

Theme of Partition in Indo-Anglian Fiction

Dinesh Kumar

Asstt. Prof. of English, Dyal Singh College, Karnal, India
dineshkarnal1@gmail.com

Abstract:

The horror accompanying the transfer of population has been the major theme with Indo-Anglian writers. Though they might differ in the treatment of their subject matter and in their choice of gory incidents to enliven their writing, they all seem to insist that the division of Punjab was done arbitrarily; that the Hindus and Muslims could have lived in a united India as they had done for a century and a half under British rule. Furthermore, with one or two exceptions, they assign the blame for the partition to power-hungry politicians who inflamed hatred among simple people to serve their own selfish ends. The politicians are not above reproach, but the haste with which Mountbatten acted only exacerbated the tragedy. And no writer has yet taken the last Victory to task though each claims absolute historical validity for his narrative.

A study of the partition reveals some interesting facts. See that the novelists fall roughly into two groups, Sikhs and the Hindus, there is also a Muslim novelist, Attia Hosain. In general Hindu writers far outnumber the Sikh writers, yet the majority of the novels on the partition are by Sikhs (Khushwant Singh, Kartar Singh Duggal, Raj Gill and H.S. Gill being the more prominent one). This is not surprising, for the Punjab was the homeland of the five million Sikhs, and it was to them that the province owed its prosperity. They were considerably richer than their Muslim counterparts. When the Punjab was cut into two, the two and a half million Sikhs whose home fell in Pakistan

were enraged—not so much by threat to their religion as by fear for their very considerable material possessions. They hungry Muslims, who had long envied the Sikhs, at last found an opportunity to enrich themselves quickly by looting Sikh property. There is much truth in Leonard Mosley's observation that "This was not a Hindu-Muslim war, but a Sikh-Muslim war."

If we talk of some Sikh novels like Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974) which opens in March 1947 in a village in West Punjab—soon to become part of Pakistan—where Dilipjit, a Sikh boy and Jasmit, a Sikh girl, meet secretly at the all too familiar village well. It ends on the Indian side of the border some nine months later. A good few of the characters are already dead: some of illnees, other at the hands of the Muslim marauders while on their long trek to India. Among the last to die are Jasmit, and Dilipjit's old father, Ishar Singh. But before Ishar Singh dies he rapes a Muslim girl called Leila, whom his son Dilipjit had rescued and who has been living with the boy "I am not the same Leila", says the girl to Dilipjit when the latter bacons her to bed. "He had me, your father. Wednesday night it was. I told him about you bethe first".

Another Sikh novel, H.S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals* (1978) brilliantly evokes the trauma of those refugees who crossed the border between the two countries by train in a week's immediately

following Independence. The novel opens with a trainload of Hindus and Sikhs on their way to India. They are stopped and attacked by Muslim hooligans. In a desperate bid to preserve the honour of his Santa Singh shoot his fourteen year old granddaughter, Baljeeto, rather than see her abducted by the readers. Her seven year old brother, Ajit sits through the act-a silent witness. Soon Santa Singh's action is emulated by the other Sikhs, and the ghoulish drama is enacted in other parts of the train. What takes place is completely credible and is substantiated by similar incidents recorded by G.D. Khosla in *Stern Reckoning* and by Collin and Lapierre in *Freedom at Midnight*. On several occasions Hindus, Sikhs and even Muslims, killed their women with their own hands rather than see them dishonored. And when the men were not around to protect them, women threw themselves into wells or soaked their clothes in kerosene and set themselves twice ablaze.

Twice Born Twice Dead (1979) by Kartar Singh Duggal covers much the same period as Raj Gill's *The Rape*. And as in the former novel, so also here, there is an abundance of historical material, several references to political personalities, and virtually hindered of anecdotes of human suffering. But there is no editorializing: We are given a panoramic picture of human suffering, mostly narrated by the refugees who have suffered violence, are nearly juxtaposed with the kindness the two principal characters receive from Hindus and Muslims alike as they move from one camp to another. No blame is assigned to any group or individual. We are asked to look into ourselves for the malady. How could Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, who had lived together as brothers for the centuries, suddenly turn against each other and indulge in acts of barbarism? The Muslim leader

Liquat Mistery, "Our people gone mad", seem to be the only explanation. Hate may meet with hate, violence may be subdued greater violence, but insanity can only be compassion, and this novel, for all its violence, is a vigorous cry for compassion. The novel deals with the peregrination of Sohne Shah, a Sikh village headman, in the company of Satbharai, the daughter of his Muslim friend, Allahditta, killed by his own people for harboring Sikhs. Sohne Shah flees with Satbharai to a refugee camp in Rawalpindi. From here the two move to Lahore, then to Lyallpur, and then to Amritsar-the holy city of Sikhs in India. And what do they see there? A caravan of Muslim excuses on their way to Pakistan. Frightened, broken in spirit, the caravan moved on. While most of Sikh writers admit that the Sikh attacks on the Muslims were as vicious as the Muslim attacks on Sikhs, only Kartar Singh Duggal has given a graphic picture of Sikh atrocities.

Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* was the first novel in English on the partition and in many ways it remains the best. In unimpassioned prose, and with the bitter economy of words, he tells how communal frenzy engulfed the remote village of Mano Majra where Sikhs and Muslims had lived in peace. The arrival of a "GHOST TRAIN" from Pakistan filled with corpses of Sikhs and Hindus jolts the idyllic tranquility of Mano Majra. But it is not till murdered bodies are discovered floating in the river that the Muslims are evacuated from the village and put on a train bound for Pakistan. Sikh extremists, seething with vengeance, decide to ambush the train carrying the Muslims. The Hindu magistrate, Hukum Chand, learns of their plan but is powerless-he does not have the policemen to offer the train protection. But he has in his

custody a Sikh ruffian called Jugga. He releases the ruffian and lets him know that the latter's Muslim sweetheart, Nooran, is on the train that is to be attacked. Jugga defeats the plan of the attacker, but is himself killed in the process. Through the portrayal of Hukam Chand, Khushwant Singh shows how the much maligned Indian bureaucracy was itself caught between the hatred of people and the bungling of politicians, and it is to these bureaucrats rather than to the fine sentiments expressed in Delhi, we owe whatever lives were saved.

Turning to the next group of writers, all Hindus except for the Muslims Attia Hosain, we see that they are less obsessed by the writers-R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand - have avoided the subject altogether. In so far as Narayan and Raja Rao are concerned, this is not surprising. Narayan has always shunned political subjects. His one exception was waiting for the Mahatma and it proved the least successful of his works. Nothing could be less suitable to Narayan's comic genius than the horror packed partition. Nor could the subject hold much appeal to Raja Rao, who, steeped in religion and philosophy, finds sustenance in India's myths and rituals. But why Anand, the political novelist should have avoided the subject is not easy to explain. Having fought the Indian independence, he perhaps did not want to be critical of the Indian leaders in the early days of freedom. Also, as a humanist he believes in man's essential goodness, while the story of the partition shows man's inherent capacity for evil. The three major works that fall in this category of non-Sikh group are Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*. Of these *Sunlight on a Broken Column* has the distinction of being the only novel by a woman to have

been written on the great event. Divided into the four parts, it covers some 20 years in the life of the narrator heroine, Laila. The first three parts paint a vivid picture of Laila as she grows up in rich and cultured land-owning family in Lucknow. It is a time of political ferment the secular nationalists under the Congress banners are being challenged by the communal nationalist under the Muslim League banner. The politics of the stress have invaded the drawing-rooms of the sophisticated and even father and son find themselves in opposite camps.

However, it is part four that concerns us directly, and what we find here is something quite different. We are told of the effects of the partition, not on those who were forced out of their homes in the Punjab but on the members of a Muslim family far from the scene of action. Of Laila's two cousin brothers, Saleem opts for Pakistan, Kamal decides to remain in India. As the two brothers argue over the merits of their respective decisions at the same time try to keep the family from splitting up, we see what an enigma of partition? How is it that one suddenly becomes an alien to one's own birth place? What is more important to the individual-family ties or a country? To whom does one owe loyalty? And is loyalty divisible? Such questions are further compounded by the fact that no one really knows what the relationship between the two countries will be in the future. Salim and his wife leave for Pakistan and Laila tells us that "it was easier for them thereafter to visit the whole wide world than the home which had once been theirs"

The last novel of this group, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, offers the most comprehensive treatment of the subject to date. The author recreates in vivid detail the consequences of partitioning for a Hindu

family and its close associates as they journey from Sialkot to Pakistan to Delhi- the capital of India where unknown to them, the fate of these innocents was decided. It all began on the 3rd of June, 1947, The Viceroy was to make an important announcement in the evening and Lala Kanshi Ram, a prominent Hindu grain merchant, held his breath. Over the community radio came the dread word 'partition' and soon the Muslim of Sialkot began celebrating their new found independence by setting fire to the homes and shops of the Hindu residents. Lala Kanshi Ram, his wife, their son, along with their landlady and her family move to a refugee camp on the outskirts of Sialkot, where they are to be taken by a foot convoy to India.

To conclude, it can be pointed out that out of all the novels referred here only one was published in the first fourteen years following the partition, while four of them have been published in the past five years. Indo-English writers have belatedly seen the fictional and dramatic potential in the theme of partition, and more novels are sure to appear in the coming years. Whether these novels will offer something new is still to be seen. Six of these seven writers whose works have been examined here have covered the familiar ground- the effect of the partition, largely physical, on the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as they journeyed to their new homes. But what about the emotional trauma of the religious minorities such as the Christians, Parsees and the Jews? Though unaffected by communal frenzy, they too were victims of the partition of a country on a purely religious basis. Where did they fit in- in a Hindu India or a Muslim Pakistan? And how did they make their choice? Their lot too called for expression, and so for nothing has been written about them.

References

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