

THE PLIGHT OF COMMON PEOPLE IN THE PARTITION LITERATURE OF INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Aijaz Ahmad Ganie¹ & M.S. Rathor², Ph. D.

¹Research scholar, Jiwaji University, Gwalior (M.P.)

²Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, Govt. College Khaniyadhana, Shivpuri (M.P.)

Abstract

The sources of history and literature witnessed that few people on the name of religion divided the subcontinent and created severe problems in all regions of the subcontinent that people still are facing even after seventy years of partition. If we go through the pages of Indian History and Partition Literature many admirable characters will come alive in front of us. About numerous events and disasters we can learn from the books of historians and literary giants who portrayed all the situations, disasters and predicaments faced by the people before, during and after partition. Partition of India is still a darkest period in the history of subcontinent and it has left indelible marks on the pages of Indian history. Many writers have attempted to represent the trauma of partition skilfully through their writings. Britishers before leaving the subcontinent tried to break the unity of religions on the name of partition, many people were shocked as they were aware about the consequences of this division. After partition, the people who earlier were friends, neighbours, colleagues were labelled as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians and became thirsty of each others' blood. They acted as savages; they forgot the respect for elders and women, love towards children. To represent the people who on the name of religion killed millions of precious lives, many writers of the Indian subcontinent produced a literature called Partition Literature. The partition led to huge movements and disastrous conflicts across Indo-Pak border. About ten million Hindus and Sikhs were expelled from Pakistan and nearly seven million Muslims from India to Pakistan and thousands of people were killed in this conflict. Though, independence for Indian subcontinent was an event of celebration, but it was celebrated in the shape of mourning, tears, separation, exile, crying, bloodshed, abduction, rape, murder etc. India was the one of the largest colonies of Great Britain and was granted freedom after a long period of subjugation, however resulted into the partition of country which caused a big destruction to the subcontinent in the form of ethnic and religious riots. This paper aims to explore the voice of people and their plight, who badly suffered during the cataclysmic event of partition.

Keywords: Partition Literature, history, violence, abduction, subjugation, migration, cataclysmic events, riots.



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The Plight of Common People in the Partition Literature of Indian Subcontinent

The partition of India is the most remarkable and momentous events in the history of Indian subcontinent. No other event or happening in the history of world has such magnitude and far reaching consequences. It is such a great event that its impacts were different on

different people or genders. Great events like, Partition of India, generally inspires artists and writers to record such great events in the history and represent in literature. Similarly the partition of India has been recorded in the history and presented in the literature written by various writers of Indian subcontinent in different languages like English, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi etc. As History, alone is not sufficient for the comprehensive understanding of the events, causes and consequences of the partition. Though hundreds of books had been written on the history of partition but, it is difficult to have a complete and clear picture of the partition of India, its impacts, complexity and consequences. Indian subcontinent drank the sweet nectar of freedom from the foreign yoke of British colonial rule but had paid a heavy compensation in the form of partition and was divided into two parts – India and Pakistan.

Dr. Asaduddin writes:

The Partition of India, a momentous event in Indian history, continues to tantalize historians, haunt the Indian psyche and cast its shadow on our social and political life. It is closely linked with the chronicle of our freedom struggle that made the actual liberation of the country from foreign yoke an experience of violence, slaughter and exile for many. One of the most massive demographic dislocations in history, with its attendant human tragedy, it defies chroniclers to come to grips with it in all its dimensions. Tomes of analysis and exegesis by historians and bureaucrats have not led us anywhere closer to a definitive understanding of the phenomenon, even though the recent works of Bipin Chandra, Ian Talbot, Ayesha Jalal and Mushirul Hasan have brought fresh insights into the field. Historical accounts and official documents, despite their apparent 'transparency' and 'factuality' can tell us only about the statistics - at least one million deaths, ten million refugees, and so on.¹

