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THE THEME OF PARTITION IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

The novels dealing with Partition have been subjects of critical inquiry in the history of Indian Literature in English. There have been attempts to describe the experience of Partition in different forms. Historiographical attempts such as historical writings, narratives, interview and memoirs constitute one group while artistic attempts, such as literature, motion pictures, and paintings form another group. Many Indian novelists have tried to depict the trauma of partition in fictional writing. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the readers with the Indian novels in English that deal with partition as major or minor theme.

Keywords: *Partition, Memoirs, Narratives, Motion Pictures, Trauma, etc.*

The presentation of Partition differs in form and manner from novel to novel. In some novels, like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Raj Gill's *The Rape* (1974) Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* (1998), Partition is the central theme. In B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1959), Attaia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Partition is not the main theme but one of the significant themes. The Partition also appears in the evasive manner in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and marginally in Gurucharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), K. A. Abbas' *The World is my Village* (1984) and in some of the post-modernist novels like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), Amitov Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988), and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989).

R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) seems to be the first novel to refer to the Partition in the history of Indian literature in English. Indeed, it is a matter of surprise that the holocaust appears in Narayan's novels. His fictional world of Malgudi hardly accommodates politics. But *Waiting for Mahatma* is an exception. It is basically a novel about Gandhi and his impact on Sriram and Bharati, the round characters in the novel. "The novel," as William Walsh puts it, "gives us an impression of Gandhi and a certain truth about him which no amount of social or historical reporting can do (Walsh, 43). In its attempt to portray Gandhi, the novel documents the political events like the Non-Co-operation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement. The novel portrays Gandhi's role during the Partition. There is no direct effect of the Partition on the main characters in the novel. The episodes of the trauma are partly reported through letters and newspapers. Sriram during his train journey witnesses Hindu extremists searching for Muslims. And Bharati feels unhappy at the sight of the refugees.

The next novel to portray the experience of the Partition is Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. (1956) If R. K. Narayan was one far removed from the scene of the ordeal; Khushwant Singh is one who was in the midst of the massacre. His *Train to Pakistan*, the first comprehensive treatment of the Partition in Indian literature in English portrays the impact of the Partition on a village

community—"how the Partition," to use Alok Bhalla's words, "brought to an abrupt end a long communally shared history" (Bhalla, 5). Under the shadow of Partition Khushwant Singh creates a fine story of love and adventure. Juggat Singh, a ruffian sacrifices his life in saving the refugee train to Pakistan, which is carrying his beloved also. The writer strikes a strong note of humanism. It shows how love transcends communal bias and hatred. The villagers—the Muslims and Sikhs live in harmony. The rhythm of their days set by the arrival and departure of the trains. It is this railway station which is crucially the theatre of all activity in the novel.

All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains. The sound of the arrival and departure of trains regulate the activity of the people of Mano Majra. According to C.N. Srinath, "the train is metaphorically time and consciousness" (Mukherjee, 59). Then one day a grisly railroad cargo arrives from the west, carrying hundreds of mutilated bodies of Hindus and Sikhs, bound for their new homeland but attacked and murdered enroute by Muslims. The cry for vengeance goes up among a group of young Sikhs who make plans to sabotage the next train to Pakistan, which will carry, in reverse, Muslims to their new homeland. A young Sikh called Jugga; famed in the village as a trouble maker, a thief, gives his life to save the train, for abroad is the Muslim girl he loves. So the train passes into Pakistan and with it the assurance that the man possesses innate nobility even amidst widespread evidence to the contrary.

The theme of Partition appears in a south-Indian expatriate—B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* (1959). Basically, it is the story of love and marriage of a western educated Indian called Krishnan. Obviously there is east-west encounter. The partition is not the central theme here, but it gives a significant climax to the main theme. The tragedy of the Partition appears in the end, where Kamala, the protagonist's Indian wife, sacrifices her life by saving a Muslim girl during the communal riots. Rajan seems to have shared Khushwant Singh's humanism. Kamala is a female counterpart of Khushwant Singh's Juggat Singh. This novel also presents the Sikh point of view of the Partition.

Manohar Malgaonkar's *Distant Drum* (1960) deals with the Partition theme marginally. And in his *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), the theme forms the backdrop as well as the touchstone on which human relations and the communal equations are tested out. Malgaonkar's moorings are in history. He naturally documents different phases of Indian history. *Distant Drum* is basically a novel about army life. Some of the episodes in the novel give an account of the Partition experience nostalgically. The division of the nation brought with it many divisions. The defense unit was also divided. The Partition offered a choice before the military officers to opt for either of the two nations. The army men who had worked together began to work against each other. This aspect is presented in *Distant Drum*. In this sense the novel can be read as a story of separation of two military men. Kiran and Abdul Jamal, who were at the military academy at Deharadun, and worked together to encounter the communal riots during the Partition. After the Partition of the country Abdul Jamal opts for Pakistan. The two friends meet on the Kashmir border. Now they belong to two opposing units. The consequences of the Partition bring about a clash between old friendship and new realities.

