
Shattering of Communal Harmony: A Study of K.A. Abbas's *The Refugee*

Dr. Darshan Lal

Asstt. Prof. of English

D.A.V. College (Lahore), Ambala City

darshanlal004@gmail.com

Abstract

*This paper will focus on the brutalities faced by both the sides of India and Pakistan during Partition of 1947. K. A. Abbas in his story titled *The Refugee* has given a graphic picture of bloodshed, alienation and communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in both India and Pakistan. The festering wound of partition that both the nations suffered on this very day still persists. No remedy can perhaps heal this wound. People from both sides not only suffered the physical losses but mentally they were traumatised. In this story Abbas describes how the people of India and Pakistan lost faith and became enemies to each other in no time. Because of the hatred for one another Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs paid a lot for this bloody partition. In this paper, I shall try to analyse the pathetic conditions and brutalities faced by the people of both sides before and after Partition. K. A. Abbas has very meticulously given voice to their sufferings.*

Keywords: partition, alienation, displacement, migration, bloodshed.

Paper

People were living in harmony for thousands of years before Partition. But Partition of 1947 blew away about ten millions of people from one place to another like autumn leaves. People from both sides faced a lot of hardship and suffering and all their thread of faith snapped. Partition shattered the prevailing system of brotherhood and people became blood thirsty in no time. The injuries which this partition gave

to people of both sides were beyond repair. People were uprooted from their ancestral homes. Brothers were separated from brothers. K. A. Abbas remarks: "The tragic storm of August-September 1947, blew away nearly ten million people, like autumn leaves, from one end of the country to the other—from Delhi to Karachi, from Karachi to Bombay, from Lahore to Delhi, from Rawalpindi to Agra, from Noakhali to Calcutta, from Calcutta to Dacca, from Lyallpur to Panipat, from Panipat to Montgomery! The thousand-year-old joint family system was shattered beyond repair. Age-old friends and neighbours were ruthlessly separated. Brother was torn away from brother. Uprooted from their ancestral homes, millions found themselves driven to a strange and alien soil."(139-140)

Partition was not merely a political partition; it was a 'Partition of hearts'. People were displaced only on the basis of religion. Millions of people were displaced and brutalised. Urvashi Butalia has very rightly remarked in her book titled *The Other Side of Silence*: "It brought untold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain and violence to communities who had hitherto lived together in some kind of social contract. It separated families across an arbitrarily drawn border, sometimes overnight, and made it practically impossible for people to know if their parents, sisters, brothers or children were alive or dead. A mother or daughter, separated in the violence of Partition..."(8)

During Partition people became so blood thirsty that they didn't spare anyone. Women were the most sufferers. They were paraded naked and raped publically. For the sake of their honour, thousands of women jumped into wells. Fathers cut off the heads of their own daughters. Urvashi Butalia has very rightly documented: "...women jumping into wells to drown themselves so as to avoid rape or forced religious conversion; fathers beheading their own children so they would avoid the same dishonourable fate."(5)

K. A. Abbas is one of the famous Muslim writers of pre-independence India. As a journalist he brought the social and crucial issue to the forefront. Patriotism and social concerns are the main themes of his writings. *The Refugee* was written by K.A. Abbas. The story depicted the horrifying events that happened during the Partition of 1947. K. A. Abbas has sketched the collage of displacement, alienation, bloodshed and sorrowful memories of the millions of people of India and Pakistan. *The Refugee* is the story of an old Sikh woman from Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan). She was displaced from her own home from Rawalpindi to hundreds of miles away to a refugee camp in Delhi. From there she was shifted with author's mother to Bombay. Giridhari Lal has very beautifully observed about the shifting identity of the people during Partition: "Their roots losing their grip over the native soil. Men, women and children on the move in search of a new home, a new harbour, a new identity, is a pathetic process of disintegration of human lives segregated by the decision not their own."(84-85)

Before Partition people of every community lived in harmony. Ma-ji lived peacefully and lovingly with her neighbours—Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. The elder Muslim women addressed her Behan-ji or Sardarni while the younger ones addressed her Ma-ji or Chachi.

Similarly Prabhjot Sohl in one of his articles titled "A Service to the History" has remarked that people lived in harmony before this bloody Partition. He gave the example of Muslim populated Village Rashidan on Punjab-Haryana border. Prabhjot has very beautifully quoted Amar Singh a member of SGPC, who was migrated from Pakistan after Partition: "This area is a part of the Patiala state. In the mid-19th century, the Maharaja of Patiala gave about 2,400 acres to the *maulvi* who taught children. The village is named after the *mauvli's* daughter Rashidan. The nearby *mazaar* is that of the *mauvli* and his daughter. The mosque was built in the 1860s."(5) Prabhjot again quoted Amar Singh. Amar Singh told that when they shifted from Pakistan to India there was no place of worship for them. They put the Guru Granth Sahib in the mosque. Prabhjot remarks: "When we migrated to this village. Sikhs had no place of worship. We placed Guru Granth Sahib in the mosque and started praying here till we had the resources to build our own gurudwara. The mosque is also a *guru ka ghar* for us. The villagers have always revered it."(5)

