



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

An UGC Approved Open Access Journal

Vol. 2 No.4/ December, 2017

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017

Savage Harvest: Stories of Cruelty, Courage and Compassion

Dr. Manoranjan Mishra
Assistant Professor of English
Government College (Auto.),
Angul, Orissa

Abstract Mohinder Singh Sarna's *Savage Harvest: Stories of partition* is a collection of thirty short stories. These stories are replete with instances of violence that marked the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947. Partition of India is said to be the bloodiest incident in the history of the sub-continent in which more than twelve million people were affected in some way or the other. There are also many instances of courage and compassion that reaffirm one's faith in humanity. The researcher has tried to put together all those instances of cruelty, courage and compassion—the multiple hues of human personality.

Key words: Sickle, divergent, butchered, smoldering, notorious, savagery.

Mohinder Singh Sarna's *Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition* is a collection of thirty short stories with the 1947 partition of India as the backdrop. A Punjabi writer of repute, Sarna, is the winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award. The present collection is a translation of his stories by his diplomat son, Navtej Sarna.

The 1947 partition of India is said to be the bloodiest incident in the history of the subcontinent. More than twelve million people had to be displaced, with more than half of the population being butchered and subjected to savagery while crossing the borders. Arson, loots, murders, rapes became the order of the day. Sarna himself was an eyewitness to such senseless brutality and barbarism as he was holed up in his house in Rawalpindi along with his father and younger brother. Later, he escaped to Delhi before finally settling in Amritsar. He witnessed the "same killing and brutality on this side of the border; the misery of the refugee caravans going in both directions, the senseless vengeful violence" (Sarna, M.S. xii). The stories are expressions of cruelty, courage and compassion—the divergent hues of human personality that were in display during such a trying situation such as partition that affected the lives of so many people at the same



time. “*Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition* tells the stories of riots and rapes, plunder and pillage, arson and killings. These acts of violence were to permanently fracture society, leave a deep imprint on arts and culture in the decades to come, and most importantly wreck the psyche of the people far beyond the geographical confines of the holocaust” (Review *The Hindustan Times*).

The very first story titled “Savage Harvest” sets the tone straightaway. Dina, the protagonist of the story, was the village blacksmith. Since he didn’t have much work to do in the village, he spent much of his time helping out the peasants. During sowing and harvesting, his “blood would tingle and strange freedom would enliven his bones” (Sarna 2). A mere look at the crops standing in the fields; the sugarcane swaying in the breeze, would fill his body with a strange sensation. “Sickles, harvests, the sugarcane swaying gently in the moonlight, the call of the golden earth and the lilt in the songs born of this earth...” (2) enchanted him greatly. He would instantaneously forget the hellish times in which he had to live. For the last twenty days he had only moulded metal into axes and spears. “The season of sickles and scrapes had passed; this was the time of axes and spears. And it had been a strange harvest. Instead of wheat, those who had planted it had been chopped up (2). Pakistan had already been created and it was now his responsibility to arm the warriors of the new born country. It was as if creation of Pakistan was a *yagna* and killing of Hindus and Sikhs was the *ahuti*. “And this jihad would succeed only if his furnace kept raging and spitting out fierce instruments of death.” (3)

Dina had to work overtime as his son Bashir wanted fifty axes for him and his group, otherwise he would tear him to pieces. Dina tried to console him thinking that he only made axes but he didn’t kill people with those. But his wife’s statement removed this myopia that affected him. She said, “The killer kills one or two or at most a handful of people. Each axe made by your hands kills dozens.” (5) Dina feels guilty at his contribution to the mindless massacre. He wonders:

Would anybody eat the sugarcane that had been sprayed with blood? Or wear cotton which had been irrigated by blood? What kind of wheat would grow in this blood drenched soil? And what kind of a harvest would it be after this bloody season? The shower of blood that has reddened everything had been caused by the axes he had fashioned. (9-10)



Dina's conscience was shaken. He wanted to absolve himself of the sins by throwing the instruments of death into a well, before his notorious son and his gang could lay their hands on them. Like a man possessed by evil spirits, he runs towards his house but is greeted by the corpse of the innocent old wife of the Brahmin of the thakurdwar. The old woman's wrinkled forehead bore a long gash from an axe.

The same brutality and barbarism had been unleashed in another village named Laddewala Varaich. The village had turned into a cremation ground. Its headman Khuda Bakhsh Varaich moved through the neighbouring Muslim villages, pleading and beseeching the villagers not to perpetrate any violence but in vain. "The Quazis of Qazi da kot, the Maans of Maani, the Gujjars of Quila Mian Singh, the Dogras of Kotli, the Gondals of Gondlanwal ...they had all called him an enemy of Pakistan and a murderer of believers." (Sarna "A Village Called Laddewala Varaich" 24) He was accused of supporting the infidels, i.e., the Khatris of Amritsar who had been "chewing up Muslims like bits of sugar cane" (24) and raping their sisters and daughters in the bazzars. Helpless, he begged the villagers to leave the village before Thursday evening, when the Baths, Chimnis, Maans, Gondals and Dogras were all going to attack the village together. He had even helped the villagers "tie up their bundles, dismantle their cots and pack them, and stitch up sacks full of kitchen utensils." All his efforts to find a safe passage for the villagers came to a naught as one of his own people informed the attackers before the villagers could depart. The entire village was burnt to ashes by the attackers.

