important politico - historical events of the past, while providing, at the same time, the novelist's interpretation of a historical moment. Various writers have tried to write their experience in the form of novels, short stories, etc. The misery displacement, the huge loss, sufferings that was experienced by the people was recorded. Some writers have directly suffered due to partition. We can point out some of the famous novels based on partitions are, *Ice Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidva, *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh, *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgokar etc.

'Train to Pakistan' is a magnificent novel where Khushwant Singh tells the tragic tale of partition of India and Pakistan and the events that followed, will be remembered as one of the blackest chapters of human history. On the eve of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a incubus experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Partition touched the whole

country and Singh's attempt in the novel is to see the events from the point of view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village. The peaceful life in Mano Majra suddenly came to a jolt when the money lender Ram Lal is murdered by dacoits and the village is engulfed in the violence and bloodshed of the partition.

The decision to write this novel came to him only when he had found something compelling to write about the experience of autumn of 1947. He felt thoroughly disillusioned with the contemporary situation of the partition:

I believed that we Indians were peace loving and non-violent, that we were more concerned with matters of the spirit, while the rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things.... I became an angry middle aged man who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world.... I decided to try my hand at writing and hence *Train to Pakistan*. (Singh, Introduction VIII)

'Train to Pakistan' deals with the story of partition that leads to communal violence. According to the author, the violence had rendered ten million people houseless and one million slain. Khushwant Singh had lived through the civil strife that engulfed the whole of Northern India. He also heard stories of massacres of Sikhs and Hindus in the village of the North-West Frontier Province and Rawalpindi and Campbellpur districts and thousand of refugees trekking eastwards to areas where Hindus and Sikhs were in preponderance. The novel especially covers the events of 1947.

In the beginning of the novel, the writer informs, "the communal riots, precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousand. Both Hindus and Muslims killed, both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured, both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread North and East and West. To Noakhali in East Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus, to Bihar where Hindus massacred Muslims.".... Hundreds of

thousands of Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the North West Frontier abandoned their homes and fled towards the protection of the predominantly Sikh and Hindu communities in the East." (Singh, 3)

The climax of *Train to Pakistan* is exciting when Jugga saves the train at the cost of his life under the rumbling wheels of the Train to Pakistan may suggest the final estrangement of the two communities, but his heroic defence of the Muslims of Mano Majra and his consequent martyrdom attract attention to the inseparableness of the two communities of the rural India, the heart of the popular culture of India.

“Karma” the last part of the novel indicates the Indian way of life in relation to man’s experience with the unknown cosmic design stored for him. Arthur Lall aptly 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 there 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. (Pobby, 133)

The second Indian novelist, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* carries the story of - Indian history from 1939 to 1947. It starts with Gandhiji's Swadeshi and Non-Violence Movements and ends with the havocs of the partition. We see here two main characters involving in probing the validity of the doctrine of Non-Violence and violence and among them Hari Kumar and Debidayal, a disciple of Gandhiji and follower of Safi's extremist group respectively. They are introduced as symbols of Non-Violence and violence. But as the time passes, Hari Kumar is compelled to commit murder and Debidayal (rejects) leaves the way of violence. Their attachment with Sundari and Mumtaz changes their whole course of life and they ultimately find their fulfilment in love. It is a realistic portrayal of India from an Indian perspective. Malgonkar also gives an authentic picture of partition riots and mass migrations across the twenty newly created nations. The author critically questioned the relevance of the doctrine of Ahimsa.

The novel also assumes special significance as a post colonial venture to make visible events that have been pushed to the peripheries and silenced by British historians and novelists. Published in 1972, his novel rewrites the history of the mutiny of 1857 from the Indian perspective redeeming it from the contempt with mutiny and glorifying it as The First War of Indian Independence. The novelist assumes the role of colonizer and performs the tremendous task of refashioning history by destroying European monoliths rejecting colonial illusions and replacing them by national image of glory.

