



The Thematic Concerns in Indo-English Partition Novels

All the novels depict the unabated miseries of the refugees which they had to face in the aftermath of their reaching the land of promise. The government was incapable to cope with the influx of millions of refugees. The living conditions in the camps were worse. The people, who had lost their houses and huge property in Pakistan, were struggling to get a small house allotted to them in India. The shocking events and the miseries of the migrants continued even after their settlement. The psychological impact of partition on them has been vividly described by all the novelists in their works.

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The Indian partition of 1947, that drowned the joy of freedom in its screaming violence, still remains pivotal and unforgettable today, not so much for its political significance in the emergence of the sovereignties of India and Pakistan, but for its lasting impression of horrific emotional duress. It is difficult to sort out the historical, political and social intricacies associated with partition through history and historiography but the fiction writer has the astute ability to examine partition trauma to produce a greater comprehension of the events because he or she inserts racial, religious, socio-economical and political account in front of the reader to present an honest depiction of partition. It is, therefore, significant to examine the occurrence of the trend of partition in fiction form as it explores diverse issues associated with these events.

The present paper undertakes the study of Indo-English fiction writings in which the communal dilemma appearing before and during partition has been one of the important thematic preoccupations of Indian writers in English. Apart from historical writings, fiction too has occupied a prominent place to picture the role of communalism during the independence movement through the pre and post-partition periods. Countless pages have been devoted on delineating the fictional account on the subject and critical views have been presented by various authors about the communal dilemma projected on the people who had to face the tribulations of partition. Whereas the historical narrations were concerned with the political aspects of the happenings, fiction dealt with the human aspect concerning the common man's or mass level problems. Most of the fiction could comprehend the fact that riots were not the

cause of partition, but partition had caused riots and the riots were an opportunity for sectarian politics.

Among the prominent novelists, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar and Chaman Nahal have been the earliest writers to give a comprehensive representation of the partition, whereas Kartar Singh Duggal, H. S. Gill, Raj Gill and many others have taken up the subject much later and have narrated stories of the individuals, particularly on women, against the partition backdrop.

Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan pictures the realistic story of political hatred and of mass passion during the tragic days that preceded and followed partition. Through a graphic picture of Punjabi village life, its ethos, mores, tranquility and social harmony, Khushwant Singh narrates a moving story of Mano Majra Muslims separating from their brotherly Sikh community. He sees a self-sacrificing person like Juggut Singh, the Sikh protagonist, full of nobility and unaffected by communal considerations, who forsakes his life for the safe journey of the train containing hundreds of Muslims to Pakistan. He engineers the failure of communalism in the moment of crisis. The novelist also vividly describes the stories of violent incidents of communal killings.

A Bend in the Ganges is Manohar Malgonkar's successfully attempt portraying India's struggle for freedom which is the central theme of the novel. It is a carefully documented historical novel spotlighting India of forties. Malgonkar emphatically portrays the two forms of Indian struggle for freedom the violent and non-violent struggle and two different ideologies projected through the characters pro-Gandhian and anti-Gandhian. The novel

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concedes the reality of violence but impertinently shows that in no case violence is an alternative to non-violence.

In *Azadi Chaman Nahal* narrates with remarkable penetration and realism, a moving saga of a Hindu family under the impact of partition. He follows history very closely, uses a wider canvas and takes a closer look at the impact of partition on human lives. He very objectively presents cordial Hindu-Muslim relations which turn out into intense communal hatred during the holocaust. The novelist through his protagonist Lala Kanshi Ram gives a very convincing and graphic picture of the paradoxes of partition experience felt by the people who became prey to man's lust and cruelty. Lala is portrayed as a Gandhian who goes through dislocation, tribulations and suffering of the tragedy and emerges out in the end as an undefeated man. He survives against all odds in life, achieves a new spiritual identity and exhibits human will to surmount all difficulties in the way. *Azadi* tells the philosophy of life that suffering, pain and death are only prelude to a new life, full of hope.

Kartar Singh Duggal's novel *Twice Born Twice Dead* is a remarkable study in objectivity of the communal dilemma created by the partition in which the people turned into barbarous brutes preying upon their own kind. The three main characters in the novel, including an innocent Muslim girl Satbharai, once separated from each other during the communal riots in Pakistan, and then met again on the Indian soil, were at last separated again for ever, as if it was all scripted in their destiny. Such a dilemma suggests that women have always been viewed and had their identities reconstructed only as passive victims of history and that no resolution at all was possible from any side for the suffering of the victimized women.

Raj Gill's novel *The Rape* unfolds the collapse of human values during the partition and delineates the chaos and catastrophe, the partition unleashed on the masses. The focal point of the partition theme is the event of rape. The main thematic concern of the novelist is to show the perversity of a human mind in a critical situation created by the vested interests of politicians. The protagonist Dalapjit cultivating the atmosphere of harmony as an exponent of love, Jasmit sacrificing her life for the boy of his own religion and Leila becoming the victim of rape by a beast, are not only characters in the novel but characteristics of human love and of human values even when the endless miseries of partition plunder their happiness.

Major General H. S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals* presents some aspects of life following the partition, the trauma of its aftermath and the woeful plight of the refugees in India. The novel is extremely moving and brilliantly written with a very human touch. The novelist displays his characters as the sensible, humane and generous messengers of human love and sacrifice.

