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Communalism and Culture: A Reflective Study in the Light of Partition Literature

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Abstract:

Communalism is just an umbrella term used to cover the violence projected during the partition of India and Pakistan. Almost all partition writers consciously write to promote a brotherhood among Hindus and Muslims, though nothing really changed the violence of partition. The effort on the part of these writers certainly establishes that, humanity does not die even in the face of hard atrocities. Culture is made by the people and nurtured by the people who live together in it. Intizar Hussain, in one of his interview says: "I have no idea what a purely Islamic culture is?" It then may be said: that religious and cultural identity could always acquire richness and clarity through a respectful acknowledgement of each other.

Through the stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, Bisham Sahani, Khushwant Singh and many more narratives it is obvious that the authors record the pain, horror and fear of every individual who are mere accomplices in the making of a "barbarous world". Their writings are not mere consolation to the one suffered rather, they are a presentation of those people who have lost their national and cultural identities only for the sake of their religious identity. The atrocious nature of partition does not even leave children from its deadly grasp, they are violated and lost, and the childhood innocence gives way to corruption. Partition therefore, thwarts cultural growth apart from endangering the lives of every individual.

This paper further concentrates on the politics that the partition narratives focus on, which brings culture into question. Culture instead is used as a weapon, to develop a rage among the people, to divide their emotions and nations into bits and pieces. The so called cultured men are the very men of power, and these men often manipulate the men who belong to the marginalized section of the society. The characters like Nathu in Bisham Sahani's *Tamas* and Juggut Singh in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* are set examples of such manipulations. Thus, culture remains a monopolized concept exploited only by the men of power.

Keywords: Partition, Culture, Communalism, Politics, Violence.

“There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.” – (Manto, *Toba Tek Singh*).

Saadat Hasan Manto beautifully presents the wretched state of an insane man who is torn between India and Pakistan, and dies on a no man’s land, in Manto’s short story *Toba Tek Singh*. The physical state of the man is quiet the psychological state of the human mind during Partition. The very word Partition is born out of the requirement to separate the two religions, Hindu and Islam. Men believe that the world is not made by one God. Each religion has a different God, and their belief, faith, culture, custom and even the blood running in their veins are different. The war between Hindus and Muslims became necessary as they did not want to live together which took the shape of communal violence and thus, Communalism got another meaning to its content. The partition of 1947 clearly showed that it is only the religious identity that forces every individual to fight their lives. Religious identity is a social construct, thrust upon a child on his birth. Instead of looking into the cultural ambience and social surrounding, a man is judged by his religious identity. Every narrative concerning partition is therefore to build up the consciousness that a man is cultured only when he is strongly rooted. But uprooting of the same man shatters him and he is completely lost and surrenders his will and fate in the hands of men who now turns to be his life giver, his prophet, and guide.

Gyanendra Pandey in his book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, clearly states that communalism came into force only because the spirit of nationalism was not affected. The British strategy of dividing India and Pakistan only led to thousands of killings which was obvious, which was deliberate on their part, but the people who could have stopped this did not find the killings atrocious as it would give them complete freedom and a nation of their own. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* is a record where the brutalities of the two communities brought about thousands of corpses burdened in a train one night at Mano Majra. Singh narrates in his novel that:

“One morning a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the days of peace. No one sat on the roof. No one clung between the bogies. No one balanced on the footboards. But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality.” (Singh, 82).

Singh is delineating both fear and curiosity in the people that is raised with the sudden arrival of the train; in the next chapter the anxiety gives way to an alarming truth that: “the train had brought a full load of corpses,” to which: “ a heavy brooding silence descended on the village.”(Singh, 124). The atrocious nature of killing thousands of lives is so intense that it is deeply felt through these lines:

“Red tongues of flame leaped into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then wood. And then – a faint acrid smell of searing flesh.

The village was stilled in a deathly silence. No one asked anyone else what the odour was. They all knew. They had known it all the time. The answer was implicit in the fact that the train had come from Pakistan.”(Singh, 88-89).

Thus, Khuswant Singh faithfully narrates the violence that is witnessed by 1947 Partition. Even the characters like Hukum Chand, the Deputy Commissioner who belongs to the ruling class is equally disturbed and stupefied.