There is an episode in the novel in which Kiran and Abdul go to a masque to see refugees during the Partition. The revengeful Muslims attack Kiran since he is a Hindu but Abdul rescues him. The situation is entirely different in the post-Partition context. Here Malgaonkar traces the irony of soured communal relations against the backdrop of defense life. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments that *Distant Drum* presents, "A more satisfactory, if less ambitious, treatment of Hindu-Muslim relationship" (Mukherjee, 59).

The next novel about the Partition is Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Though the Partition is a peripheral theme here, it is one of the significant novels about Partition. For the first time a woman writer narrates the tragic story of the Partition. She is the first Muslim writer to write about it. As William Walsh points out "the two principal ones (themes) are politics and a woman's struggle for independence (Walsh, 103), the politics of the Partition affects private lives also. It disintegrates a Lucknow Muslim Zamindar family. During the division of the nation some members of the family opt for Pakistan. The novel depicts the crisis among Muslims at the time of Partition.

Padmini Sengupta's *Red Hibiscus* (1962) deals with the Partition of the Bengal province. The novel is essentially a story of two women—Sita, a romantic girl searching for a suitable life partner, and Rasmi, harijan woman, who is almost a female counterpart of Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha. The Partition is at the backdrop in the novel. The letters in the novel sketch in a picture of the Partition.

After a couple of years, Manohar Malgaonkar again attempts to weave a novel around the Partition at considerable length in his *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964). It is one of the most important narratives of the Partition. This is the only novel in which the genesis of communalism is traced conspicuously. The novel delineates the Partition in the context of the Gandhian creed of non-violence. Through the character of Shafi, the novelist traces how nationalist Muslims turned into communal fanatics. The story of Debi and his family exhibits the trauma of the Partition, whereas Gian's story is one of failures of the Gandhian ideology as far as the common man was concerned. Malgaonkar looks at the Partition as an irony of Indian history.

After *A Bend in the Ganges*, the Indian novel in English has to wait almost a decade for another Partition novel to appear. Raj Gill's *The Rape*. (1974) portrays the impact of the Partition on the Sikh community. One of the most important aspects of Partition that the novel depicts is the negation of values-how man has lost the human touch. The protagonist-Dalipjit's father rapes the beloved of his own son. The protagonist's final statement is worth noting, "The world is sick" (Gill, 298).

Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975) is a well-written novel about the Partition. In Nahal's hand the theme of Partition assumes epic dimension. Through the moving saga of Lala Kanshi Ram's family, the victim of the Partition, Nahal gives an authentic picture of the Partition, which makes it an unbiased document in history. The merit of the novel lies in the fact that the novel transcends the pangs of Partition. Lala Kanshi Ram, the protagonist, achieves dignity and a tall spiritual stature through the traumatic experience, which he gains at the cost of physical loss. Thereby the novel achieves a distinctive tone.

H. S. Gill is another novelist to deal with Partition. His *Ashes and Petals* (1978) is a story of revenge and reconciliation. The novel portrays the conflict between the generations which survived the Partition and the post-Partition generation. Santa Singh belongs to the former and his grandson Ajit to the latter. Santa Singh is a refugee and a live witness to the atrocities inflicted on his family during the Partition. He kills his own granddaughter instead of yielding her to the attack of ruffians. Memories of the ordeal haunt his psyche and the psychosis of vengeance continues even during the post-Partition period.

There grows a conflict between Santa Singh and his grandson Ajit when the latter wants to marry a Muslim girl called Salma. For Santa Singh, who has witnessed the Partition, marrying a Muslim is not a sensible choice. But what is important about the novel is that there is reconciliation in the end. Ajit marries Salma, but dies. Finally Santa Singh accepts Salma, which indicates that the novelist hopes for a sort of understanding between the two warring communities.

