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Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



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Witnessing the Grave of India-Pakistan Enmity: A Study of Select Partition Stories

Virender Pal
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University College
Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra

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Abstract: Partition of the continent still evokes painful memories among the sufferers. The violence that erupted during the partition continues to cast its shadow on the people of both the countries. If the bridges are to be built between the citizens of the country then the bitterness that emanated from partition has to die. The literary writers of both the countries have started the process. Partition stories coming out from both the countries now focus on the shining examples of humanity rather than on the human beasts who perpetrated senseless violence on the helpless people. Movies and YouTube channels are also playing their role in accentuating the positive stories where the people were saved by the persons belonging to other religious groups. In the recent partition stories emphasis is on the humanity rather than on senseless violence. The current paper is a study of select stories of famous Punjabi writer Mohinder Singh Sarna.

Key words: Partition, violence, humanity, communalism.

Unlike the independence of other British colonies, independence in the Indian sub-continent was accompanied by the partition of the sub-continent into two countries India and Pakistan. The happiness of independence was drowned by agony of the people who got engulfed in the violence that erupted with the announcement of partition. The division of India into India and Pakistan “provoked the single largest movement in recent history” (George 135). Had this movement been peaceful, the partition of the sub-continent would not have aroused such horrifying and painful memories which still haunt the people in both the countries. The “whirlwind of riots, rape, pillage and killing” (Sarna, Navtej XI) which accompanied partition has remained etched in



the unconscious memories of both the nations. Saikat Banerjee asserts that partition was an eruption of “wickedness, violence and pure evil” (198). The troubled relations of both the nations are manifestations of the past memories related to violence that engulfed the region.

There are two aspects of the stories of partition: oral and written. Oral stories which can be treated as oral personal histories of the partition are full of horrifying “torture rape, lootings, kidnappings death and displacement” (Zakaria 2). These stories are the layered narratives of human beings who witnessed man at his worst (also man at his best, but best memories have been buried by the worst memories). Man in these oral stories appears as a beast who is out to destroy all the civilizational and cultural etiquettes.

The written stories can also be divided into two parts: one which were written immediately after the partition and the others which were written after considerable period of time after the displaced people got settled and started a new life. The stories written immediately after the partition are pessimistic about the future of humanity. Human beings do not appear in these stories as humans rather they are recognized by their religion. They are either Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. Though there were objective chroniclers of partition violence like Manto, most of the other writers came up with grossly biased narratives.

Unlike Manto who described the atrocities on both sides and showed that, when it came to cruelty, neither Muslims nor Hindus differed from each other, Aslam is intent on showing how Hindus and Sikhs barring a couple are the villains of the periods. Abdullah Hussain, who also does not show Muslim atrocities, blurs the perpetrators of violence (Zaman 62).

The books that are referred to in the above quotation are Abdullah Hussain’s *Udas Naslein* and M. Aslam’s *Raqs-i-Iblis: Inquillab 47 ki Ek Khuchukan Dastan*. One need not go through these two books to uncover the partisan attitude of the authors, rather Aslam, in his preface to the novel, makes it clear that he is writing “the novel to reflect the cruelty of Sikhs towards Muslims” (Zaman 61).

There are many such examples where the writers treated partition as an event punctuated with “genocide necrophilia, ethnic cleansing, mass uprooting and the collapse of moral universe”



(Nandy, XI). The blame of all these crimes is generally laid on the other group. The partisan attitude of these writers is probably the result bitterness and hopelessness that emanated from dislocation, personal losses and hardships they faced in refugee camps. These narratives were written in the heat of rage which blinded the objective faculties of these writers. And of course, all of these writers did not have the calibre of Sadat Hassan Manto or Khuswant Singh, that is why the readers have discarded these writers on both the side. The bitterly biased narratives of these writers have gone into oblivion, while the books and stories written by great writers like Manto are still in publication.

The stories that appeared after some time were written after the bitter feelings had cooled off. The intermittent cooling period allowed the communal myopia of the writers to weaken; and a new perspective of partition emerged with them. These enlightened writers were aware of the kindness shown by the individuals of the other religious groups. Once the mist of the communal feelings lifted; a new perspective of the partition emerged and the beast of the earlier partition works paved the way for civilized, sensitive and kind human being who was not blinded by the madness that emanated from communally charged atmosphere. These stories also use violence as a structure; but violence in these stories become a launching pad for humanity. These stories are about the human beings who did not allow their humanity and rationality to drown in communal mayhem. These stories are optimistic about the future of humanity. The current paper is a study of the select short stories written on the theme of partition by Mohinder Singh Sarna, a prominent Punjabi writer.

