

From Harmony to Holocaust: A Study of Community Relations in the Partition Novel

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Even a casual reading of novels on the subject of the Partition of India in 1947 indicates that these novels observe a common pattern. This pattern, as it manifests itself in Indo-English and Panjabi fiction, is the subject of this paper. The pattern relates to the sudden eruption of violence in a society described as harmonious in varying degrees. The tendency of most of the writers is to begin with the portrayal of the friendly and amicable existence of the three major communities, an existence which subsequently gets disrupted by forces either from within the community or from outside. The recurrent pattern foregrounds the element of harmony in the pre-Partition Panjab between the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities. That supposedly unproblematic era is marked by declarations of love and friendship. As such, religious differences are played down while the age-old co-existence is endlessly emphasised.

The pattern itself is a pointer to some compulsions behind the choice of such portrayals. Partly being historical fiction, the Partition novel seems to be strong on facts. Though history and autobiography mingle and history is never seen as a collective experience, yet on the whole there is a close following of history by the novelists.

The novelists, perhaps as a thematic necessity, first focus on the cordial relationship and total harmony in the pre-Partition days and then move on to describing hostility and actual violence during the Partition. It seems that any Partition novel would inevitably have the description of violence in it. Violence was, after all, the most outstanding and the most visible aspect of the Partition. A sudden transformation of an amicable life into one marked by violence, along with its detailed, graphic description, lends a dramatic quality to the pattern. As well as being true to history, the author gives the impression that s/he is bending before the dramatic compulsions of the narrative.

Whichever may be the direction chosen by the writer, the result is a facile writing saved from utter mindlessness only by one factor, namely a deep commitment to humanistic idealism which has its own appeal and desirability. All the writers reaffirm their faith in humanistic values and deplore the communal and divisive politics. The belief in the secular and liberal humanist ideal emerges as the most outstanding and common feature of the Partition novel both in English and Panjabi. We do not come across a single

novel that either presents the separatist point of view with sympathy or sides with communalism.

Most of the novelists, especially those belonging to the Indian part of the subcontinent, seem to somewhat sentimentally appeal to the reader to comprehend the entire phenomenon as an illogical aberration in human conduct. This involves a certain glossing over of historicity. That the tensions between the communities had been deep-rooted and complex is a fact that is ignored perhaps because it is found to be tactically unsuitable. The decision of the Indian leadership to make the country a secular republic does impose a certain constraint upon a writer not to emphasise the negative factors which have otherwise been a part and parcel of our community life. In any case it is both defensible and necessary that divisive factors are played down so that there is no further eruption of the kind that was witnessed at the time of the Partition.

Almost all the writers tend to treat this event and the resulting experiences as a national aberration, as a nightmare which needs to be excised from our memory and consciousness. The tendency not only represents wishful thinking but also hints at the artist's inability to wholeheartedly confront the complex and the terrible. This leads one to think that such abdication of responsibility results in ignoring not only the past but the present too. The complex amalgam of contradictions along with a naive sense of sentimentality pushes the writer to choose a safer, more convenient course of literary expression. Either there is no tension, and life is rosy, harmonious and perfectly amicable, or tension exists but only superficially and is, in fact, caused by mischief-mongers, outsiders, and power-hungry politicians.

Nanak Singh's *Khoon de Sohle* (1948; *Songs of Blood*) has the distinction of being the first novel in Panjabi on the Partition theme. The writer himself confesses: "My eyes had once witnessed Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs drinking water from the same glass. Today alas, the same eyes have to see the sad spectacle of one brother drinking the blood of the other."¹

The first half of the story presents the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh unity. People belonging to different religions are shown living together in peace. Their association is age-old and firmly established. The purport of the description of events in the first half is to highlight mutual love, unity and friendship among the communities. The setting of the novel is idyllic, in a village located on the bank of the river Suhan. Baba Bhana, the main character, is a money-lender, respected alike by Hindus and Muslims. No function is considered complete without his presence whether it is at a Hindu or a Muslim home. He looks after his Muslim friend Rahimbaksh's family and gives him complete support. The text puts the impulse behind the description of the village succinctly enough: "The village had complete unity and there was no trace of racial or religious discrimination."²

