

Politicisation of Religion: Through the Lens of Partition Literature

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Abstract:

Literature produced during and post-Partition of India into India and Pakistan reflects the greatest massacre of the century in a vivid sense. The very formation of the Radcliff line based on religion remains a problematic fact, building up the two separate nation states out of the groups of people who shared similar identities, past, present and aspired for a similar future. This partition also gave rise to a new form of tension and uncertainty in the South Asian sub-continent. Citizens born across these borders later on tend to have national pride based on whimsical political claims instigated by the individual governments of the particular nations. People across borders were lured by national pride. Yet, the national identity remained subject to probabilities, owing to the Partitions in South Asia. The literature that deals with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent talks about the dislocation, uprooting, and going away of the people of a society that previously lived in peace and harmony, resulting in the most gruesome human-made catastrophe of the century. This paper, through the context of Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan", Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", and "The Assignment", studies the impacts of the politicisation of religion.

Keywords: Partition, Partition Literature, Religion, Politics.

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Introduction

The ties among the diverse religions in India have always been a strength for the subcontinent's past. The Partition was the result of a miscalculated political move that devastated the lives of millions and continues to affect the fates of the subcontinent's inhabitants in many ways. In August 1947, India finally gained freedom from British colonial subjugation. But this so-called freedom came with the stroke of the great Partition. Across the subcontinent, communities that had co-existed for almost a millennium were now to live as two distinct nations for the sake of safeguarding their freedom. The anticipation of freedom, built on false hopes, made millions leave their native homes and cross the borders empty-handed, while many could never make it beyond the border. Literature from various ages of the subcontinent shows that the diverse religions, which were the strength of the subcontinent, turned into the deadliest ammunition against the masses by the masses.

The sub-continent has a history of a common past for the peoples of different religious and linguistic backgrounds. Following Harsha's death, North India broke up into several smaller empires, and the Rajputs—an aristocratic class of former monarchs, lords or army officials of foreign races, including the Sakas, Pahlavas, and Huns—took over as political leaders. The Rajputs asserted that they were descended from ancient Hindu deities like Agni, Chandra, and Surya. Muslim invaders were able to reach the area thanks to all of these clan conflicts and religious rivalries (Sen, 1988). These Hindu upper-class ruling classes, to assert their supremacy, kept questioning the legitimacy of their lower caste subjects. Thus, these upper-class rulers were in no good sense better than any invader to the lower caste subjects. Arabia and the Indian subcontinent have had trade links since ancient times. Arab traders used to travel to the Malabar region, which connected them to South East Asian ports, even before the advent of Islam. Islam first came into contact with India through newly converted Arabs. According to historians Elliot and Dowson in their book "The History of India as told by its

own Historians", the first ship carrying Muslim travellers was spotted on the Indian coast as early as 630 AD. While H.G. Rawlinson's book "Ancient and Medieval History of India" claims that the first Arab Muslims arrived on the Indian coast in the latter half of the seventh century AD. Another trustworthy text is "Tuhfat al-Mujahidin" by Shaykh Zainuddin Makhdum. Yet, the advent of British rule in India and the eventual Partition of the Indian subcontinent based on religion were the product of the politicisation of this religion in various aspects. Literature holds a mirror to this entire procedure in various contexts.

Literature Review

Partition literature chronicles the 1947 split and its aftermath throughout South Asia. It became an essential repository of memory, trauma, and identity. "The Other Side of Silence" by Urvashi Butalia and "Borders & Boundaries" by Ritu Menon & Kamla Bhasin are examples of foundational work that challenge state-centric narratives, highlight silences surrounding abduction and recovery, and emphasise oral histories and gendered violence. Alok Bhalla's multi-volume anthologies gather cross-linguistic short stories to highlight domestic violence and displacement in the wake of Partition. Gyanendra Pandey's "Remembering Partition" highlights the diversity of experiences and the contested terrain of memory. The methodological frameworks—trauma studies, memory studies, and postcolonial theory—that continue to influence the discipline are established by these works. Another recent scholarship by Sam Dalrymple, "Scattered Lands", meticulously dives through the five partitions and the formation of modern Asia.

Literary counter-histories that examine communal disintegration, displacement, and imaginary frontiers are offered by canonical writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Qurratulain Hyder, Intizar Husain, and Amitav Ghosh. Their works range from Ghosh's "The

Shadow Lines” to Manto's “Toba Tek Singh”, uses epic timelines, vernacular registers, and fragmented narration to depict violence and belonging. The archive is further complicated by regional trajectories. Bengali narratives emphasise refugee migration and caste-marked precarity, Sindhi writings lament lost cosmopolitanism, and Punjabi short fiction captures immediacy and local fracture. Comparative South Asian viewpoints place Partition in shared but disputed memory domains, extending the canon beyond 1947 to encompass subsequent upheavals like 1971.

When taken as a whole, these scholarly studies show how literature defies standardisation, producing multiple archives of trauma and survival that continue to influence discussions about citizenship, nation-building, and intergenerational memory.