One remarkable story in this case is "Savage Harvest." The story showcases the madness prevailing during the partition and resurgence/triumph of humanity at the same time among the members of the same family. The story revolves around Dina, a Muslim blacksmith who used to make "sickles and scrapes" (2) for harvesting the crops, but this season he is making "axes and sickles" (2) for "arming the warriors" of newly born Pakistan (3). The warriors referred to in the story do not require these weapons to defend their newly born homeland, rather it is to get rid of the unwanted religious groups:

Pakistan already existed, but to complete that reality it seemed necessary to kill all



the Hindus and the Sikhs. He did not understand this fully, but this was what everybody said, from the village heads to the imams of mosques. And this had would succeed only if his furnace kept raging and spitting out fierce instruments of death (3).

The writer makes clear that Dina and his wife are unwilling participants in this violence. Dina's wife keeps on pricking his conscience regarding his role in violence. Both of them are acutely aware of their role in the mayhem. Dina's wife tells him that casting of weapons for the rioters is even "worse than killing" because the killer kills one or two or at most, a handful of people. Each axe made by your hands kills dozens" (5).

The story is an interesting case where the writer tells that the rioter in chief is the son of this conscientious couple. The important thing is that their son is not a threat for the minorities only; rather they are a threat for his parents also. Through the story the writer make clear that a person who has turned into a beast is not a threat just to a selected group of people, but they are a threat to everyone. Dina tells his wife:

You talk as if you don't know your sons, what savages they are can I say anything to them as if they wouldn't skin me alive (4)

The people who have become demons have lost respect for their parents also Dina is afraid of his own son; his fear of his son shows the transformation the society has undergone. It must be understood that problems between the communities existed earlier also, but they were never potent enough to break or even debilitate the fabric of harmonious social relations between the communities. Raj Mohan Gandhi rightly points out:

Normal life usually prevailed on the ground, and cordial exchanges took place during festivals, though the century old tension between purify of belief and purity of birth was present even in the 1930s and 1940s. If this tension remained part of Punjab's climate, the Punjabis' ability to put it to one side was a stronger part. (365)

Infact, many refugee narratives testify that the problems were fuelled by the partition. Prior to the making of Pakistan, no problems existed between the communities. Sagarika Ghose quotes a



refugee from Rawalpindi:

There was nothing wrong with our life there we had everything land, respect in the community, prosperity. Only after 1947 we suddenly had nothing. (“The Partition Psychosis”)

Almost all the literary works testify that cordial relations existed between the communities at all levels. Old people like Dina were nurtured in culture that respected all and sundry. He is enraged at his son’s behavior. He laments:

It was a rotten thing that Bashir had done. Defending the honour of the women of the village was a common burden. Everyone’s daughters were just like your own. The loss of any woman’s honour was a catastrophe to all (9).

But he knows that he is helpless because people like him are only a few. Abduction of village girl by Bashir at one level shows the degradation of morality of the people; at another level it shows the vast differences that exist in partition related experiences of people. In the story, Bashir abducts a neighbourhood girl Preeto, but in other partition narratives like Bhisham Sahni’s *Tamas*, familiarity indemnifies an individual from violence. In *Tamas*, for instance, Ramzan who has killed many Sikhs finds it difficult to kill Harnam Singh and Banto because it is anything to kill a kafir and quite another to kill a man with a whom one is familiar and who is also staying under one’s roof (184). Similarly, when the Muslims humiliate Iqbal Singh one person recognizes him and conceals because “he know there was no way to help the Sikh” (Sahni 189). These two incidents from the stories written by two different writers show how the incidents of violence were interpreted differently by different writers.

Though there are so many different interpretations of different incidents by different writers there are some points of agreement also. Most of the writers agree that the violence erupted largely due to the outsiders who came after dislocation and carried bitterness with them and their hearts heavy with hatred. For instance, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* makes it clear in the beginning “Mullahs roamed in the Punjab and the Frontier province with the boxes of skull said to be those of Muslims killed in Bihar” (1). In “Savage Harvest” also the call for jihad had come from “imams of mosques” (3).