It is interesting to note that Anita Desai also deals with the Partition in her *Clear Light of Day* (1980). The novel is set in Delhi during the time of the political disruption. The domestic drama of the Das family is enacted against the backdrop of the 1948 riots, the assassination of Gandhi. The novel narrates the tale of disintegration of the Das family. The younger members of the family Bim, Tara and Raja waft apart. The novel is divided into four parts. The second part deals with the Partition. As Rajeswari Mohan writes, "the novel interviews the tales of three women as they contend with adulthood and its responsibilities with oblique accounts of the traumatic events of India's Independence and partition" (Mohan, 48). There is a parallel between the disintegration of the family and the disintegration of the nation. The first section refers to Mortimer Wheeler's *Early India and Pakistan*, which strikes a parallelism between the family and the title of the book. However, Desai's theme is not politics, but woman and her alienation. As she herself acknowledges that her novels are not reflection of Indian society, politics. Like Virginia Woolf she explores the inner world of individuals.

If the novels mentioned so far are in the realistic mode, there are some that may be called novels of magic realism which also give experience of the Partition. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amitov Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), and Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995) deal with the Partition. But the Partition in these novels is not a central theme. Perhaps, the reason is that most of these novels are interested more in presenting a general view of the nation's political history than a single event. They are allegories of the political history of modern India as a whole.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the Indian novel in English. The stamp of Rushdie's fictional art finds parallels between public and

private life—national political events and incidents in the life of individual characters. The narration of particular event gains significance on account of the symbolic overtones and allegorical allusions associated with it. Rushdie's fiction often centers around India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, which owe their birth to the Partition. In the opinion of M. K. Naik, "If the political allegory in *Midnight's Children* concerns India, its sister nation, Pakistan, born at the same time, is the subject of *Shame*" (Naik, 40).

Midnight's Children records the political history of India from the Jallianwalabaag massacre to the emergency. The novel can be read as a critique of politics. The very birth of Saleem Sinai on the midnight of 15th August 1947 indirectly refers to India's Independence and Partition. The novel is divided into three parts. Part I covers the events from 1919 to 1947, Part II the childhood of Saleem Sinai and Part III deals with the Emergency. There is a close relationship between the human story and the politico-historical story. Hence the protagonist says, "I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country." (Rushdie 9). The novel also covers the emergence of the Muslim League, which played a very significant role in shaping the idea of Pakistan, and the communal riots in Delhi following the division of India. Part II emphasizes the migration of the Sinai family to Pakistan. (Rushdie's family too opted for Karachi after the Partition) Rushdie's fiction does not deal with the Partition directly. But as a writer he never upholds communalism and the two-nation theory. As O.P. Mathur notes Rushdie's "political stance is unmistakably anti-partition," and "he is firmly against the partition which was a culmination of what he hates most-communalism" (Mathur, 11).

Along with the mode of magic realism, the mode of realism also enriches the Indian novel in English. Sharf Mukaddam's *When Freedom Came* (1982) is a realistic novel where the central theme is the Partition. Its main concern is to show how the communal virus in urban India corrupted communal relations in Indian villages. The novelist chooses Bombay (now Mumbai) as a typical example of urban communal experience which is contrasted with Devanagar, a village in the Konkan region in Maharashtra. The protagonist of the novel Fakir, a secular and innocent boy turns into a communal fanatic when he migrates to Bombay. The making of Fakir takes place in Bombay. Fakir disturbs the calmness of village life. The Hindus disturb Moharrum and the Muslims disturb the performance of the Ramayana. The disturbance affecting the socio-religious activities gives rise to rioting in the village. The novel objectively depicts communal politics and the corrupting nature of urban life.

Rushdie's treatment of Partition in *Shame* (1983) is more comic. The religious war set off by Partition, the narrator explains, is the result of a dispute between two groups he calls the "the veg and non veg" (Rushdie, 61) or the 'one godly' and the other 'stone godly.' Rushdie telescopes all the pandemonium carefully reproduced by the earlier novelists into the bombing of a Delhi movie theatre. When some "gardeners of violence" (Rushdie, 63) plant a bomb in the theatre belonging to the father of the heroine. She escapes but is left naked and eyebrowless, a condition which Rushdie transforms into analogy.

Rushdie continues to derive comedy at the expense of his heroine's nudity, a state disgraceful to Indian women, a condition hardly to be considered comic. This orthodox treatment of feminine modesty becomes more evident when set against one of the scenes in *Azadi*, which depicts a group of Hindu women paraded naked through the streets for the shameful delight of their male communal enemies.

K. A. Abbas was committed to the 'progressive movement'. His *The World is My Village* (1984), a sequel to *Inquilab* (1955), deals with the Partition peripherally. Anwar, the progressive protagonist goes on a journey through India and abroad. Through his journey Abbas discusses the issues related to the politics of the time. As far as the Partition is concerned, being a progressive writer he condemns it. He seems to question the very idea of Partition on the basis of religion by creating a hero who is the son of Hindu-Muslim parenthood. His identity shows the absurdity of Partition. What Anwar says about Islam holds the mirror to it, "Islam never preached that innocent Hindus should be killed. In fact it has said that the murder of one innocent man is equal to the massacre of the whole community" (Abbas, 471).