Historians almost fail to represent the detailed enormity of the tragedy of partition. Their statistics failed to provide the exact accounts, how women must have felt while drowning themselves in the wells lest they be abducted and abused by men of other community. The statistical accounts given by historians fail to impart that it was feeling of insecurity and not religion or politics that forced most of the common people to choose India or Pakistan. The historical statistics or narrative do not narrate the identity crises that the innocent people faced during the period of partition, neither they narrate the pangs of separation between the families; husbands were separated from their wives, brothers from

sisters and parents from their children. History did not clearly represent the sufferings of the women who remained the worst sufferers of the tragedy of partition. History includes or presents only facts and figures but, literature explores the feelings, emotions and sentiments of the people involved in the event directly or indirectly. History shows the superficial elements and does not go deeper in to the minds and hearts of people as literature does in describing their experiences. In this way history is a simple record of partition written on pages but, literature is the reflection and representation of the sufferings, miseries and difficulties faced by the people in the tragedy of partition. History usually records and presents the data about the leaders and other important men of the time and ordinary men and women are ignored. But literature explores the lives of even common, ordinary and marginalized people. History is State-centric and nationalistic, literature is people centered. History mainly deals with the struggle of people for freedom, its progress, and achievements, and narrates the partition only as a side issue. But literature mainly explores the tragedy of partition, gives voice to the sufferings and miseries of abused women, victimized children and men. What history ignored, literature explored. Thus we can say that literature is complimentary to history. About history Urvashi Butalia opines:

I have for long been concerned with, what I like to call, the 'underside' of history. A question that preoccupies me is: Why is it that the history we know deals so much with the state, with government, with rulers and hardly ever with people? It is these and other similar questions that have informed my research on partition. As an historical event, Partition, for example, has ramifications that reach far beyond 1947, yet historical records make little mention of the dislocation of people's lives, the strategies they used to cope with loss, trauma, pain and violence. Why have historians been reluctant to address these? Are these questions of no use to history at all? . . .²

Urvashi Butalia also says that history is full of facts but, human feelings and sufferings are set aside or find no reflection:

. . . But the 'history' of partition seemed to lie only in the political developments that had led up to it. These other aspects—what had happened to the millions of people who had to live through this time, what we might call the 'human dimensions' of this history—somehow seemed to have a 'lesser' status in it. Perhaps this was because they had to do with difficult things: loss

and sharing, friendship and enmity, grief and joy; with a painful regret and nostalgia for loss of home, country and friends; and with an equally strong determination to create them afresh. These were difficult things to capture 'factually'...

These aspects of Partition—how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives, and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in.—find little reflection in written history.... (5 -7)

The partition of India resulted into the large exodus of people ever in the history of humanity. Millions of people migrated from one place to another. The whole subcontinent of India was occupied by religious frenzy and bigotry. People turned mad acted as beasts ever ready to slaughter fellow beings on the name of religion. The humanity was torn into pieces by its own children. People of both nations killed each other on the name of religion. Large libraries of literature had been produced on this subject by various authors of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The trauma of partition and agony experienced by the people of Indian subcontinent found its voice in the literature of partition produced by various writers in different languages. An acclaimed poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz lamented about the brutalities and atrocities of partition, "This stain covered daybreak, this night bitten dawn. This dawn is not that dawn we craved for."³ Muslims living in India migrated to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs living in Pakistan migrated to India leaving behind everything; their ancestral homes, tradition and culture and became refugees with empty hands. Women became the largest sufferers, who were assaulted, tortured, sexually abused and abducted by the men of opposite communities on the name of religion.

The tragedy of partition gave rise to a new literary genre called Partition Literature almost in all languages of Indian subcontinent, particularly in Hindi, English, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Telugu and other vernacular languages spoken in the subcontinent. The common element in all these literatures is pathos and the common themes of these literary giants were violence, brutality, communal riots, bigotry, arson, exploitation, abduction, rape, murder etc. The writers of the partition literature presented the disastrous situations of partition in a different way as the historians depicted. Their literary works embodies the human sufferings,

agony and trauma of partition. Writers such as Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Amrita Pritam, K.S. Duggal, Saadat Hasan Manto, Nanak Singh, Asmat Chughtai and others have revolved their writings on the subjects of partition. In English Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, K.A. Abas's *Inquilab*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and *Bribe*, in Hindi Yashpal's *Jhoota Sach*, Bhishma Sahani's *Tamas*, and in Urdu Saadat Hasan Manto's short-stories like *Toba Tek Singh*, *Aakhri Salute*, *Titwal Ka Kutta*, *Khol Do*, *Thanda Gosht* etc. and other works by various writers in different languages presented the insight of hardships that common innocent people faced and endured in this nasty battle of power and politics.