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Most of the partition studies in India have been concentrated on the partition of Punjab. The partition of Bengal has largely remained neglected in historical as well as academic circles. The partition of Punjab has been treated as a national calamity while the partition of Bengal has rarely been referred to in the field of partition studies. Even in the field of literary studies; the partition of Punjab has been the centre of literary imagination of the literary writers. The stalwarts of partition literature like Khushwant Singh, Manto, Gulzar, Intizar Hussein etc. have concentrated largely on the happenings of Punjab. It is probably because most of the partition related violence occurred in this region. The main reason for eruption of violence in this region was because most of the dislocated people chose to move to West Pakistan. Most of the people who were living in Eastern states like Bihar chose Western Pakistan instead of Eastern Pakistan. This choice of western Pakistan is a bit perplexing because East Pakistan was near to the people of Bihar. Why they chose West Pakistan instead of a nearer destination is probably one of the most important lacuna in the partition studies. The students of partition studies have neglected this area. The probable reason of immigration of Biharis to West Pakistan instead of East Pakistan is probably because of the diversity of West Pakistan. West Pakistan included the states of Sindh, Punjab, North Western Frontier provinces and Balochistan and the people of this part of Pakistan spoke different languages; so there was a better chance of absorption of people of different linguistic groups. On the other hand, East Pakistan consisted of only one linguistic and cultural group: the Bengalis. Due to the monolithic structure of the society in East Pakistan; a non Bengalispeaker would have found it difficult to mingle.

Now because the people travelled long distances to reach their “promised land” their hardships were greater and the bitterness and hatred they carried was intense. This probably explains the intensity of violence on the Western Frontier. That is why the narratives written by the people on this side are full of scenes of inhuman violence. Consider the following scene from Train to Pakistan for instance:

Its [Sutlej’s] turbid water carried carts with the bloated carcasses of bulls still yoked to them. Houses rolled from side to side as if they were scratching their



backs. There was also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies, little children sleeping on their bellies with their arm clutching the water and their tiny buttocks dipping in and out. (144).

The narratives of the North Indian writers are full of group violence; where organized groups massacred people; kidnapped and raped women. The same kind of scene of mob violence is replicated in "Savage Harvest" also. Khushwant Singh uses Sutlej to show the inhuman violence; Sarna uses sun, water and crops to show the magnitude of tragedy:

On the horizon, someone had murdered the sun. The blood of innocents had spread across the sky and had dissolved into the waters of the streams and canals. Would anybody eat the sugar cane that had been sprayed with blood? Or wear the cotton which had been irrigated by blood? What kind of wheat would grow in this blood drenched soil? (10)

Violence is an important part of the structure of these narratives and the violence is used to accentuate humanity by the writers. In other words, gravity of the tragedy shows the strength of humanity. Sarna also used violence to highlight Dina's humanity. The story ends with Dina's delirious shouts:

Don't kill me, don't kill me with those axes! Get this chain off my neck! Oh, my daughter Don't harm Preeto! Oh, these Chains! In Allan's name, don't use those axes! Don't kill me (11)

Dina's shouts bring out his real self. His shouts show that he is not a willing partner in the crime. He may have made axes and spears because of his fear for his life, but his humanity did not die. His humanity burst out of him, slighting his fears about his own safety. His shouts about Preeto testifies that humanity can be suppressed but it can not be rooted out of the personality of a person.

The oral stories narrated by the survivors are also replete with the violent incidents, but the oral stories generally delete the positive incidents. The oral stories concentrate on the hardships suffered by the persons and their groups. This is because the partition is only viewed as a tragic event. The people who survived the mayhem of the partition accentuate the tragic events to indulge in self pity; to assure themselves of their special status as the survivors of one of worst tragic events



the world has witnessed. Moreover one of the important component of the oral stories is that of the listeners. When a story teller finds listeners; he develops a tendency of self-aggrandizement to show himself as a survivor; a fighter. So greater the tragedy still greater is the heroism of the survivor. In the process stories of other survivors become his own Urvashi Butalia correctly points out:

Partition refugees often personalize stories of general violence and trauma, telling and feeling them to be their own and marking the shifts in political climate, location, as felt personal things.

In the process of personalizing the stories, the survivors generally delete the positive things, help offered by other communities. One of the reasons behind this deletion may be the intermingling of the painful stories. The other reason may be that the painful memories were so strong and recurring that they pushed the positive stories out of the consciousness. Whatever may be the reason, the oral tellers of partition tales focus more on tragic incidents and violence; they have to prodded for the positive stories. The stories of violence flow out naturally from their lips; the positive stories have to be dug out.

The written narratives are different. They often end up showing the triumph of humanity. The reason may lie in the fact that a written story takes considerable time and allows the feelings of the writers to cool down while writing. The writers often end up showing the positive side, emphasizing the triumph of the human values.