Two more novels published in 1987 are Manoj Das' *Cyclone* and N.N. Saxena's *Ties Thick and Thin* deal with the Partition superficially. In Manoj Das' *Cyclone* (1987) the Partition appears at the flag end of the novel. The novel realistically depicts the Hindu-Muslim enmity existed in

Kusumpur. The communal cyclone sweeps away the peace of the place. The novel describes how mob psychology works and communal riots are generated. Sudhir, the central character, protects a Muslim man called Haru Mia, who is later killed by the Hindu fanatics.

Saxena's *Ties Thick and Thin* (1987) is set in Delhi. It is a story about ups and downs of Ajay. The novel has a sub-plot which is important from the Partition point of view and that is the love affair between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl. As in H.S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals* here is also a clash between generations. The elders oppose the marriage, because the consequences of Partition haunt them.

Amitov Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988) deals with the Partition from a different perspective. The novel is divided into two parts as 'Going Away' and 'Home Coming'. It accounts the history of three generations of a Bengali family in Dhaka. The anonymous narrator, who lives in Calcutta, takes both an imaginary and a real journey to England, Pakistan and India. The novel covers the historical period from 1939 to 1980. The first part of the novel deals with Tridib's parents' visit to London and ends with the narrator's own journey to England in 1980. The second part gives a sentimental account of the days spent by the narrator's grandmother in Dhaka, a place that belonged to India before and became a part of East Pakistan after the Partition.

The second part deals with Tridib's death in the 1964 riot at Dhaka, which was a recrudescence of the communal riots of Partition days. The novel includes many stories within its texture and deals with many divisions. The merit of the novel lies in denouncing the very idea of division. The novel depicts the cracks in the private as well as the public life. The joint family of Dhaka is divided; so are nationalities, national boundaries, and identities too.

These borders, though unreal like shadows, wield horrible influences on human life. They bring about violence which is often repeated. Hence, the shadow lines created by the Second World War, the Partition of India, and Bangladesh war have created untold miseries. The most important aspect that the novel delineates is the communal tension. Tridib, one of the major characters, dies in a communal riot. As Novy Kapadia thinks the novel stresses, "the need for a symnetic civilization to avoid a communal holocaust" (Kapadia, 88).

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story* (1988) touches briefly the saga of Partition. In a couple of pages, it catches the essence of the emotional commotion of people of a divided nation. It has been one long and lonely march from Lahore to Madna for Mr. Multani. The dictum that life has to go on finds its best expression in the trials and tribulations of Mr. Multani. The satisfaction of seeing his son through medical college may be a comforting thought but true happiness is elusive as old memories continue to haunt him. The pathetic condition of displaced people, victims of Partition, is conveyed most pathetically when he tells Agastaya Sen the protagonist, "Darshan (his son) is lucky, I would think, he has not been a refugee like me—wanderers clutching only our pasts—we had nothing else" (Chatterjee, 229). Many years later this emptiness continues to haunt Mr. Multani.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) deals with the Partition mainly from the political point of view. The novelist tries to find parallels between the archetypal characters in the great Indian myth the *Mahabharata*, and the great Indian political leaders of the twentieth century. The author himself says that the novel is, "an attempt to tell the political history of 20th century India, through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the *Mahabharata*. The parallels are interesting to note; Gangadatta-Gandhi; Dhritarashtra-Nehru; Pandu-Subhash Chandra Bose; Karna-Jinnah; Priya Dhuryodhani-Indira Gandhi. Not only are mythological characters identified with contemporary personalities, but also the ideology of democracy is equated with Draupadi, and Pakistan becomes Karnistan. The tearing of the mythical Jarasandha is contrasted with the division of the mythical Jarasandha is contrasted with the division of the subcontinent. The novel can be read as a post-colonial response to history. It is an attempt to resist the grand narratives of history. In fact, history is being re-written today. The novel decentres the earlier notions of history. What is important from the view point of the Partition is an entirely different portraiture of M. A. Jinnah that it depicts. The historiography of the Partition so far represented Jinnah as a villain in the drama of Partition. But Tharoor decentres these notions and represents Jinnah from a different perspective. What Dhritarashtra (Nehru) says about Jinnah explains why Jinnah became the spokesman of Karnistan (Pakistan).

Thus the novel deals with the Partition in this distanced manner. As O.P. Mathur opines, “any detailed description of the horrors of the Partition would have had a contrary tonality, and they are therefore only referred to” (Mathur, 12).

