

Muslim Identity in Indian Anglophone Fictions

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Abstract

Since the independence of India, the minority identity, specifically the Muslim identity, turns into a matter of great question, which is further threatened by the religio-political upheavals of various ideology; and Muslim issues has frequently been staged as a serious subject by many Anglophone writers. My study delineates the minority identity (by minority I especially mean the 'Muslim') in secular Indian canon in English. The canon comprises a number of contemporary Indian novels that involve in representing the nation or the national concern in the mode of secularism. This paper examines different aspects of Muslim identity in relation to secularism within the secular framework of the Indian English fictions. The different aspects include the question of secularism, issues of Muslim identity, and the historical relationship of the Muslim to the nation. Finally I put focus on the relationship between secular matrix and minoritarian position, as two contemporary concepts in the canon of Indian English fictions.

So my study aims to present a broad overview of the two above-mentioned subjects and contextualize the novels in relation to some of Muslim issues, in that the Indian secularism was found to be very little successful to sustain a fair-free existence of the minority after independence

Key words: minority, Muslim, secularism, secular matrix, minoritarian position, Anglophone writers

IN 1947 India emerged as a secular state out of the pluralist idea of religion and syncretic aspect of cultural practice; and the Nehruvian ideology of secularism and Gandhiji's policy of religious tolerance led to the path of the Indian secularism. The Indian nation-state promised to provide equal treatment to each individual citizen, irrespective of religion, language or culture. But the way India goes today by the name of secularism is different from the way Nehru and Gandhiji wanted India to be. The Muslim began to exist in India as a minority group after the Partition, and they constantly and increasingly felt threatened of their certainty. Each different ideology and social organization now wants the nation to be directed by the radar of their own ideology, subordinating the fundamental component of secularism to their own worldview, refuting the ethnic groups' traditions to subsume into the mainstream of Indian subcontinent. The novels I have chosen are of different varieties: *The Shadow Lines*(1988) by Amitav Ghosh, *Midnight's Children*(1981) by Salman Rushdie, *A Suitable Boy*(1993) by Vikram Seth. All the three novels are involved in presenting the national concern,

and premised on the pluralist idea of religion and nation, and they each present a number of perspectives on Indian nationhood and religion. However, the gap they each show between the secularism and the minority position and the way they attempt to build bridge between the two matrix differs quite radically. Midnight' Children (1981) is an amalgam of history, magic realism, an account of political disturbances during and after the Partition, and through the heteroglossic realm, dramatizes a secularism based on a minoritarian perspective, and draws a discrepancy between the Indian secularism and the religious worldview. Seth's 'A Suitable Boy'(1993) stages the conflicting religious worldviews of Hindu-Muslim communities and voices a secularism derived from a majoritarian perspective. Ghosh's the Shadow Lines (1988) is premised on the historical events of riots, Partition, and like A Suitable Boy articulates a majoritarian secularism. All the three novels propound a secularism from their own perspective and stage conflicting worldviews of different religions in relation to secularism, and finally establish a need to recuperate a rational secularism in the Indian subcontinent. As works like, Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy Man (1998), Chaman Nahal' azadi(2001), Manohar Malgonkar's a Bend in the Ganges(1965), Kushwant Sing's a Train to Pakistan(1956), have also a historical background of communal riots, transformations of the community life, and they each attempt to put forward the fact that the Indian secularism must preserve the unities of all ethnic relations

Midnight's Children exploits a conflict between the radical secularism and the Muslim position, and forges what Homi K Bhaba calls the 'double temporality'. On the one hand the Muslim nurtures an identity based on their historical attachment to the nation, which is ensured the Indian constitution-oriented secularism. On the other hand, they have identity shaped by their religious positions. Aadam Aziz, the grandfather of the protagonist Selim, is a Kashmiri Muslim and is well conscious of the political turmoil in pre-independent India. After getting married he moves to Agra, and works for the nationalist movement. Naseem aziz, his wife, feels disappointed and a fear of some unexpected consequences for her husband's involvement in the freedom movement, and wants her husband to live just under the fold of the Muslim identity. Aziz, a secular Muslim, however, does not avoid his citizen duty by entering into a 'sectarian' mode of religiosity. Aziz's disagreement with his wife can be seen as a conflict between the secularism and religious worldview. Aziz could not bring his wife to his sideline, and, in regret, refused to take any food. "The war of starvation which began that day very clearly became a duel to the death. True to her word, Reverend Mother did not hand her husband, at mealtimes, so much as an empty plate. Doctor Aziz took immediate reprisals, by refusing to feed himself when he was out. Day by day the five children watched their father disappearing, while their mother grimly guarded the dishes of food"(Rushdie 1981: 43). The India of Aziz is a whole tree,

