Shiv K Kumar’s *A River With Three Banks*: Revisiting Partition

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*A River with Three Banks*, the most ambitious novel by Kumar deals with the theme of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Kumar has described the tragic consequences of the partition vividly in this novel. The merciless killing and bloodshedding in the wake of communal violence, the abduction of young girls, the loss of faith, the migration of a large number of people from both sides of the border are some of the tragic consequence of the partition. The river-India appears troubled by the inner currents of brutality. The title of the novel is highly symbolic. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity may be taken as three banks that condition the flow of the river-India’s life-stream. Thus Shiv K. Kumar’s *A River with Three Banks* is a symbolic record of the consequences of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. About the partition of India D. R. More in his book *India and Pakistan Fell Apart* rightly observes:

The partition of India in 1947 was the most fateful incident in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It made a very great impact on the Indian people, turning the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who for a considerably long period unitedly fought against the British, into one another’s enemies. In this civil war, thousands of men from both sides were massacred, a great number of women raped and abducted, children mutilated and property destroyed. A bilateral communalism – Hindu and Muslim or Sikh and Muslim–caused the carnage of thousands of innocent people. (More 1)

*A River with Three Banks* is also a story of marriage and divorce, love and hate and forgiveness and revenge on the backdrop of the partition. Gautam Mehta, a journalist in Delhi, manipulates his divorce from his adulterous wife, Sarita through his conversion to Christianity. One day his close friend Berry tells him to spend a night with a call girl. Gautam falls in love with this call girl Haseena, a Muslim girl, who has been kidnapped from Allahabad by a gang of abductors headed by Pannalal, a pimp. Gautam helps her to escape from Delhi to Allahabad. Gautam is persuaded by Pannalal, catches him on the banks of the Ganges. In a duel, Pannalal gets killed. Gautam later on converts himself to Islam in order to marry Haseena. At the end of the novel, while Haseena’s family migrates to Pakistan, she stays back but not as Haseena Mehta but as Haseena Gautam. They decide to start a new race– sans religion and sans caste.

The novel opens on a relatively calm note: “It was the quietest day of the week – comparatively speaking, of course.” (*River 1*) But soon the plot of the novel starts unfolding rapidly. The novel begins with Gautam's proceedings to get divorce from his wife. Gautam Mehta, a Hindu journalist working for The Challenge, goes to Father Jones, a Bishop, to convert himself to Christianity. He manipulates the Bishop about his conversion by saying that this is a
matter of spirit and heart, he also adds that he was influenced by cardinal Newman, and Catholic writers like Francois Mauriac, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Green, etc. Actually he decides to embrace Christianity not because of his love for the religion but securing a divorce from his wife Sarita. “The certificate of baptism was all that he wanted to grab. That was his Passport to freedom.” (8) What implies Gautam to get divorce from his wife is her illicit relationship with Mohinder, a fellow journalist of Gautam. The partition, in the novel, is at two levels – division of the family and division of the country. Gautam’s parents are migrated to Delhi from Lahore due to the partition of the country. They suffer not only from the partition of the country but also from the partition of the family:

His parents arrived in Delhi after many harrowing experiences on the way from Lahore. Though they were fatigued and their nerves were frazzled, Gautam could not keep them with him for more than a few days. They had been looking forward to seeing their grandson but soon they felt unhoused – their second partition.” (31)

Kumar has attempted to weave the domestic division as well as the political division of the country into the texture of the novel. The domestic drama of divorce takes place during the partition riot. When Gautam goes to the church to meet the Bishop he witnesses a murder of a Muslim called Abdul, by Hindu fanatics. Gautam discovers a letter in the dead man’s pocket which reveals that Abdul was in search of his abducted daughter Haseena.

After having got the divorce, Gautam and his friend Berry go to Neelkamal Hotel which “offers its patrons everything – wine, woman and song – to use an apt cliché” (16), to celebrate the occasion, though Gautam is a gentleman he is forced to visit a prostitute by his friend, Berry. In the hotel both of them happen to meet a pimp called Pannalal. Coincidentally, Gautam meets Abdul’s daughter Haseena who had been abducted by Pannalal during the partition riot. Here begins the story of Haseena as a partition victim. Pannalal had abducted her away from Allahabad when she was an undergraduate student and forced her into the business of prostitution. The abduction of women was a common thing during the partition. The story of Chandani in Chaman Nahal’s Azadi and Haseena in A River with Three Banks represent this aspect of the partition.