So many stories have been written by the writers that try to salvage the situation with the violence being the most essential ingredient of the partition narratives; new stereotypes of the people emerged on both sides of the Radcliffe line. Manto has rightly pointed out that these “were the times when philosophy, argumentation or logic had lost their meaning; they were nothing but an exercise in futility” (103). Since then many writers have realized that stories cannot be written to highlight violence only. Muhammad Umar Memon quotes Muhammad Hasan Askari, a prominent Urdu poet to declare that “the rioting cannot become the subject of true literature” (381). Most of the serious literary writers have realized this and that is why focus has now shifted on the stories that have remained hidden from the eyes of the common public and even from the progeny of the survivors of this massive tragedy. The non-fictional books have played a major role in



reconstructing the stories that have been filtered out of memories due to preponderance of the riots and violence. AnamZakaria narrates one such story where a Muslim man was brought up by a Sikh family. Saraf Din tells Anam: “I am a Muslim and so was my father but he was adopted by a Sikh in India before Partition” (23). The man, Saraf Din, who was brought up by the Sikh parents remained a Muslim, but was blessed with four brothers who were Sikhs (23). Saraf Din’s son further narrates:

The Sikh family was my father’s real family. Even when the riots broke and Sikhs and Muslims were killing each other, the Sikh gentleman ensured that my father was safely sent to Pakistan. (24)

Such beautiful stories have the power to shatter the stereotypes of violent and inhuman Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims. These stories make clear, that the inhumanity that prevailed during those times was momentary, transient; but the humanity that existed before and after the partition is permanent. Now these stories of goodness of people are not restricted to books only, popular media like movies have also started sharing this responsibility. Recently a movie *Sardar Mohammad* (2017) told the same story and was appreciated by the masses. Two important YouTube channels *Punjabi Lehar* and *Indus Diaries* are doing a great job in this field. Every time they come up with a new video of a dislocated person and questions him/her regarding the cordial relations they have shared in the past with the people of other communities. These two video channels are followed by a large number of people on the both sides of the Radcliffe line. The immense following of these channels indicates that bridges are being made, people are getting enlightened and stereotypes are being shattered.

The process is already getting strong in literature. Mohinder Singh Sarna’s story “A New Taj Mahal” is another attempt in building bridges between the two countries. Taj Mahal in the story appears as a metaphor. It signifies the grave in which enmity between the two countries has to be buried. The story shows that this enmity can be eliminated by cultivating an understanding.

The nameless narrator of the story travels to Rawalpindi, his native place after many years. The welcome he gets from the people is overwhelming. In the course of the story narrator as well as the readers undergo a transformation. A story spread over eleven pages transforms the readers and



forces them to throw away their biases and develop a new understanding of the people.

The sequence of events starts with narrator visiting the shop of Abdul Rahim to pay an old debt, but the response he gets from Sabir Hussain; son of Abdul Rahim, is overwhelming. Sabir Hussain not only refuses to accept the money, but also gifts a new pair of shoes. The response of Shabir Hussain is heartwarming enough to create a new understanding of the people who have been demonized. The story is structured to clear all the doubts in readers' minds. The story further shows that the Shabbir Hussain is not the only one to show extra ordinary warmth to the narrator.

The narrator proceeds further to meet Abdul Sattar, his childhood friend. There he discovers that his childhood friend has died in the battle of 1971. Abdul Sattar's death in battle against India could have easily been an excuse to treat the narrator badly, to treat him as a murderer of Abdul Sattar by Abdul Sattar's family; but nothing of that sort happens. Narrator eats and sleeps at their home and takes Abdul Sattar's son Sayadatwith him to wander in his old city.

In the last leg of his tour Narrator reaches his ancestral home; which was left by his family at the time of partition. The welcome, he gets there is again a life changing experience. The lady of the houses blesses him: "May you live a long life, son" (20). The gesture of the old lady is moving enough to fill narrator's eyes with tears. The narrator is introduced to the children as "the real owner of the house" (20). He is surprised to find that all the books left by his family are still preserved by the family. The poems left by the narrator in the house while leaving for India are restored to him. The house holds many "miracles" (21) for the narrator. The narrator finds that the soul of the house has been preserved by the occupants of the house. The narrator discovers that their "family photograph were still on the wall" (21).

The writer at once realizes that the occupants of the house did not refer to him to him as the "real owner of the house" only in words; rather they have preserved it religiously. The story ends; but the turmoil in the readers mind does not. The effect of reading this particular story on the readers is dramatic. The readers suddenly realize that the images that they have carried over the years were false images concocted by highly biased media and fallacious stories. The reality was hidden under the piles of false stories. The story is further supported by the interviews done on camera by a few dedicated people through YouTube channels like Punjabi Lehar and Indus Diaries.



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Thus the 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 two estranged countries and pave the way for a peaceful prosperous sub-continent.

Notes:

1. The phrase “the Grave of India-Pakistan Enmity” has been taken from Mohinder Singh Sarna’s story “A New Taj Mahal.”

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