in that each fruit of the tree are to be labeled with the same identity. Aziz wants himself to be identified by his motherland's identity: "I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian" (Rushdie 1981: 40). Aziz even thinks that others also should come up to form a secular modern India and bids his wife to think of being modern Indian. 'Forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman' (Rushdie 1981: 34). His devotion to the nation makes him come out of his home and join the Gandhi-led protest by helping the wounded mobs. A large number of people gathered in Amritsar for an anti-British protest. The mobs were shot scattered by the British military force. The Gandhi-led 'grand design' got 'distorted' (MC 340: "the shops have shut; the railway station is closed; but now the rioting mobs are breaking them up. Doctor Aziz, leather bag in hand, is out in the streets, giving help whether possible. Trampled bodies have been left where they fell. He is bandaging wounds, daubing them liberally with Mercurochrome, which makes them bloodier than ever..." (Rushdie 1981: 34-35). His extension of secular hand towards the wounded people makes the novel a great endorsement of secular matrix.

Aziz, however, does not wear a secular identity by replacing his Muslim identity, rather sees India from a Muslim secular perspective. He wants India to have a Muslim secularism. Mian Abdullah, contemptuous of 'the Muslim League', promotes the idea of secular India from a

Muslim perspective, and call the 'Free Islam Convocation' to begin a Muslim secular movement. Mian Abdullah's movement wants to form an India with Muslim fervor and Aziz, sidelining with him, claims that Abdullah is fighting his fight.

However, Aziz should not to be taken as a Muslim devoid of any national feeling. His disagreement with his wife, his involvement in the freedom movement, his attempt to form a secular India lead to the fact that he wants to live under the broad umbrella of Indian secularism. He effectively mediates between the religious and national identity.

Ghosh's the Shadow Lines resonates with typical national concerns and revolves around the historical context of India-Pakistan war, Hindu-Muslim riots, religion-based nation Partition. There were some other novels also in Indian English canon that have background of the historical Partition. Such as, Balchandra Rajan's The Dark Dancer (1970), Chaman Nahal's Azadi (2001), Kushwant Sing's A Train to Pakistan (1956). The Shadow Lines, however, is especially remarkable because in this novel diverse versions of identity __linguistic, religious, regional__ come to be sharply focused in this novel. Gosh's novel revolves around the story of three generations in Dhaka, Calcutta, and London, keeping Tridib, a cousin of the narrator's father at the centre in the novel. He is the one who experiences the terrible picture of the communal riots and becomes a victim of the danger. The story begins in the pre-

independent India and ends just after the Partition. Though little space is given in this novel to the presentation of the Muslim subject, the Muslim issues are implicitly focalized in the context the novel is set. The novel is secular in the sense that Ghosh's final attempt in this novel is to show the harmony and integrity in the diverse religious and cultural ethnicity. However, the novel come to be structured from the perspective of a majoritarian secularism, as the anonymous narrator belongs to a Hindu community. The India of the shadow lines is one with Hindu fervor, as is implicit in the boy's talking about their classmate Montu in terms of his 'Muslimness'. They interrogate the narrator for his friendship with Montu, and the narrator, sidelining by his own religion, denies his friend. Their conversation goes as follows:

Then Tablu said loudly: we'll know at Gole Park

Why? Someone asked.

Because that's where Montu gets on the bus. He said.

He'll know; he's Muslim

They turned to me and smiled. Of course, he said, Montu's a friend of yours, isn't he?

I remember how my throat went dry as I tried to think of an answer

Not since we moved away, I lied. I haven't met Montu for months (Ghosh 1988: 200)

The narrator, who is of a secular disposition and has friends of all religions, gets pressured with the religious identity and is felt compelled to lie in order to maintain his religious position. This leads to the fact that the secularism is not always ease in intermixing with the religious identity, as is implicit in *Midnight's Children*, too, wherein the secular idea of Aziz could not adjust to the conservative religious matrix of his wife.

The events of partition give rise to severe hatred between the two communities. Ghosh, however, shows that it is not possible to divide the emotional bonds that exists between the two communities for generations as is illustrated through the incident of Hazratbal crisis. Ghosh presents a tight bond between Hindu, Muslim and other ethnics when he writes:

This mosque became a great centre of pilgrimage and every year multitudes of people,

Kashmiris of every kind, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Budhists, would flock to Hazratbal

on those occasions when the relic is displayed to the public. This is well arrested, even

by those European observers whose Christian sense of the necessity of a quarantine

between doctrines was outraged by the sight of those ecumenical pilgrims (Ghosh 1988: 225)

Ghosh presents the Hazratbal Shrine in which the relic (a hair allegedly belonged to the prophet Mohammed) is kept as an incarnation of interreligious harmony, where people from all religious communities visit to revere the relic. The emotional and the moral respect for other religion's relic are at the peak when people of all religions get outraged by the theft of the holy relic, and gather together for protest against it:

There were huge demonstrations in Shrinagar in which Muslim, Sikhs, and

Hindus alike took part. There were a number of public meetings too, which

were attended and addressed by members of all the major religious communities.