While writing any literary piece of work about the historical events such as partition of India, a writer must maintain isolation from historical facts and keep away himself from historical perspectives to provide a realistic picture of society and issues related to it at that time, by isolating himself from the historical facts a writer will provide an amalgam of human emotions, fantasies, hope, ups and downs with a message to the world. Almost all the literary works about partition have this common characteristic and almost all authors who wrote about partition depict the hooliganism, treachery, barbarism, rape, murder, abduction and thirst of blood among people for each other in their writings. The religious frenzy turned people insane and were ready to kill their neighbours who had lived together for generations. Many writers have given tragic accounts of the events realistically without taking any side. They blame both sides of the border equally responsible for this catastrophic event.

The trauma left by partition of the Indian subcontinent remained a major concern of Indian literature after Independence. Most of the writers considered Independence as a false dawn as it brought nothing which would be celebrated like Nazrul Islam of Bengal says that Swaraj did not bring anything for the hungry child or because it was divided India. Other poets of different languages like Telugu, Gujarati, and Kannada all expressed the same feelings. Whole subcontinent was affected by the communal holocaust and is still fresh in the minds of people. Punjab and Bengal were directly affected by the partition hence the writers of these regions expressed the deepest anguish about partition. The first novel which described the trauma of partition was Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, in 1956, through which he made people of the Indian subcontinent aware about the hollowness of such mass fratricide and brings out the futility of bloodshed and condemns the partition of India. He presented the events and incidents happened during partition realistically, as it was a common

practice during the time of partition to strip off the man's trousers to check whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. In his novel *Train to Pakistan*, a circumcised man remarks:

Where on earth except in India would a man's life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed? I would be laughable if it were not tragic.⁴

Thus Singh depicts a state of madness in people which made them act insanely during partition and it is obvious that if a man drinks the poison of communalism and hatred, he will naturally do such insane and lunatic acts. In this novel the plot of the story revolves around the village of Mano Majra located on the banks of river Sutlej near Indo-Pak border. All the communities of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh lived there with peace and harmony for centuries. The activities of the village were dependent on trains. From morning to evening there was hustle and bustle of trains. One day a train arrived from Pakistan carrying dead bodies of Hindus. This created distrust and restlessness among people in the village.

People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all night talking in whispers. Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him, and thought of finding friends and allies.

At that time Jugga, a local goon was in prison, who was in deep love with Nooran. They had a child and Nooran did not want to go to refugee camp in Pakistan as her son would not be accepted there due to his Sikh lineage. The people of the village were living peacefully until one day few youth gathered in the Gurdwara and delivered fiery speeches to take the revenge of killings, murder, loot and rape. Their broke chaos in the village and the villagers made a plan to stretch out a rope across the bridge to stop the train carrying Muslim refugees. Then they hatched a plan to kill Muslim passengers and set the train ablaze. Jugga was freed from jail by Hukum Singh. His beloved Nooran was also in the train hence he cut the rope despite being fired and saved her. Khushwant Singh kept the eternal love of man and woman alive in the novel despite all crucial circumstances and made love victorious in the end.

Another story based on the theme of brutalities of partition is Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, it revolves around a young Parsee girl, Lenny, who witnessed the brutalities and horrors of partition. A maid Shanta worked in this Parsee girl's house and was wooed by a string of lovers. Among them Massuer and Dilnawaz (Ice Candy Man) were in competition with each other in winning her favours. The maid was taking care of Lenny with innate love and affection. There was peace and harmony in the city of Lahore. People were living peacefully and affectionately until the news of partition breaks. All the peace and harmony

was shattered. The Ice Candy Man killed the Masseur out of sheer hatred and jealousy. Then one day a train came from India with dead bodies and sacks full of breasts. In this incident, Dilnawaz's sister was also killed, which caused disgust and hatred in his mind towards all Hindus. He joined the rioters and took part in barbaric and violent events. He even abducted the maid whom he loved so much, but forced her to prostitution just because she was a Hindu. Later he married her but she was saved from prostitution by the help of Lenny's relatives and was shifted to refugee camps in Amritsar India.