The purpose to assert stories of imagination like the murder committed by Hari Kumar, participation of Debidayal in extremist activities, the arrest of Gian and Debi and their detention at Kalapani, love stories set before us the picture of the past on the one hand and their social and cultural aspects on the other hand. The events occurred in the last episode confirms the power of love. Both the novels *Train to Pakistan* and *A Bend in the Ganges* purely aim at narrating the facts of the tragedy of partition but at the same

time another constructive motto of these novels is to suggest that love is the only solution that can be helpful in restoring peace and brotherhood in society.

The novel depicts powerfully the horrible developments resulting in the partition, the triumph and tragedy of the hour of freedom, the screams of the victims renting the morning air, the dawn of freedom greeting the sub-continent in the pools of blood, the barbarous cruelties heaped on men and women, catcalls of the crowd and innumerable women being carried away naked, struggling and screaming at the top of their voice. The Muslim fears of being ruled by the Hindus in the absence of the British rule in the country where they had been the rulers, their notion that the Hindus were more dangerous than the foreigners and ought to be their real target and their subsequent striding at them, their struggle for a sage homeland separate from India leading to the Partition, and the terror and pity of it - all these form the contents of the novel.

His novels, though, written in a later period, portray the pre-independence and recently independent scenario. The issues discussed in his novels are Indian Nationalism and British Colonialism on the one hand and religious fanaticism on the other. His novel presents a cogent account of political history of the thirties and forties —unfolding an epic movement for independence and its attainment at the cost of the division of the subcontinent.

In *A Bend in the Ganges* we find the classic situation of a man beset by conflicting values brought by historical changes, yet the entire background is enriched by the detailed accounts of social, political and historical circumstances and has been vividly portrayed and illustrated with a comprehensiveness and through sweeping accounts of the holocaust.

N. S. Pradhan writes:

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. (Pradhan, 139).

Azadi is an important novel which deals with various aspects of the traumatic experience of Partition of the country into two. Chaman Nahal shows his remarkable powers of observation of the human nature in general and the political behaviour of Hindus and Muslims in particular. Though the novel is tragic in its tone, it is epic in its vast canvas. The greatness of Chaman Nahal’s version of partition lies in his balanced and impartial picture of the Hindu - Muslim hatred and love, their emotional and political relationships and the ambivalent relationship between Indians and British people in a very realistic and elaborate manner. In this regard, Parvati Rao opines:

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) Nahal’s *Azadi* seems to be different from all the other Partition novels as it makes an effort to encompass all the evils that Partition has brought forth. It does not terminate with the minorities fleeing to India. Perhaps the novelist seeks to continue the plot in India in order to catch the ominous effects of the aftermath on the lives of a few

individuals in particular. The novel seems to be very significant because here Nahal's vision is very expansive which enables his protagonist to cease hating his counterparts in Pakistan.

Nahal portrays the feelings of all his characters in the novel; the temperament of each one is given more importance, and their ultimate craze for peace and harmony. The peaceful life of residents of Sialkot and their Hindu-Muslim unity was disturbed by the announcement of Partition by Mountbatten. The Muslims started celebrating the creation of Pakistan with drum-beating and firecrackers.

Muslims started looting shops and burning one Hindu 'mohalla' every night. Meanwhile, a train came from Amritsar which was full of murdered and wounded Muslims. This excited the Muslims who killed and wounded the Hindus in Trunk Bazaar. Soon the Hindus were forced to leave for the Refugee Camp. The scene of the leaving of the tenant families and of the family of Bibi Amar Vati is really very emotional. The scene symbolizes thousands of such scenes. Fifteen million refugees poured across the borders to regions completely foreign to them, for though they were Hindu or Muslim, their identity had been embedded in the regions where their ancestors were from.

The partition brought the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs and Muslims. However, Nahal plays a neutral role while delineating the trauma of partition. It is not as if his sympathies are either with the Muslims or the Hindus; rather, one cannot pass any judgments on them. Actually, he brings to our attention as to how the reactions to the partition range from disappointment, cynicism, frustration to partial happiness and ultimate betrayal. The common concern of Singh, Malgonkar and Nahal is the reflection of Indian value and feeling of common man and the sensitive writers that partition was a game that was unwanted element for the common man, and an unforgettable incident in the history of the sub-continent.