Alok Bhalla in one of his article *Memory, History and Fictional Representations of the Partition* in discussing an interview with Intizar Husain quotes him that: “I have no idea what a purely Islamic culture is?”(Bhalla,3213). Husain admitted the fact that the Partition was a geopolitical decision and not a “historically inevitable” emergence. Bhalla further writes: “the best of Muslim minds, Intizar Husain said, like the best minds of any community, were in love with the ‘good’. People like Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau, Mirabai and Kabir were not exclusive preserves of any single community or sect.” It then may be said: that religious and cultural identity could always acquire richness and clarity through a respectful acknowledgement of each other. Alok Bhalla in his article *Memory, History and Fictional Representations of the Partition* further discusses an interview with Krishna Sobti; a very interesting fact is put to focus. Krishna Sobti’s novel *Zindaginama* has two parts on recalling the second part Sobti focuses on two characters Mian Meer and Chhajju Bhagat. Bhalla narrates:

“One evening, Mian Meer was seated in a trance when he suddenly felt restless and went across to Chhajju Bhagat’s house. He found Bhagatji in his kitchen cooking his meal. Afraid of polluting Bhagatji’s kitchen, he stood at the door and asked Bhagatji for permission to enter. Bhagatji looked at him sternly for some time and then said: “if you had walked in who would have objected! But now you can stay outside! Mian Sahib, do pirs and fakirs have a caste? How did the thought even cross your mind? The thought occurred to you because it was already present!” Mian Meer felt ashamed and asked for forgiveness. This saddened Bhagatji even more. With tears in his eyes he said: “Mian Meer, you have made a second mistake. You should have walked in and hugged me! I feel ashamed! You think that my kitchen is more important than me! Saiyan, between friends that is a sin, a sin! With this one act you have opened a sea between us. From now on I shall stay on one shore and you on the other!” After that the two friends never met each other.” (Bhalla, 3122).

In narrating such a touching story Alok Bhalla underlines the age old stereotypes that work as a reason to separate the two religions, though Sobti’s interpretation is more utopian in its presentation. The atrocious nature of partition does not even leave children from its grasp, they are violated and lost, and the childhood innocence gives way to corruption. Partition thwarts cultural growth apart from endangering the lives of every individual. One may come across the character of Dev Vrat in Bhisham Sahani’s *Tamas* who instigates the children to slaughter hens and in the process trains them to kill Muslims in order to save their nation. The young boys like Ranvir and Inder in order to prove their solidarity planned to kill any stranger that they see on the street. Inder stalks

an old Muslim perfume seller who chances to pass through the street, when he and his friends were keeping vigil. Inder started following him and soon he started walking beside the scent seller. At this the man with all compassion asked Inder: "Where do you live, child? Keep walking along with me."(Sahani, 200). But Inder's motive was somewhat different, he was gathering up courage to kill the man. The narrator describes: "Suddenly Inder took a leap and made a quick movement. The pedlar felt as though something had moved with a flash on his left side. But before he could turn round to see what it was, he felt as though something had pricked him badly under the bag. Inder had struck accurately, and as instructed by the sardar, had given a twist to the handle too, while the blade was still inside, and thus entangled it with the intestines."(Sahani, 202). Bhisham Sahani vividly describes the move of a child who is just in his adolescent age, but the crisis of the times have threatened the innocence of the child and now it has turned to be their game at the cost of human lives. The question remains as to what communal feelings does a child bear in him or is it just an act out of solidarity which forces him to encounter this.

When the question of communal feelings come up one cannot avoid the fact that the very word 'God' is severally used and misused as Alok Bhalla quotes from Iris Murdoch in his essay *Defending the Sacred in an Age of Atrocities: On Translating Andhayug* that: "no other word of human speech is so misused, so defiled, so desecrated as the word God."(Bharati, 2). Dharamvir Bharati's famous play *Andhayug* is a metaphorical presentation of the partition of 1947. *Andhayug* is a retelling of the war of Kurukshetra and the two contenders Kauravas and Pandavas represent the Hindus and the Muslims. The presentation of the character of Krishna is the line of thread that makes God's position more vulnerable at times, which is similar in case of Hindus and Muslims; they perform the task and blame it on their Gods. Alok Bhalla rightly asserts in his essay that: "Like the Kauravas, we invariably refuse to hear the voice of God and blame him when our ambitions are not fulfilled: refuse, like the Kauravas in the play, to gaze inwards and find within the sources of grievous wrong."(Bharati, 4). Further, it can be added that 'God' and 'Religion' are merely words used to legitimize the war of Partition. The word 'God' gives cultural redemption; it produces a kind of falsity in the human mind. A term severally used to determine the legitimacy of a superior culture, a culture made out to gratify one's purpose – revenge or attainment of power.