Discussion

Khushwant Singh's ‘Train to Pakistan’ revolves around the peaceful village Mano Majra on the borders of India and Pakistan. The novel shows how a village on the border of India and Pakistan lost its peace, brotherhood and led to the dislocation of the population. The novel begins with “The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India. It was hotter than usual that year and drier and dustier” (Singh,56).

This very opening of the novel creates the tone of the devastating future that the village had to face in that year. Further, in this very paragraph, the villagers are found counting this harsh weather as a ‘punishment’ from God because of the sins that were committed. Here, this sin indicates the lives that were brutally taken for the sake of the partition in the name of religion. Religion refers to the system of beliefs that defines lifestyles. Through the idea of sin, Singh highlights the irony of religion and religious aspects, where the people were being parted and dislocated in the name of religion, while their conscience knew those killings as sin. The village of Manomajra had only

three brick buildings; one among them was the house of the Hindu moneylender Lala Ram Lal, the other two were the Sikh temple and the Mosque. All three were enclosed in a triangular common with a large peepal tree in the middle. The village had an equal number of Sikh and Muslim families, dwelling in the houses with thatched roofs, and the only Hindu family, the moneylender, had a brick house. Everyone worshipped a *keekar* tree beside the pond, and this local deity was referred to as “deo” by the villagers. This feeling of shared religious views and the commonness of the lives of the different peoples who really were not different is very logically presented by Dr Rajendra Prasad in his “India Divided”.

The weakness of the argument in favor of a north-western Pakistan based on the topographical diversity and such-like things has not been missed by Mr. F. K. Khan Durrani who in his book ‘The Meaning of Pakistan’ wrote “All Muslims, whether they live in Pakistan or Hindustan, constitute one nation, and we of Pakistan must always treat our co-religionists in Hindustan as flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood”. El. Hamza based his whole argument on the geographical peculiarities that distinguish the north-western provinces, the Punjab, Kashmir, the N.W.F.P., Sind and Baluchistan, from the rest of India. He argued that some provinces get heavier rains than others. The staple food of some provinces is wheat; in others, rice. Vegetation in the lands of the monsoon is rank and lush; in it is scanty. The flora and fauna of the provinces differ considerably. The dry lands of the North-West are the natural home of the camel, while the wetlands of the South and Assam and Bengal produce the unwieldy elephant. The dry lands of the North-West have given birth to a racial type which, in many respects, is different from the softer and darker types met with elsewhere. In a large country like India, inhabited as it is by “peoples” of many races, enclosed within many degrees of latitude and longitude, and exposed to a variety of influences of sea, mountain and desert, such diversities of “peoples” and produce are natural

and unavoidable, and to the politics of Muslim in India, they are wholly irrelevant. On similar lines, Dr Rajendra Prasad stated, “If were we to follow this line of argument, we of the North-West will have of necessity to wash our hands of the larger portion of the Muslim population of India who live in lands other than those of Pakistan, dress differently and eat food which is not the same as ours. We would have to treat them as aliens, with whom we can have no community of life or interests, a proposition which no Muslim of Pakistan would care to maintain even for a minute, which in fact every Muslim of the Punjab would dismiss forthwith as unthinkable” (Prasad,1946).

Further, in Singh’s text, readers find Juggu, the village dacoit who is in love with the daughter of the Imam of the village mosque, Nooran. Their religious differences didn’t become a barrier to mutual affection. Through this relationship, Singh talks about those numerous people whose lives were quite intermingled as they had similar forms of livelihood, similar food and clothing habits got distorted. Their lives, families and dreams were suffocated to death in the name of some “freedom” (Singh, 1956). Hukum Chand, the magistrate and deputy-commissioner of Mano Majra and the surrounding district, struggles with many of his decisions throughout the novel. Being a middle-aged lonely man, had attached to a Muslim young prostitute girl, Haseena. These attachments of *Jaggu* and Hukum Chand reflect how religious differences were not hindrances to the most natural human emotions. The death of Juggu to save the life of his Muslim beloved proves that even during the turmoil of Partition, religion was not the exact cause of the massacre. The lad at the Gurudwara was shunned when he tried to speak against an outsider dressed as a lad who persuaded the Sikhs of *Mano Majra* to kill the Muslims while they were onboard the train to Pakistan. He questioned what kind of Sikhs they were. This lad stated, ‘For each Hindu and Sikh they kill, kill two Muslims. For each woman they rape or abduct, abduct two’ (Singh,1956). Thus, instigating the mob, which was also the case with the entire sub-continent, Jinnah, in his letter to

the British legislative assembly, “a united India means slavery for Mussulmans and complete domination of the imperialistic caste *Hinduraj* throughout this sub-continent” (Jinnah,1945). Diversified is a society that is born out of the spirits, views, knowledge, and experiences of people of different caste, creed, belief and belonging. To separate such a society based on religion is to break down the very soul of the nation.