The novel is a realistic portrayal of the last days of the British Rule accompanied with partition, communal hatred and Independence. There are references of massacres, riots, rapes and abductions that took place during partition. Malgonkar's own comment on the novel is: Only the violence in this novel happens to be true. It came in the wake of freedom to become a part of India's history. Any sensible person may ask to the worshipers of nonviolence. What was achieved through non-violence, brought with it one of the bloodiest upheavals of history - twenty million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half a million were killed; over a hundred thousand women were abducted, raped and mutilated. (Singh, Introduction VIII)

Ice-Candy-Man stands apart in its rendering of the theme of Partition. Lenny reveals the trauma of Partition through her memories with a sprinkling of humour, parody and allegory, describing how friends and neighbours become helpless and ineffective while faced with the mob frenzy. Sidhwa also describes how political leaders manipulate the people and generate feelings of suspicion and distrust in the psyche of the common man. Once communal and obscurantist passions are aroused, the social fabric is torn asunder, leading to wanton and reckless destruction. Sidhwa has also commented on the historical inevitability of social process, suggesting that people who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. The tragic events combine with the witty freshness characterizing the narrator's attitude of a distanced watcher. The novel

poignantly describes the mindless Partition violence and focuses on its socio-historical consequences to women. Moreover, "the craft of describing violent and humorous scenes alternatively and the result of a compromise can be credited with." (Picuncco,215) *Ice-Candy-Man* enables the readers to understand the extent of the trauma of Partition and review it in its historical context, and thus suggestively delineates the fruitlessness of violence in individual and collective lives.

Ice-Candy-Man is a novel of upheaval which includes a cast of characters from all communities. There are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Parsis, so a multiple perspective of Partition emerges as viewed by all the affected communities. Bapsi Sidhwa uses a narrator to tell the tale. A precocious Parsi girl, eight year old with a handicapped foot, narrates the story of her changing world with sophistication and wonder. Lenny is like the persona that Chaucer adopts in his Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, rendering credibility by being almost a part of the reader's consciousness. With the wonder of a child, she observes social change and human behaviour, noting interesting sidelights, seeking and listening to opinions and occasionally making judgments. Her childish innocence is like the seeming naive display of Chaucer's persona, a source of sharp irony. The device of the child narrator enables Bapsi Sidhwa treat a historical moment as horrifying as Partition without morbidity, pedanticism or censure. The highlight of the novel is that the author throughout maintains a masterful balance between laughter and despair. The subtle irony and deft usage of language creates humour which does not shroud but raucously highlights the traumas of Partition. Sensitively the author shows the human toll of Partition, when a concerned Lenny asks: "Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is?"

Sidhwa witnessed first-hand the bloody partition of 1947, in which seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted in the largest, most terrible exchange of population that history has known. The Partition was a result of a complicated set of social and political factors, including religious differences and the end of colonial rule in India. Sidhwa was also a witness to these evils, including an incident in which she found the body of a dead man in a gunnysack at the side of the road. Characteristically succinct, she recalls the event, "I felt more of a sadness than horror." (Rewiev, 523) Her home city of Lahore became a border city in Pakistan, and was promptly flooded by hundreds of thousands of war refugees. Many thousands of these were victims of rape and torture. There was a rehabilitation camp with many of these women adjacent to Sidhwa's house, and she states that she was inexplicably fascinated with these "fallen women," as they were described to her at the time. She realized from a young age that "victory is celebrated on a woman's body. That's very much the way things are particularly in my part of the world." (Greaber, 6) These events left a permanent scar on the psyche of the child Bapsi and years later she could not resist her powerful urge to record that decisive moment in the history of the two nations and result was her most influential and much acclaimed narrative – *Ice Candy Man/Cracking India*

Ice-Candy-Man (1998) is one of those few books which have captured the events leading to Partition so vividly and authentically the others being *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by