Culture is socially constructed phenomena. Culture is nurtured and constructed by the learned and powerful. In this regard, it may be highlighted that several writers have variantly presented these men of power who continuously manipulates the people who are socially in a lower strata. Bhisham Sahani's novel *Tamas* features a similar kind of situation where Nathu, a sweeper is bribed to kill a pig, by a Muslim politician, Murad Ali, ostensibly for a veterinarian. Unaware of the dark intentions of Murad Ali, Nathu completes the job and the following morning, the carcass is discovered on the steps of the mosque and the town, already tension ridden, erupts. The events described in *Tamas* are based on true accounts of the riots of 1947; the events are so heart rendering that the consequences of it will ever remain fresh in the minds of the people. The title of this novel can be variously interpreted in this aspect; it can be the darkness of the mind, for both Nathu who is in darkness and also of the politician Murad Ali who keeps him in this

darkness. Again, it is the Dark Age that the writer is actually hinting about; the age is dark, blind and evil. The times has no God to rely on, as Dharamvir Bharati's play encompasses that it is a blind age – *Andhayug*. The supposed cultural man is the reason of all anarchy; communal violence is instigated by those men who should have stopped it. Another instance can be highlighted, that of *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh. The novel begins with the murder of Ram Lal, killed by the men of Mali, a dacoit gang. But Juggut Singh, a notorious man of the village is mistook as the murderer and imprisoned by the deputy commissioner Hukum Chand. In the course of the novel the situation of Mano Majra takes a turn and like every other town Mano Majra witnesses a similar communal violence. The Muslims of the village are forced to leave for Pakistan, in the meanwhile few external forces instigates and forces the villagers to murder the Muslims who are on their way to Pakistan, in order to avenge the death of the Hindus who arrived dead in the trains coming to India. At this point of time Hukum Chand releases Juggut Singh as he realised that this man is the last person that can save the Muslims of Mano Majra. The ending of the novel truly delineate the ruthlessness of time:

“There was no time. They looked from the bridge to the train, from the train to the bridge. The man hacked the rope vigorously. The leader raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He hit his mark and one of the man's legs came off the rope and dangled in the air. The other was still twined round the rope. He slashed away in frantic haste. The engine was only a few yards off, throwing embers high up in the sky with each blast of the whistle. Somebody fired another shot. The man's body slid off the rope, but he clung to it with his hands and chin. He pulled himself up, caught the rope under his left armpit, and again started hacking with his right hand. The rope had been cut in shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.”(Singh, 190).

Hukum Chand did not want to re-enact the same game of killing thousands of innocent migrants and he knew it could only be with the help of Juggut Singh. His character as a cultured man of respect achieves an appraisal as he takes a vital decision at the time of crisis, instead of raising the atrocious nature of war; he decided to act against all wrongs. This can be a contrast to the character of Murad Ali in *Tamas*. Both are supposed to be the protector of law and order, but both serve a different religion not of Hindu or Muslim but one is honest in his service, the other is just trying to achieve his interest by arousing moral guilt within the poor men.

Culture is just another context to raise the war of communalism, a way to erupt the bitterness in the heart of men. Culture remains a monopolized concept exploited only by the men of power. The various instances cited in this paper clearly delineate that 1947 Partition, its violence, destruction have thwarted the cultural growth and has lead every individual to an unknown foredoom. Surveying different narratives one will certainly empathize with the war victims, thousands were slaughtered, thousands homeless and few other terror stricken. On reading few sketches by Manto one may conclude with

these lines: “‘He is not Dead. There is still some life left in him.’ ‘O leave it, my friend, I am exhausted.’”(Manto, 169). Nothing possibly is revived now, what remains, is the sense of waste that the Partition writers successfully present in their creation.

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