The most pathetic and disturbing aspect of partition is that people who lived together with peace and love as brothers for generations became enemies, thirsty of each other's blood even molested women of each other's community. This is a shameful blot on the faces of societies of both the nations which is almost depicted in all the literature related to partition of India. Lenny laments in *Ice Candy Man*:

The whole world is burning. The air on my face is so hot. I think my flesh and clothes will catch fire. I start screaming: hysterically sobbing -- how long does Lahore burn? Weeks? Months? ⁵

Thus the whole world seems to be burning to a little child. The people were lynching each other, bigotry gains currency, people became insane. All these elements had been painfully depicted almost in all works of partition. Dilnawaz, The Ice Candy Man became mad when he came to know that his sister was murdered and started to take revenge on all Hindus. He says, "I want to kill someone for each of the breasts cutoff from the Muslim women." ⁶

Women remained the worst sufferers of partition. They suffered all sorts of humiliation, violence, torture and barbarism. They were abducted, molested, raped and killed, mutilated breasts of women came in trains. The easiest way of taking revenge to opposite community was to dishonor their women, and they were victimized largely. They could not even go their original homes as they lost their purity. In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh shows the hollowness of social norms and absurd customs, when Sundari, a newly married bride was going to Gujranwala with her groom on the fourth day of her marriage. On the way to Pakistan their bus was attacked by Muslims. Her husband was stripped naked and she was sexually molested by the ferocious mob. The partition literature is filled with the themes and stories based on oppression, brutalities, and madness without any reason. The theme of violence and trauma is a common chord in the partition literature that connects all literary

pieces produced on this theme. The partition of India is not merely a historical event but also an emotional and heartrending story of untold miseries, sufferings and the plight of humankind.

Apart from novels based on the theme of violence of partition, there are also a large number of short-stories that shows the plight of common people who suffered during the communal riots and brutalities of partition and revealing the disgust and anger of the innocent people, who were directly or indirectly victimized during this period. These stories are full of lamentation and consolation and explored the pathos of the situation. Most of these stories depict the sorrows of partition which uprooted the people from their native places and had nowhere to go. Like Saadat Hasan Manto's short-story *Toba Tek Singh*, depicts the writers own state of mind. Manto himself left Bombay for Lahore and always regretted done so.

Bishen Singh, a lunatic in the story wants to be neither in Pakistan nor in India but in the village Toba Tek Singh to which he belongs. Through this character Manto presents the pain and grief of millions of people who were forced to migrate from their native lands. Similarly in another story, *A Tale of 1947*, Manto through the character of Mumtaz reveals his own agony of up-rootedness. Mumtaz in the story was sailing for Pakistan, a country about which he knows nothing.

The most pathetic and harrowing story about the suffering of women is *The Return or Open It*, by Manto. In which a Muslim girl named Sakina is abducted and raped by a group of people ironically belonging to her own community. When she was hospitalized and doctor pointing towards the window asks her father to 'Open It', on hearing the phrase she in her subconscious state tried to untie the string of her trousers. The father observed her movement and shouted in excitement, "She is alive. My daughter is alive"⁷

Stories about women who were victimized during partition and were physically abused and mutilated are quite painful and nauseating. These heartrending stories filled the eyes of readers with tears and the readers felt sorry for the inhuman society of that time. Kartar Singh Duggal's *Kulsum*, is a story of helpless girl that brings out a moment of horror. The story tells the tale of a Muslim girl who was raped by an old Sikh for failing to oblige his young guest sexually. She was first raped by old Sikh and then by his guest, school master. Kulsum repeatedly plea to the school master, "Marry me, Marry me First.... I beg of you. I shall repay you for your kindness."⁸ Her repeated requests add more pathos to the story.

Among both the communities Hindu and Muslim, many people accepted conversion to the others faith to save their lives during partition. In Bishen Sahani's *Pali*, a lost Hindu child was founded and adopted by a Muslim couple, circumcised and given a Muslim name Altaf. After some years the boy was discovered by his biological parents, who took him back to India changed his name again from Altaf to Pali and was re-baptized as a Hindu after the Mundan ceremony. Though this situation seems comic but is heart touching too. The selfish society cares about the rituals and customs of religion and not about the feelings and emotions of the boy which were injured badly. He was in utter bewilderment, whom will he accept, his biological parents or foster parents? Bishen Sahani's story brings out the tragic irony and ruthless irrationality of religious bigotry and its horrible consequences. The sufferer remained an innocent boy whose fate tossed him in different odd situations.