...happy homes had been burnt to ashes. Where painted cots, spinning wheels and carved stools were still smoldering; where half-burnt human bodies lay rotting; where in the corners of houses and in ditches within lanes lay pathetic piles of old bones; and where, in the doorway of the thakurdwar, a handsome young man lay on his side, his intestines pulled out by some sharp, hooked weapon. (25-26)

Another story titled "Jathedar Mukund Singh" is replete with incidents of violence that marked the division of the country. The Jathedar and his *jatha* of Sikh hooligans had put several hundred Muslim refugees on a train- "the train that did not go to the Pakistan of Muhammad Ali Jinnah; its destination was the capital city of the Angel of Death" (Sarna, "Jathedar Mukund Singh"



41). However, Mukund Singh cannot be held entirely responsible for what he had carried out. His desire to avenge the slaughter of eighteen members of his family in Narhali village in west Punjab in March 1947. The young and the old had been brutally massacred and women had to jump into the wells to protect their honour. The sikhs were made victims because it was conceived that the “sikhs had snatched away a huge swathe of Jinnah’s Pakistan. In Jinnah’s dream, pakistan would have reached the banks of the Jamuna river. But the sikhs had struck aside the hand he had extended in friendship, preventing Pakistan from stretching across the Ravi and thereby saving half of Punjab from going to Pakistan” (42).

The people of Theekri Majra packed their belongings, loaded them into carts, and waiting for a caravan to pass close to the village the next afternoon when Mukund Singh’s gang charged into the village, looted their belongings, dragged their animals away and locked up the villagers in the school building.

The broad daylight murders took place even in the presence of the Army, which in some cases, remained a mute spectator. The narrator narrates one such incident where he was allowed to travel with an army convoy which was deployed to rescue the Hindus and Sikhs from the newly formed Pakistan. Suddenly, the convoy came to a halt somewhere between Ludhiana and Jalandhar. The narrator saw great commotion in the nearby fields. Some men, with staves and swords in their hands, were searching for a Muslim who had disappeared amidst the corn. After a frantic search, the poor looking Muslim was found and brought out. He was frozen with fear and was shivering. He begged at the feet of his tormentors to let go of him in the name of their Guru. At this instant, a companion of the narrator travelling with the army convoy “jumped out of the truck, pulled the sword out of the other man’s hand, and cut the poor Muslim to pieces” (Sarna, “The Butcher” 93). He justified his act by saying that the previous March “these people had killed eight of [his] family members” (93).

Sarna’s story “Sikhism” is about a village named Mughal Chak where the rich Sikh landlords coexisted with the Muslim landless labourers. When Pakistan was formed, the Muslims assured their masters to protect them at the cost of their lives. The Sikh landlords decided to continue staying in the village believing that such violence was quite normal when rulers changed.



They also believed that with a legitimate ruler in place, things would settle down quickly. Besides, they had little faith that their passage to India would go unharmed. The killings at Sheikhpura, the looting and burning incidents at Lahore, the attacks on caravans of refugees at both sides of the borders, and massacres of trainloads of refugees made them decide in favour of staying put in their village and wait and watch. However, the situation worsened as thousands of Muslim refugees, ravaged and looted, arrived from the other side of the border and settled in villages around Mughal Chhak. The Sikh landlords decided to go to the Gujranwala Refugee Camp before the Muslims around them, seething for revenge, decided to settle scores and pounced on them. While they were slithering away under the cover of darkness, they came face to face with the Muslim attackers. The savage attackers demanded ornaments, money and guns with bullets to be handed over to them. In turn, they assured a violence-free passage. However, the moment they handed over the guns and bullets, they were sprayed with bullets. “More than half of the members of the caravan fell right there... The bullets kept chasing those of us who tried to run” (Sarna, “Sikhism” 122). Some of the members of the caravan reached the refugee camp defying death. When they were being taken from the refugee camp to Amritsar, they witnessed heart-rending and gory sights. On both sides of the roads were lying hundreds of bodies of men, women, children and old people. “These unclaimed bodies were swollen...and had been rotting...the entire two furlong long caravan of Muslim refugees had been massacred” (123).