There were some incidents of rioting and a curfew was quickly declared by the

authorities. But the target of the rioters (and with what disbelief we read of this today)

were not people --- neither Hindus, nor Muslim, nor Sikhs---- but property identified

with the government and the police(Ghosh 1988:225).

Even the Muslim politicians, too, are not willing to give the protest a communal colour. Maulana Masoodi, Kashmiri politician, is one among them who led the demonstration against the loss of the relic with a pure secular mind. The author describes him as an 'authentic hero'(TSL 225). As "it is certain that Masoodi bravely oppose those who sought to lay blame for the theft on Hindus" (Prasad 2008: 51)

In representing the bonds between Hindu and Muslim communities, he follows the line of Nehru's secularism, who in the Discovery of India argues that religious differences are subordinate to the linguistic, regional, and cultural bonds. This is implicit in some events of Ghosh's novel wherein we can see the initiatives taken by the university communities of Dhaka and Calcutta 'in doing relief work and organizing peace marches' (Ghosh) during the riots of 1964 in the whole Bengal. The author writes: "There were innumerable cases of Muslim in east Pakistan giving shelter to Hindus, at the cost of their own lives, and equally, in India, of Hindus sheltering Muslim" (Ghosh 1988:29-30)

'A Suitable Boy' also traces the historical account of Partiton, issues of muslim communities, and their being transformed into a minority after Partiton. The novel dreams of a secular nation which shares feature of Nehruvian secularism. The India of a suitable boy is, however, a majotarian secularism in the sense that the omniscient third person narrator is from the Hindu communities, and there is a great debate articulated in this novel to relegate the minority communities, especially, the Muslim communities, to a second class citizen. The major point on which a Suitable Boy differs from the Midnight's Children is that the India of a suitable boy is one shaped by a majotarian secularism and India shaped in midnight's children is from a minoratian secular perspective. The only voice that speaks for the Muslim is Begum Abida. Begum Abida, a MP in the Legislative

Assembly in Brahmipur, is a representative of the Muslim community, and voices a Muslim secularism. She defends the Zamindari system in Purva Pradesh, which the ruling Congress Party wanted to abolish through a land reform bill. Abida tries to point out that this state is a centre of Muslim culture, and the abolition of zamindari system means the abolition of Muslim culture, their social system as well as their identity. "It is we Zamindars who have made this province what it is__ who made it strong, who gave it its special flavor" (Seth 1993: 307). In this relation Neelam Srivastava wrote:

The land reform act exemplify how Muslims, in order become Indian

Citizens fully, had to forgo a vital of what constituted their past, their

Culture, in short their identity. In other words a Muslim could not be Muslim

Outright if he was to be conceived of as modern Indian (Srivastava 2007: 51)

Nehru's secular nationalism comes up with the future for the Indian Muslims that the MuslimS have to give up their past culture and be absorbed into the mainstream of Indian culture:

The implementation of the Zamindary Abolition Act in Purva Pradesh becomes an event

which shows how the minority identity is reabsorbed in the state....the act primarily

affected the land-holding, therefore the entire way of life, of the Muslim elite. Nawabi

culture, namely the elite Muslim culture of north India has one of its (fictional) centres

in Brahmipur..... a strong nostalgia is perceptible in the way Seth portrays Nawabi culture;

a melancholy springing from a necessary changes a country must undergo on its way to

modernization. (Srivastava 2007: 52)

On the family level too, Seth explores an uneasy relation between the Hindu and the Muslim through the saga of the four families, as is explicit in the unsuccessful union of Lata and Kabir. Lata, the main heroine of the novel, is a Hindu girl of 19, whose mother is looking for a suitable boy for her. Lata is, however, in love with Kabir, a Muslim whom Mrs Mehra never approves. The moment Mrs Mehra finds her daughter infatuated with Kabir, an unsuitable boy in her eye, she sends her off to Calcutta. The novel on the family level ends with the marriage of Lata with Mahesh, a boy from the same religious ethnic. This indicates that the Indian society does not rebel in inter-social mixing as far as the religion is concerned. The Muslim community in the novel appears as an unfit existence in a majority-oriented society both at the family level as well as the political level. As far as the secularism is concerned here we are uncertain about how much the secularism is successful to bring the two communities together under its fold.

All the three novels project a dilemma confronting the secularism and the Muslim identity, and finally establish the need that the Indian secularism is to be salvaged without relegating the religious ethnics. However, there is a strong call among the Indian elitists and intellectuals to bring back India a fair secular where each ethical or religious group live their own life with same ease as of others; at the same time they will not feel hesitation, rather feel proud to say that they are Indian with a ethnic sub-identity.

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