Khushwant Singh, *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) by Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980). The novel is considered by many critics to be the most moving and essential book on the Indian Partition. Told from the awakening consciousness of an observant eight-year-old Parsi girl, the violence of the Partition threatens to collapse her previously idyllic world. The issues dealt within the book are as numerous as they are horrifying. The thousands of instances of rape, and public's subsequent memory loss that characterize the partition are foremost. In the hatred that has fueled the political relations between Pakistan and India since that time, these women's stories were practically forgotten. In one of her infrequent bursts of poetry, Sidhwa writes, "Despite the residue of passion and regret, and loss of those who have in panic fled- the fire could not be burned for. . . Despite all the ruptured dreams, broken lives, buried gold, bricked-in rupees, secreted jewellery, lingering hopes. . . the fire could not have burned for months." (139) Sidhwa replaces flowing, poetic sentences with forceful criticism when she theorizes about what caused the fire to keep burning. Sidhwa repeatedly condemns the dehumanizing impact that religious zealotry played in promoting mob mentality, separation, and revenge during the Partition.

It is a book of many voices, poignant, humorous and desperate. It is a tale of upheaval in which every friend and enemy will be displaced. Eight-year-old Lenny, the spirited and imaginative daughter of an affluent Parsi family, narrates the story of the *Ice-Candy-Man* during the 1940s, as she witnesses Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs fight for their land and their lives. As rumours of riots, fire and massacres in distant cities become a reality, Lenny's tale follows the course of her quickly shifting life.

This multi-dimensional novel evoked very good response from the critics and won many accolades for the author. Khushwant Singh, the celebrated author of *Train to Pakistan*, one of the most powerful accounts of Partition, commends Sidhwa "*Ice-Candy-Man* deserves to be ranked amongst the most authentic and best on the Partition of India" Another noted Indian woman novelist Geetha Hariharan finds a contemporary relevance in the novels as she comments: "Sidhwa captures the turmoil of the times, with a brilliant combination of individual growing-up pains and the collective anguish of a newly independent but divided country. Sidhwa's work, particularly the dehumanizing effects of communalism, she movingly reveals in *Ice-Candy-Man* is painfully relevant to our present-day India"

Luckily all these novelists taken for the study had lived, witnessed and experienced the nerve of India during partition and declaration of independence and partition tragedy etc. have been projected in their novels with full reliability.

Thus, the above five novels discussed in this study are valuable works of art which transport us to their respective ages, and by making us their contemporary spectators, give us an illuminating insight in some important historical issues.

Thus the partition of the Indian subcontinent on the communal basis into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan on the eve of her freedom after a long period of slavery and indescribable hardships on August 15, 1947 caused one of the bloodiest upheavals in the history of

human race. It rudely shocked the conscience of the civilized people all the world over, and made them sadder with anguish and dismay at man's wolfish cruelty to man in the name of religion. The sudden, rude shock of partition unnerved people, destroyed their human attributes, and transformed them into wild, savage beasts, who perpetrated extremely barbaric cruelties against their fellow human beings. They looted and burnt down shops and houses, killed small children, and made millions of people pauper and refugees. Villages were put to flames and their populations were whipped out and millions of people were converted at the point of sword. Women became a special target of communal fury; they were abducted, raped and paraded naked in the streets, with shaven heads and breasts severed from their trunks. Many of them preferred an honourable death by committing suicide to a life of perpetual dishonour and shame. R.K. Dhawan has rightly concluded:

In fact, this event, which resulted in the barbarity of the most heinous kind and in the massacre of not fewer than two million people, was terribly tragic and heart rendering because it was deliberate, and not a natural calamity, like an earth quake or a flood and hence was steeped in as much tragedy and drama as was embodied in the great Greek tragedies, all put together. (Sharma, 30)

Many years after the partition, the two nations are still trying to heal the wounds left behind by this incision to once-whole body of India. Many are still in search of an identity and a history left behind beyond an impenetrable boundary. The two countries started off with ruined economics and lands and without an established, experienced system of government. They lost many of their most dynamic leaders, such as Gandhi, Jinnah and Allama Iqbal. India and Pakistan have been to war twice since the partition and they are still deadlocked over the issue of possession of Kashmir. The same issues of boundaries and divisions, Hindu and Muslim majorities and differences, still persist in Kashmir.

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