Such tales of barbarism, cruelty, ruthlessness abound in the stories of Sarna. However, such tales are interspersed with tales of courage and compassion that reaffirm our faith in humanity. Such episodes may be few and far between but nevertheless, they occur as a balm to the aching soul. Regarding these tells of hope, Sarna tells something like this:

I didn't lose faith even when faced by the barbarity of partition. My partition stories pass knee deep through the dark quicksand of blood 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 in the whirlwinds of barbarity and brutality. (Introduction xiii)



Once Khuda Bakhsh Varaich, the old choudhury of the village Laddewala Varaich finds out that the village has been ravaged and most of its inhabitants have been butchered, he reaches the house of Chanda Singh Jat's widow and daughter Jagiro. He advises the mother-daughter duo to pack up and leave the place before the ravagers returned slithering and hissing. He himself volunteers to lead them to a Sikh village under the cover of darkness. He knows pretty well that his own life is in grave danger and that the riff-raff of his own clan stare at him with murder in their eyes. He realises his helplessness in the current circumstances but does not give up easily. When a group of young men discovers them hiding in the sugar cane fields, Khuda Bakhsh tries to protect Nand Kaur and her daughter but gets killed in the process.

When death stares directly into the face, most people would prefer to escape first. Very few would jump into the claws of death giving a safe passage to others. Basant- the imbecile and fool in the story "Basant the Fool" was capable of such supreme sacrifice not only once but twice. Usually, when Basant took to the streets, young boys would torment him and even, throw stones at him. His face was deformed in paralysis. His lower lip hung low and saliva continuously dripped from it. Such a person whom everybody considered a fool did an act of supreme sacrifice in handing over a ticket to Kanta, the daughter of Pandit Kirpa Ram so that she could travel in the plane and join her fiance and his parents in Delhi. This he did disregarding the wishes of his mother, who made a living by washing the dirty dishes of people. She had somehow managed the ticket to ensure safety of her half-crazy son. On another occasion, when Mehta Karam Chand had pain in kidney and someone needed to go to Hakim Abdul Aziz at the Imambara to get some medicine, Basant volunteered to go there himself. People were being stabbed ruthlessly in the streets those days but he gave it two hoots. For him welfare of others stood supreme. He didn't hesitate to sacrifice his life for the sake of that. It's true that such people like Basant don't die; they live forever in our memories.

In "Gondlanwala," Choudhury Karim Bakhsh's grandson Shabbir challenges his uncle Manzoor to a horse ride in his attempt to save the unmarried daughter of Surjan Shah Lamba from the clutches of the latter. Manzoor had abducted the girl and kept her confined to a house near Choudhury's well. Shabbir knew pretty well that Manzoor's horse Naazo was a frisky horse. Even



the best riders of the area shuddered at her name. Shabbir made Manzoor swear in the name of Holy Quran and Allah that he would give Shabbir anything that he asked for , if he returned in one piece after the horse ride. Despite the horse's repeated attempts to throw him off, Shabbir stuck to the horse's sides with all his might. He finally reached the spot where his uncle was standing and demanded that the Lamba girl should be given to him so that he could take her to her uncle, Jagir Singh in the Hafizabad camp. Despite Manzoor's disagreement, Shabbir "picked up the wavering, stumbling girl and put her on the mare, and then leapt on the mare himself, and spurred the horse towards Hafizabad" (Sarna, "Gondlanwala" 83).

Abnash in the story "The Parade" rushes towards the street in front of her house with a bed sheet and blanket to protect the honour of two Muslim girls who were being paraded naked. Surrounded by a howling mob, the two unfortunate girls tried to hide their nakedness with their hands but in vain. Abnash had thought that only Muslims were capable of scaling such heights of insanity and inhumanity but she was shattered to find that Hindus and Sikhs "were no laggards in committing atrocities" (Sarna, "The Parade" 179). The people justified their act by saying that they were only returning the favour to the Muslims who had dishonoured their sisters elsewhere. Abnash exhorted only those, whose sisters and mothers had been dishonoured by the Muslims to come forward and take revenge. "Her tortured soul knew that those whose own sisters and daughters had been dishonoured would never commit the same evil towards the women of someone else's family" (181).

The underlying social message of Sarna's stories is that hate and violence have no religion. They can scar the society and breed contempt and hatred but they can never be a permanent feature of a civilized society. Civilizations, since time immemorial, have been affected by such mindless violence, but like a phoenix, civilisation has raised its head again from its ashes. The world has worshipped human values. In this connection Namita Arora writes, "A feature of Sarna's stories is that while they may be grim, they are rarely without hope or relief. Most certain at least one character... who listens to that nagging voice of conscience, a voice often inspired by the teachings of his or her religious faith, and musters the courage to act on it." (Review, *The Sunday Guardian*)



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017

Works Cited

- Arora, Namita. "A Review of *Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition*, Rupa, 2013, Sunday Guardian. Review: *Savaga Harvest: Stories of Partition*. www.hindustantimes.com/books/review-savage-harvest-stories-of-partition.
- Sarna, Mohinder Singh. *Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition*. Rupa Publications, 2013.