Among other outstanding works on partition fiction are Basic Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* on the theme of communal discord, dislocation and disintegration, and

women as victims and saviours, in which the author perceives the event through the eyes of a small parsi girl Lenny in Lahore as she witnesses Hindus, Muslims, Christian and Parsees and Sikhs fighting for their land and lives; and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, in which, through tale of a narrator, the author focuses on territorial divisions from an old lady's perspective the insubstantial shadow-like lines dividing the people and nations, creating a lot of misery and loss of lives. Salman Rushdie, in *Midnight's Children*, draws attention to the ambiguity of both historical and fictional knowledge through a boy born on the day India won her independence; Attia Hosain, in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, reveals the continuing effects of nationalism and partition in post-colonial India and puts up a feminine and Muslim point of view of the partition. Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* is unique in which the dream of independence and decolonization were portrayed clearly, as it criticizes the politics of partition and communalism, especially contemporary Indian issues; Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* deals with the trials and tribulations of displaced people to make sense in an unfamiliar world; *What the Body Remembers* is an eloquent debut novel by Shauna Baldwin the story of which comes out of the rich culture of India and the brutal drama of the 1947 partition as told from the point of view of Sikh characters; and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* signals the cultural return to the story of independence and enjoins the tradition to nationality with the history and memory of post-partition tension. Chroniclers like Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin are prominent among the stream of writers who wrote women's stories of partition atrocities.

Among other significant works on Indo-English partition fiction are Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, Abdullah Hussein's *The Weary Generations*, Balchandra Rajan's *The Dark Dancer*, translation of Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning*, Alok Bhalla's *Stories About the Partition of India* and many others.

It is remarkable to note that the main thematic concerns of all the novels have been the depiction of communal harmony before the partition, thereafter the British conspiracy to divide the community, political blackmail of the nation, the disintegration of social relation due to partition, communal hatred resulting in violence, killing, rape, abduction, arson, mutilation, atrocities on women, dislocation, mass migration, trauma, identity crisis, refugee problem, prevailing corruption of the times, and, of course, the stories on the theme of love and sacrifice.

All the novels clearly suggest that the 'divide and rule' policy of the British was the real villain in bringing about a rift between the two communities which ultimately led to partition. The British used to take the fullest advantage of the religious differences among the races of India, playing the Hindus against the Muslims and the Sikhs against both. The politics of separatism between the Muslims and non-Muslims actually led to communal violence.

All the novelists have portrayed the realistic picture of communal harmony, feelings of brotherhood, and peace prevailing among the people of the land in times before the partition, though there were heterogeneous cultural differences among them. Religions never separated them; there was seldom any rivalry between Hindus or Sikhs and Muslims. The novels reveal that the communal conflicts were only created by the politicians and the colonial power for their selfish ends.

All the novelists show violence and exile as the major themes of their novels as partition itself was a metaphor for violence. One certainly feels horrified reading about the barbaric incidents of genocide, criminal carnage and the cruelest ever acts of massacre, depicting all the brutalities human beings can commit against fellow human beings; all arson, loot, rape, murder and atrocities that made partition of India one of the worst tragedies in human history. All the novels vividly present the immediate consequences of the partition like the massacre in trains, the burning of the houses, the heaps of corpses, and their prompt disposal by burning, the starvation deaths, the deserted villages, the wiping out of the Hindus in Pakistan and Muslims in India, the defiling of the places of worship, the phantom villages and the shameful acts done in mad communal frenzy.

All the novels have their main thematic motif in tracing the impact of the tragedy on human life and have shown women as the worst victims of the tragedy. All the novels have depicted the truth of history as observed by Urvashi Butalia⁽¹⁾ who writes, "The history of partition is the history of deep violation physical and mental for women". Women were abducted, repeatedly raped, passed on from hand to hand, sold, auctioned, looted, abused, used and thrown away not only by the communal hooligans belonging to the opposite community but also abused and rejected by their own families. Women's bodies became sites to symbolize the nationalisms of the two new nations. "Thus the political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women", as views Veena Das⁽²⁾. The plight of these suffering women has been projected through women characters of their novels.

The partition novels successfully trace the impact of partition on families. All novels depict dislocation of families, separation of parents and children, husband and wife, brothers and sisters; many lost members were not traceable, many members killed and mutilated in front of their dear ones, many of them forcibly converted to the other religion. Many families lost their ancestral house and property and turned into poor refugees. The families depicted in the novels represent the dislocation and agony of hundreds of families destroyed in the catastrophe.

All the novels portray love as one of the themes and show love-tangles and sacrifice of lives for one another. And often, the love pair consists of a Hindu/Sikh boy falling in love with a Muslim girl or vice versa. In most cases it was the women who suffered the most.

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All the novelists felt that in India too, the fanatics were no less guilty than their counterparts in Pakistan. Whatever the Muslims did to Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, the same was done to them in India. Hindus also took vicarious pleasure of vengeance of atrocities on Muslims, particularly their women. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured and raped. Both were equally guilty as writes Khushwant Singh⁽³⁾.

What is important is that no novel ends on a pessimist or a gloomy note though they dealt with the tragedy of violence and have melodramatic depictions of communal frenzy. All have characterization of humanism and affirmative vision of life. In this respect the novels celebrating human values can be placed in the tradition of humanistic novels. All the novelists suggest that suffering, pain and death are only prelude to a new life full of affirmation and hope. They knew that life is for living and for that one must leave behind past. No brooding over the past will bring it back. Good must always triumph over bad.

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