Similarly Khushwant Singh has depicted the picture of communal harmony before the Partition in his famous novel *Train to Pakistan*: "There are only about seventy families in Mano Majra, and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims, about equal in number. The Sikhs own all the land around the village; the Muslims are the tenants and share the tilling with the owners. There are a few families of sweepers whose religion is uncertain. The Muslims claim them as their own....There is a three-foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keeker tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the *deo* to which all the villagers---Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo-Christian---repair secretly whenever they are in a special need of blessing."(2-3)

Ma-ji was the mother of author's Sikh friend from Rawalpindi. Before Partition, she lived happily with her husband and neighbours in her own home in a double-storeyed building. She earned a handsome income from her many rented shops and from harvest of her own land. The writer remarks: "Ma-ji used to live in Rawalpindi in her own house. It was a double-storeyed building...she occupied the upper floor while down below on the ground floor were shops, mostly tenanted by Muslims shopkeepers or artisans."(141) Ma-ji had a buffalo of her own and she distributed milk, butter and curd to the whole neighbourhood. The news of impending Partition in June in 1947 worried many Hindus and Sikhs but it didn't worry Ma-ji an inch. K.A. Abbas has very rightly remarked: "When, in June in 1947, the newspapers published the news of the impending Partition, it did not alarm or even worry M-ji or the old Sardar-ji. Politics, they always thought, was no concern of peaceful folk like them. Whether the country was called Hindustan or Pakistan, what did it matter? Their concern was only with their neighbours, and with them their relations had always been friendly, even cordial."(143)

There were communal riots in the past in Rawalpindi and at these time this riots became more violent than before. It became very dangerous for Sikhs to live in Rawalpindi. Ma-ji's only son lived in Bombay. He was very anxious about the safety of his parents. He asked them to come to Bombay but Ma-ji didn't want to leave Rawalpindi and her neighbours. The writer remarks: "This time the fire of hate and violence raged more fiercely than ever before, but even then Ma-ji was sure that it would soon cool off."(143) When many of Ma-ji's neighbours went away to East Punjab for safety, she stayed on in her own home. When one of her neighbours told her that it was not safe for Sikhs to live there, she opines: "Who

will harass us here? After all, the Muslims who live around us are like my own children—aren't they?"(144)

She had complete faith in brotherhood. When some of the refugees from East Punjab stayed in Ma-ji's neighbourhood, she helped them with foodstuffs, clothes, blankets and bedding. Then one day a very horrifying thing happened in front of her eyes that shattered her faith. One day on the road in front of her house, a tonga-wallah was stabbed to death. He was stabbed because he was a Hindu. The people did not even spare his horse. They kept on stabbing the poor horse till it bled to death. Ma-ji remarks: "Son, it was bad enough that the tonga-wallah was killed. They killed him because he was a Hindu—but they did not spare even the horse. You know a horse has neither religion nor caste. And yet they went on stabbing the poor animal with their daggers till the poor dumb creature, bled to death."(145) This incident moved Ma-ji deeply and she left Rawalpindi and moved to Bombay as refugee.

In Rawalpindi, Ma-ji lived in a very spacious house, with six spacious rooms and a wide verandha and a big courtyard but in Bombay she lived in a single room. She had to do everything--cooking washing in this very room. All her belongings and savings were lost. Ma-ji still remembered her Muslim neighbours with great affection. She read out letters received from Rawalpindi. She said to her son: "Your Bombay may be a great and grand city, son. But we can never forget our Rawalpindi--- those pears and apricots and apples, those grapes and melons and baggoogoshas that you never get in Bombay..."(148) After expressing all her feelings to her son Ma-ji fell silent. The memories of her past in Rawalpindi shattered her completely. Tears bubbled up from her eyes. She suffered a lot in her life but she never cursed anyone. The feelings of alienation haunted her. K.A. Abbas remarks: "And

suddenly she is silent, tears bubbling up in her tired, old eyes. And it seems that in the intensely human heart of this refugee there is neither anger nor self-pity, but only memories--memories that are soft like ripe apricots and fragrant like baggoogoshas....”(148)

To conclude it can be said the loss that people suffered during this Partition is incurable. It affected the lives of millions of masses and made them homeless. Homes can be made but the loss of one's family can't be compensated at any cost. Heart touching memories of the displaced people are still searching their own motherland and their own roots. A famous Urdu writer M. P. 'Chand' has very rightly documented in his book titled *A Bond of Love: My Passage to Pakistan* when he visited Pakistan. He remarks: "At the time of Partition, I was barely 12 years old. During migration to India, I could see only the railway station at Lahore. So, I was feeling excited that I was in the same city....."(22) Million of people are still waiting to cross the border and want to touch the threshold of their motherland. Rootlessness still haunts them. The trauma of

Partition inspired and motivated many creative writers who penned such works like –*Azadi* by Chaman Nahal, *The Rape* by Raj Gill, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar, *Tamas* by Bhisham Shahni and *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh. K. A. Abbas's story *The Refugee* thus depicts vividly the horrors of Partition as has been done by many sensitive writers like Raj Gill, Manohar Malgaonkar, Bhisham Sahni and Khushwant Singh

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