‘Whether this was a reasonable or unreasonable idea, it is difficult to say’ (Manto,1955). This statement sets the tone of the short story. Through the narrator of “Toba Tek Singh”, Manto tries to promote his views regarding the catastrophic man-made phenomenon of the Great Indian Partition who was confused regarding the upcoming fate of the dwellers of the sub-continent. On knowing about the exchange of the lunatics across the borders, a resident of the Lahore mental asylum asked another resident, “What is Pakistan?” The lunatic replied, “The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are produced.” As Jinnah, in his lecture, called Islam a nation, this statement provoked an otherwise peaceful community by giving them excessive powers. This made the demand for Pakistan a violent movement, resulting in millions of brutal deaths. Similar conversations can be heard between two Sikhs as well when one asks about the language of Hindustan where they are forced to move, another replies, “I know the language of Hindostras, there devils always strut about as if they were the Lords of earth” (Manto,1955). This creates the terrific image of Hindu Raj, which was the mirror image of Pakistan. The inmates of the asylum were not informed about Pakistan or Hindustan. Some said, “There was this man by the name Mohammad Ali Jinnah, or Quaid-e-Azam, who had set up a separate country for Muslims, called Pakistan” (Manto,1955). This very aspect of the role of the political leaders and people with powers deciding the fate of millions of people was one of the driving forces of this massacre. Bhishan Singh asked God where Toba Tek Singh was, but he did not reply. His neighbour, Fazal

Din, came to visit him at the asylum and informed him about the whereabouts of his family. This friendship is the epitome of the companionship of the people of a village, for whom religion or nationality was not the identification, but rather their village was their identity. Thus, in Toba Tek Singh, the identity of Bhishan Singh and his village got merged. In the conclusion of the story, we find Bhishan Singh lying dead on the no-man's land between India and Pakistan. 'In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh' (Manto 1955). This also highlights the special colonisation of land, in the name of nation-states and the otherness of land as a non-living entity in the context of Anthropocene capitalism.

The picture of a city largely affected by these riots, Amritsar, is depicted by Manto in his 1947 story "The Assignment". When the entire city of Amritsar was canopied by the blanket of full-scale communal violence, disillusioned with the smoke of bombing and other atrocities, "Muslims living in Hindu localities began to leave for safer places and Hindus in Muslim majority areas followed suit. However, everyone saw these experiments as strictly temporary. The atmosphere would soon be clear of this communal madness, they told themselves" (Manto,1947). The uprooting and the dislocation of their lives were yet a far-stretched nightmare for them.

The people of the city did not really like the aftermath of the communal violence and hoped that the situation would soon be under control and that they would get back to their homes. The story leads us to the household of a retired judge, Mian Abdul Hai. He lived with a son of eleven, a daughter of seventeen and an old servant. He did not leave the Hindu neighbourhood as he believed that the situation would soon return to its regularity, while his daughter, Sughra, was less sure of things.

“Sughra could not help noticing that, whenever she went on the roof, fires were raging everywhere” (Manto,1947) The nights had become particularly frightening. Some slogans chant, “Allaho Akbar”, others “Har Har Mahadev”. In the meantime, the retired judge fell ill, and his condition deteriorated over time without any proper treatment. In this situation of turmoil, Sughra sent the old servant to bring medicine for her father. She hoped it would be him every time the doorbell rang, but he never returned. On one such morning, the son of Gurmukh Singh appeared with a sack in his hand, and the story reached its climax. Gurmukh Singh sent a bag full of *sawaiyyan* every year during Eid, thanking the judge for saving him from a fake case. Even on his deathbed, he assigned his son to take the bag of *sawaiyyan* to the household of Mia Sahib. The toxicity of communal violence could not tarnish the relationship between the Sikh and the Judge. The son of Gurmukh Singh, to fulfil his father’s last wish, went to give the bag of *sawaiyyan* to the family of the judge. Yet ironically, he was eventually forced by his fellow Hindu mates to carry out a massacre on the Muslims of the area. This highlights the sense of betrayal, caused without any particular religious consequences but due to the mere call of the hour.

The superstructure of nationalism, built on the base of capitalised politics, manipulates the identity of the citizens belonging to the lower classes for the benefit of the upper class in the modern world. In the case of the Indian-subcontinent, the identity of the people born in the post-colonial times remain subjected to probability. The inconsistent national boundaries and border politics have resulted into challenging nationalities among the masses of population who have shared common culture for a very long time. As Partha Chatterjee also has argues that the concept of European “nation” does not fall fit in the case of India.

Conclusion

In all the above-mentioned texts, what is inevitably noticeable is the shared brotherhood, which in the surge of forming Muslim-ruled Pakistan and Hindu-led Hindustan got distracted in the fake aspiration of freedom. Gyanendra Pandey writes, “Partition *was* violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart” (Pandey 7).

Religion had never been any real obstacle to the well-being of the populace of the subcontinent. The making of the nations, where even the definition of nation stands invalid, resulted in loss of humanity and the tremendous humdrum whose reparation can still be found in the lives of the people. It's high time to realise that religion had never been the cause of partition but just people against the people, and thus, strengthened the communal bond among the people of the subcontinent. In the context of the partition and nationality of the Indian subcontinent, the idea of probable nationalism could be studied further, and the idea of probable citizenship can be studied through an anthropological lens.

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