When Gautam learns that Haseena is actually the daughter of Abdul who was killed before the church, he decides to release her from the clutches of Pannalal instead of using her for his sexual pleasure. Out of the crisis evolves a romantic love story of Gautam and Haseena in the novel. Gautam falls passionately in love with Haseena. Here, Shiv K. Kumar has followed the love affair of a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl repeatedly found in many partition novels. While commenting on the love motif in the partition novels D. R. More in his book The Novels on the Indian Partition says:

Almost all the novelists have used the motif of love as a means of bridging the emotionally divided minds by way of a love episode. For instance, a love episode of a Hindu or Sikh boy and a Muslim girl is necessarily woven into the plot.” (More 242)

Both Gautam and Haseena decide to run away from Delhi. Finally they are helped by Berry to escape from the shackles of Pannalal. Thus Gautam’s elopement with Haseena and Pannalal chasing the lovers provide a romantic tinge to the love story. If Gautam - Sarita relationship represents divorce and hate, the Gautam – Haseena relationship represents union and love.
Gautam, thus, falls in love with Haseena, and puts the proposal of intending to marry her before Haseena’s mother. When he is asked to convert himself to Islam, without hesitation he embraces Islam and assumes the name Saleem. Gautam, thus, crosses religious barriers to serve his convenience. Though born as a Hindu, he converts himself to Christianity for the sake of divorce and again to Islam for the sake of marriage. Pannalal too comes to Allahabad in search of Haseena and he happens to meet Gautam. Pannalal threatens to kill him if he does not disclose Haseena’s whereabouts. In this encounter Gautam kills Pannalal, which unfortunately takes on the communal colour that “a member of the majority community was brutally killed last evening by a member of the minority community.” (River 163)

After Haseena’s marriage with Gautam, her family decides to go to Pakistan. Through Berry’s British connections Gautam safely escorts the family of Haseena across the border risking his own life. The couple decides to start a new race of humanity. Protest ing against Haseena’s wish to be addressed as “Haseena Mehta” Gautam says : “No my love,” … “Not Haseena Mehta” …. “Just Haseena Gautam – our first names only … Yes we’ll start a new race – sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality.” (214) At the end of the novel there is a description of clouds sail across the border and a flock of birds winging away into the sky. It symbolizes the message of a universal religion which Kumar wants to convey through the novel:

The sky was now covered with mountains, clouds – white, inky blue and grey. They assumed all sorts of fantastic shapes – of giant dinosaurs, their long necks craning forward, of the skeletal remains of some primordial, mammals, of an army of soldiers on the route. Ceaselessly, they sailed across the bridge from India to Pakistan casting fugitive reflections In the tawny waters of the river. (214)

Thus, like other novels on the theme of partition, Kumar’s A River with Three Banks too ends on a strong note of optimism. Kumar advocates that we should cross the religious and communal barriers for a better future through this novel.

Basically A River with Three Banks narrates two stories : the story of Gautam – his conversion to Christianity for the sake of divorce and again conversion to Islam for the sake of marrying a Muslim girl, it is also a story of Haseena – her ups and downs as a victim of the partition. Both the stories are interwoven on the background of the partition. Gautam and Haseena are the two central characters portrayed lively in the novel by Shiv K. Kumar. The impact of the partition is pronounced on Gautam and Haseena. Gautam’s father is migrated to Delhi from Lahore facing harrowing experience of the partition of the country. Haseena is abducted, her father is killed and her family migrates to Pakistan due to the partition. Haseena represents the hundreds of unfortunate women abducted during the partition. Neither Muslims, nor Hindus, nor Sikhs but women of all these communities are the most suffered victims of the partition. Women were abducted, raped, paraded naked in public streets, forced to prostitution, and put to death. According to Urvasi Bhutalia, “The history of partition was a history of deep violation – physical and mental – for women.” (Bhutalia 131)

The theme of woman’s exploitation and forced institution has been depicted very effectively in the short stories by Saddat Hasan Manto. But Haseena’s character in A River with Three Banks is quite different from that of the women characters portrayed by Manto in his stories. Haseena is not corrupted by the institution of prostitution. Even though she is abducted and kept in a brothel, she remains unprostituted. Her first encounter with Gautam turns into love.
Pannalal, a pimp, is a selfish man. He is a villain and gets killed at the hands of Gautam. Thus the novel observes the poetic justice. Another important point to be noted here is that Pannalal and Sulieman, a man connected with the business of prostitution, work together in their business. At this level there is no scope for communal rivalry. Therefore, the Superintendent of Police comments: “Here is a real intercommunal home, with Pannalal and Sulieman Gani as its heads.” (River 131) It is ironic that we find communal hatred only among the politicians and not among the people like Pannalal and Sulieman.

There are other references to the partition in the novel. The episodes like the public rape of a woman and stabbing of her brother, and Haseena’s father dying before the church are witnessed by Gautam in the novel. The brutal killing, the rape, the forced prostitution, the abduction of women, the naked parades of beautiful women are common episodes in the partition novels. In this context, Saros Cowasjee observes: “Though partition offered a variety of subject matter, the majority of the writers chose to deal with violence of one kind or another – abduction and rape being particular favourite.” (Cowasjee : 1995, xiii)

The partition was a complex phenomenon. It had many aspects – historical, political, economical, psychological, religious etc. Thus Kumar’s novel A River with Three Banks is concerned with those people who have definite past, their present is disturbed by the partition of the Indian sub-continent but the future is possible for them. They can hope for better life in future. Thus Kumar’s novel ends on the optimistic note.

Works Cited:


