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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA OF PARTITIONED INDIA: A STUDY OF KHUSHWANT SINGH'S 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' AND AMITAV GHOSH'S 'THE SHADOW LINES'

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Abstract:

India, once called 'Golden Bird' and the country of 'Unity in Diversity' got partitioned in 1947. It is not only the nation that has been divided but also the feelings; love and unity of the innocent citizens of the country got butchered. This is the fact which continuously haunts me as an Indian whenever I read these two novels – Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan' (1956) and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines (1988)'. The present paper is a humble endeavour to focus on the psychological trauma and the violence that the partitioned India had to suffer and how that has been vividly chronicled by these two novels.

KEYWORDS:

Partition; trauma; communal brutality; disillusionment; oasis of peace; heterogeneity of life.

INTRODUCTION

The followers of Mikhail Bakhtin may be satisfied, to some extent, to find that both Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan'(1956) and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines'(1988) emanate from a particular historical moment which present the nation and her people at a crucial point of their evolution and growth. By capturing the bloodiest crisis moments of Indian history- the partition of India in credible and efficient narrative action, these two novels eventuate into a search for the vibrant concerns essential for the survival of the nation and its people in Post-Independent India.

Both the novels grapple with 'the tryst of common people' caught between the greedy self-seeking politicians, fanatic religious leaders and their cohorts, power wielding corrupt bureaucrats and anti-social elements looking for opportunities to exploit any situations to their own advantage and the unseemingly haste with which the Labour government in Britain decided to transfer power. It is on record that Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy of India got his reform commissioner , Mr. V.P.Menon to draw up the plan for transfer of power and the division of India in just a few hours. With this plan he himself flew to London and got Mr. Atlee the Prime minister of England and his cabinet to accept it in exactly five minutes. Before the people could realize the political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by gusto of violence that quickly became a tide. Hundreds of people were killed, raped and butchered on either side of the border, and for those who survived the catastrophe the experience was so traumatic that the memories of those grief-stricken days haunted them for years to come. For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and first rating sense of being uprooted. This is not what they had aspired for in the name of freedom- the partition was a dirty trick.

In 'Train to Pakistan' Khushwant Singh brings to the centre stage 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. The novel opens with a foreboding of 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" ('Train to Pakistan' 9)

As the plot of the novel progresses towards its concluding part one of the main characters, Hukum Chand, the Magistrate of Chundunnuger is a disillusioned man as he feels the sting of his helplessness to do much to stop communal violence that had been erupted in the wake of the partition of the country. Political freedom had been achieved apparently through 'non-violent' means but the Hindu- Muslim riots emitted in several parts of India and also in the newly-created Pakistan. Hukum Chand's words of self-introspective rumination quietly portray the futility of this political freedom without proper orientation of the people.

'The Shadow Lines' by Amitav Ghosh focuses on the partition of India and the consequent trauma of the East Bengal Psyche. In Post-partitioned India the trauma of partition continues through three generations. The agonies of displacement, the sense of alienation in the adopted land and the constant dream of return to one's land – these are the common themes in both the novels 'Train to Pakistan' and 'The Shadow Lines'

Tha'mma, the narrator's grandmother belongs to the generation that had to uproot itself in 1947. When she is all set to go to Dhaka to rescue her Jethamosai, she inquires if she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the airplane:

"But surely there's something trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barrier strips of land…But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before… What was it all for then partition and all the killing and everything if there isn't something in between?" (The Shadow Lines, 151)

The last questions of Tha'mma slapped at the face of partition politics. The development and the growth of Tha'mma's character encapsulates the futility and meaninglessness of political freedom which was otherwise supposed to usher in an era of peace and prosperity for all.

Tha'mma disillusionment increases when she has to mention her birth place on the passport form during her visit to Dhaka. She is distressed to write Dhaka as her birth place-

"She liked things to be neat and in place- and at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality."('The Shadow Lines', 151)

Tridib's death bewilders Tha'mma further. She finds her idealism fast turning into helplessness as the anarchic tendencies within and without her gather force. There is obviously a need for an order, a new order but what kind of an order remains an unanswered question. Tha'mma lies in bed, weak and helpless.

The immediate offshoot of the partition that the both sides of the border faced was a terrible and inhuman violence. Khushwant Singh goes on to describe how the feeling of guilt arose from the maddening violence by the Hindus and the Muslims precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into 'a Hindu Indian and a Muslim Pakistan'. The riots had first broken out in Calcutta and then spread north and east and west engulfing a vast segment of population. The novelist writes:

"Muslims side the Hindus…The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and spread and clubbed. Both tortured. Both roared…The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947 when the new creation of the state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in flight, by the time monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all the northern India was in arms, in terror in hiding"('Train to Pakistan', 9-10)

The massacres and the brutalities unleashed by the partition are then juxtaposed against the harmonious bonds of friendship, brotherhood and good neighborliness in an obscure, sleepy and tiny village Mano Majra situated near the border and inhabitated by only seventy families out of which:

"Lala Ram Lals is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs and Muslims, about equal in numbers."('Train to Pakistan', 9-10)

But the shattering of peace and harmony of this small village with the brutal murder of the village money-lender Lala Ram Lal and the daring decoity at his house by the gang of Malli and his men, is a kind of foregrounding of communal violence and the anarchic chaos that was to be let loose later. 'Oasis of peace' gets shattered when the 'ghost train' starts arriving in Mano Majra.

And as day passed by there were more news as well as rumours about the brutalities of Muslims and the Sikhs against each other on this and that side of the border. These obviously led to suspicion between the two communities which had lived together as family members for decades:

"…quite suddenly every Sikhin Mano Majra became a stranger with an evil intent.His long hair and beard appeared barbarous, his kirpan menacingly anti-Muslim. The Sikhs were sullen and angry. 'Never trust a Mussulman.' they said" ('Train to Pakistan', 141)

Yet the feeling and spirit of mutual welfare and brotherhood endured and after a long meeting

Imam Bash said:

"What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers" ('Train to Pakistan', 147)

But when the Muslims feel compelled by the circumstances to leave for Pakistan in spite of all good intentions of the local Sikhs another aspect of partitioned freedom is revealed. Infamous Malli and his gang not only now align them with the instigations but are also officially appointed 'custodians'of the Muslim property left behind and proceed to loot in broad day-light. On the instigation of the young Sikh boys, quote a few of the Mano Majra Sikhs volunteer to aid and abet the destruction of the train stealthily at night so that the Muslims of Chundunnager and Mano Majra among others, would not go alive and safely to Pakistan.

It is however the sagacity of the shrewd and witty but good intentioned District Commissioner who heaps all kinds of abuses on the new political bosses for creating traumatic situations, that saves the Muslim passengers from being butchered not with the help of police but with the help of Budmash Jugga who was released from jail and who was told that his beloved Nooran was also travelling by the same train. No sooner had he been released than he rushed to cut the thick rope stretched and tied tightly across the railway bridge. In the process of ensuring the safe passage of the train to Pakistan, he had to make the supreme sacrifice of his own life - "…the rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him and went on to Pakistan. " ('Train to Pakistan', 207)

Though some critics have labeled this ending of the novel as 'somewhat melodramatic' due to the lack of sufficient foregrounding of Jugga from a budmash, an anti-hero into a hero, Jugga's sacrifice can be probably viewed as a form of wish fulfillment for the writer to achieve in fiction what on his own admission he could not achieve in real life at the time of partition.

The Mu-I-Mubarak incident in Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' establishes that the riot , insurgence, unrest or mutual hatred –all are the result of how you take up a situation and interpret it. If people take the brotherly stand and work in a secular way there is no vie for each other's blood. Man gets carried away by his passions if he does not exercise his reason and show a little restraint. On one hand it shows how the people of a particular area remained free of any communal brutality and butchery which the humanity usually has to undergo during such moments and how on the other hand the places which had nothing to do with it got involved and brought the tragedy in many lives.

The real sorrow of the partition, however, as portrayed in the two novels , i.e. Khushwant Singh's 'Train to Pakistan' and Amitav Ghosh's 'The Shadow Lines' under review, was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history and cultural heritage. The relations between the Hindus and the Muslims were not of course always free from suspicion, distrust on angry rejection by one group of the habits and practices of the others. But such moment of active male violence and communal frenzy were a rare and transient exception to the common bonds of the mutual goodwill and warm feelings of close brotherhood. Even if there were some disruptions on some rare occasions, the rich heterogeneity of the life of the two communities was never seriously threatened. The Hindus never cease from paying homage at dargahs; the Muslims continued to participate in Hindu festivals and traders from both the communities continued their usual exchange of goods and services in the bazaars etc. Indeed, one can assert with confidence that the dominant concerns of the Hindu Muslim intellectuals throughout the 19th Century and till about 1935, were more with creating free spaces for enlightened through than with confining people within their narrow religious identities. Organizations which nurtured violent hatred towards each other and incited communal passions did exist, but at the very margins of the solidity and healthily functioning social and cultural order. It is the unthoughtful decision of the partition and hollow love of nationalism that let the mischief off and out.

It has to be kept in mind that freedom is not just the absence of the extended pressure; it is also the presence of something else. The struggle for freedom is not without its darker side. If the fight for political freedom aims at ensuring peace for a particular community, it may also arouse and mobilize diabolical forces which one would have believed to be non-existent or at least to have died long ago. If social and moral freedom is unlimited it may unleash the numerous problems of excess and lack of restraint. Taking all this into account, the questions that arise is whether there is such a condition as complete freedom? Is freedom for the individual and for the society linked to compatible with each other? And is absolute freedom a possibility for an individual, a community or for a nation? Should there be sufficient essential preparation, orientation and educations of the individuals and of the society to enable them to digest their freedom, realize its full potential and cope with the freedom with dignity and with nationality? Fortunately both the novels , 'Train to Pakistan 'and 'The Shadow Lines' raise these significant questions on all their various dimensions and the narrative of the two novel obliquely explore and subtly answer these questions with the much needed flexibility of interpretations especially with reference to the pluralistic, multilingual, multilingual, multicultural, multi-religious and multiethnic character of the vastly spread society of India in

its wide spread regions and teeming with paradoxes and contradictions at several levels.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude it can be said that the partition of Indian sub-continent was one of the greatest traumatic experiences in our recent history. The violence it unleashed by the hooligan actions of a few fanatics, the vengeance that the ordinary Hindus , Muslims and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness.

Should the partition be forgotten? Has it any relevance to us today? We must not forget the partition because it has now become history. We must remember that it did in fact happen and it can happen again. That is why the people who clamour for an independent Kashmir, Khalistan or Nagaland should remember what happened in the past when some of them ask for a separate Muslim state. My fellow Sikhs should realize that the worst enemies of Khalsa Panth are the Khalistanis and of the Nagas are those who ask for an independent Nagaland. Reminding ourselves what happened in1947 and realizing the possibilities of its recurrence we should resolve that we will never let it happen again.

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