The riots were the natural results of partition. A neglected spark during partition turned into huge fires and gutted large cities into its compass. Khushwant Singh ironically presented the genesis of one such riot in a story called *The Riot*. Tension prevailed between the two communities, but the real culprit of day was the bitch, Rani. A Hindu shopkeeper Ram Jawaya throws a stone at her that catches a Muslim grocer, Ramzan and all the hell broke in the shape of riots: "What had once been a busy town was a heap of charred masonry".⁹ During riots a man's rationality is hibernated and his savagery comes into life with full vigour and force to destroy the humanity. Riots may be caused by a negligible incident or family situation but are spread and aggravated in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion sufficient enough for destruction.

Many writers were disgusted and disappointed with the violence and harrow of partition that they portrayed the realistic accounts of violence of partition very artistically without taking any side and blamed both the communities and nations equally. The most striking example of neutrality we find in Krishan Chander's *Peshawar Express*, in which the author depicted a well balanced statistics of the murdered men, women and children belonging to the both communities.

Not only male writers but also female writers laments on the tragedy of partition and showed grief and sorrow towards the victimized people and explored the plight of common people. Attia Hosan's *After the Storm*, depicts the struggle of women and children in keeping themselves alive in the hell let loose by their men folk. A small, weak, thin with anxious eyes and a smile on her face, child, Bibi is led to speak about her past. Her childhood years had

been robbed from her. She was unable to recall her childhood years and her mind fails to fill the gap between the refugee camp and her adoption. But we understand from the story, Bibi is an orphan without a soul.

Another story, *Where Is My Mother*, by Krishna Sobti, presents the terror and horrors imprinted on the mind of a little girl. She persistently pleaded and repeatedly requested to the Baluch-Yunua Khan, "I want my mother, where is my mother" (Dr. Raju J Patole. 36). Her inconsolable and anguished cry brings out the agony of the children who suffered during partition. Hence it is obvious that in the catastrophe of partition not only adults suffered but also children were traumatized and exploited.

Not only Indian writers but also Pakistani writers wrote on the theme of partition. Saadat Hasan Manto, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ashfaq Ahmad, Qudrat Ullah Sahab, Ibne Insha, Aziz Ahmad and Intizar Hussain are some of those writers who expressed their grief about the violence of partition through their stories. Qudrat Ullah Sahab's story, *Ya Khuda*, dictates the tale of harrowing misery to which Muslim women were subjected during partition. The title *Ya Khuda* itself symbolizes the utter helplessness of a human being victimized during partition, when the womenfolk faced such an inhuman treatment by the hands of men irrespective of their religion or country.

Punjab suffered most during the catastrophe of partition, so the Punjabi writers in English, Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi wrote on the theme of partition again and again. Their novels, short-stories and poems dealing with the trauma of partition are found in abundance in Punjabi Literature. Punjabi writer's, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and her poem *Aj Aakhan Wari Shah Noo*, have emotionalized the people of both the sides of the border to the extent that even today when they read the poem their eyes are filled with tears and weep for what they themselves had done to each other and felt sorry for every incident.

There is a lot of literature written on the theme of partition and representing the plight of common people like Raj Gul's novel, *The Rape*, H.S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals*, Alamgir Hashmi's novel *Clear Light of Day*, Gurucharan Das's *A Fine Family*, B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* and many more works written by Indian and Pakistani writers based on partition themes.

Hence the partition of Indian subcontinent in to two nations on the basis of religion was seen as an inevitable price paid for the freedom of country from the British colonial powers. The partition literature produced by the writers of Indian subcontinent provides us an

opportunity to understand how common people during the predicament of partition suffered, especially women were subjected to violence by the men of opposite communities, children were traumatized and men were brutally killed. Arson, bloodshed, rape, murder, lynching, abduction etc. were the common happenings during partition and very artistically and realistically represented by the writers of Partition Literature. Among all the dreadful consequences of partition there are still certain things for consolation i.e., though the subcontinent was divided into two nations but the language and literature were not partitioned. The Two-Nation Theory claimed Hindi to be the language of Hindu and Urdu of Muslims. The Hindus who stayed in Pakistan and Muslims Who did not migrate from India to Pakistan kept the both languages alive in both Countries. The partition failed to destroy the languages of the people. Hence literature was not partitioned and will never be.

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