Gurucharan Das wrote an autobiographical novel *A Fine Family* (1990) which deals with the Partition peripherally. It records the ups and downs of a middle class Punjabi family from 1942 to 1980. One of the crises the family faces is the trauma of the Partition. Bauji is a lawyer in Lyallpur. The violence of the Partition forces him to flee to India. The family loses everything in the ordeal. Though the suffering part of the family saga is not as moving as Lala Kanshi Ram’s family in *Azadi*, Bauji finds it difficult to leave the earlier house and find a new identity in new surroundings. But the novel is a “well-researched piece of life in the pre-Partition times” (Jayalakshmi, 3).

Mahatma Gandhi has been a favorite theme for the Indian novelists in English. Here is a novel about Gandhi at the time of Partition. Mukund Rao’s *The Mahatma* (1992) can be read as a literary biography of Gandhi during his last days. The novel depicts the two aspects of Gandhi- the personal and the public. The personal story is about his experiment with sexuality, the public story is about his sincere attempts to soothe the wounded souls of Partition victims. He goes to riot-torn Noakhali in 1946 when the whole of India waits for the moment of birth of Independence. The Partition provides a test for Mahatma’s stubborn belief in non-violence. The novel is an exercise in documentary realism. M. K. Naik is right when he says, “Rao certainly gives us a feel of both the Noakhali milieu and the moment with painstaking attention to detail” (Naik, 69).

Mukul Kesavan has tried his hand at writing history in the fictional mode in his *Looking Through Glass* (1995). Being a historian Kesavan has chosen the technique of magical realism to rewrite the political history of modern India. The narrator is a contemporary photographer. Once travelling by train he peeps down into the river while the train is moving over the bridge. No sooner does he peep down than he finds himself at the bottom of the river, and with that he falls in 1942. Thus begins the history of India. The narrator is introduced to a foster family and makes friends with persons in history. There is a chapter-“Waiting on Jinnah” where he meets Jinnah and asks, “Mr. Jinnah, Sir, do you really want the country Partitioned?” Jinnah’s reply is “Barristers do not have opinions-they have briefs. (177). The narrator is not worried about the consequences of the Partition, because the Partition is “an unchangeable part of my (his) future. Nothing could change that, not even an assurance from the Quaid” (178). Like other post-modernist novels the focus of *Looking Through Glass* is not the Partition itself but narrating the nation’s history.

Like Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Manju Kapoor’s *Difficult Daughter’s* (1998) is a bildungsroman. As in Hosain’s novel the private turmoil is enacted against the socio-political turmoil. The Partition serves as a backdrop, but then it is not a major event in the novel. It is a story of four generations of daughters in Punjab. The focus of the novel is Virmiti, the eldest of nine children from a Hindu Arya Samaj Family. Like Hosain’s Laila, Virmiti struggles for her Independence. She revolts against her family by marrying a professor as his second wife. Her struggle continues even after her marriage with a man of her choice. The rest is domestic conflict and woman’s search for self-identity.

In the same year Shiv K. Kumar, a well-known Indian poet in English, came out with a Partition novel entitled *A River with Three Banks* (1998). The central theme of the novel is the Partition. Being a victim of the Partition, Kumar waited for fifty years to give an outlet to the pangs of the Partition. The novel narrates the romantic story of Gautam, a born Hindu converting himself first to Christianity and then to Islam, for the sake of Haseena, a victim of the Partition. The novel is remarkable in respect of its treatment of the religious dimension of the event and its portrayal of the role of the press during a crisis period like the Partition. The novel occupies a unique place among the Partition novels on account of the message it holds up-the religion that all practise has to be a sort of universal religion-“sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality” (Kumar, 214).

Sauna Singh Baldwin, an expatriate remembers Indian history from 1937 to 1947 in her *What the Body Remembers* (1999). The choice of narrating history in the fictional mode seems to be deliberate. She thinks that forgetting history is a folly. As she declares in her Prologue to the novel:

In this novel the story of two Sikh women and their husband provides a human dimension to history. Satya, the first wife of Sardarji is a barren woman. Hence, he goes in for a second wife, Roop. As her name itself indicates, she is a paragon of beauty. Human themes are welded with the political theme. The novel tries to find a parallel between the politics of polygamy struggle for power-sharing,

question of woman's identity and the politics of the Partition. Though the Partition comes as a backdrop at the end of the novel, the most significant aspect of the novel is its attempt to allegorise the story of Satya and Roop to suggest the crisis of the Partition. Thus, the Indian novel in English has given considerable attention to the treatment of the theme of Partition. A large number of novels represent the event from different angles.

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