The same strain of idealism runs in another novel, *Twice Born Twice*

Dead by the famous Sikh writer Kartar Singh Duggal. The village Dhamyal emerges as an emblem of the love and unity between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The three communities are shown to be living together in mutual trust. When it is the anniversary of Guru Arjan Dev's martyrdom, the Muslims pool their sugar rations and arrange for the supply of Sherbat to their Sikh neighbours. The Hindus and Sikhs clean the streets on the occasion of Id and send sweets to their Muslim neighbours. Thus, Dhamyal is blissfully free of intolerance. Not only are people shown leading an amicable life in the pre-Partition days but even when the division is imminent the harmony remains intact. The Muslims of Dhamyal remain friendly and promise help and security to the Sikhs in general and to Sohne Shah in particular. When outsiders attack and disturb the harmony, thereby making the Sikhs flee from Dhamyal, the village Muslims visit the refugee camps with eatables and persuade the Sikhs to return to the village.

In *Khushboo* (The Perfume), Devinder shows Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living amicably even as late as 1945. The author insists that despite their different religious affiliations the three communities lived together happily until religious fundamentalism raised its ugly head. In the novel, nothing can break the friendship of Jaggi and Bashir. When both fall in love with the same girl, Usha, Bashir offers to withdraw as he values his friendship with Jaggi more. When Jaggi's lost father returns home and the family celebrates the event by starting an *akhand path*, all their neighbours including Muslims join in the prayers and thanksgiving.

Sohan Singh Seetal in his award winning novel *Tutan Wala Khuh* (1973; *The Collapsing Well*) depicts the Hindu Muslim unity before the advent of the British in India. The friendship of Chiragdin and Chanda Singh, carried forward by Ilamdin and Sajjan Singh, expresses close ties between Sikhs and Muslims. Chanda Singh implores Baba Pira not to break up the friendship between Ilamdin and Sajjan Singh:

Oi Mian Piria, do not make them discriminate against each other. This well is common to both of them. Chiragdin and I have spent our lives together and we want their friendship to endure like ours.³

Another character, Baba Akali, is a living embodiment of the Hindu Muslim unity. Time and again he reminds the villagers not to get worked up on petty issues and start fighting among themselves since they all belong to the same stock. Seetal believes that before the Britishers came to India and started governing it, all the communities were living happily together, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, helping in the hour of need and living without any religious conflict.

Of all the writers writing in Panjabi about the Partition, Niranjan Tasneem alone has pointed out the bias against Muslims and the areas of incompatibility between the communities. In *Jadon Saver Hui* (At Daybreak), he shows Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living together but also pictures an undercurrent of tension between them. The economic disparity between the

Hindus and the Muslims, the grudge felt by the Muslims and their pitiable condition, are clearly depicted by Tasneem. Bhaiyaji is a representative of the rich Hindu class which owns a major chunk of business. The Muslims are at the receiving end. Bhaiyaji is the owner of the house in which Buddhan, a helpless, old Muslim widow, is a tenant. She cannot even pay a most nominal rent. Similarly, a Muslim potter called Daula is also unable to pay Bhaiyaji a monthly rent of fifteen rupees for a shop.

Biri, Bhaiyaji's grandson, describes a number of incidents which reflect the prejudices against and humiliations of the Muslims who are accorded a second class status in the town. They seem to have accepted this inferior position and have been living together with the other communities until political messages awaken their resentment. The Hindus and Sikhs avoid using things touched by the Muslims because they are considered unclean and untouchable. In Bhaiyaji's factory a separate water container and mug is kept in a corner for Muslim artisans; in his house separate utensils are used in case a Muslim guest drops in and is served water or food. Biri is very reluctant to drink or eat at Buddhan's place. He makes all kinds of excuses. Tasneem thus highlights the fact that both Hindus and Muslims refused to forget even for a moment that the majority of Muslims were converts from the sections of the lowest Hindu caste, the untouchables. They could relate to this class only at the functional level; otherwise, a certain distance was always observed. Because of their spurning and their insulation the Muslims could not develop a warm relationship with the other communities, although such a relationship could have prevented the division both of the hearts and the nation.

Khushwant Singh was the first Sikh writer to write about the Partition in English. He portrays the relationship between the three communities in undivided India as totally harmonious and cordial. The main action of his novel *Train to Pakistan* takes place in a small village called Mano Majra situated near the Indo-Pak border with a railway bridge serving as the link between the two sides. Mano Majra is painted as an oasis of peace, and Khushwant Singh repeatedly emphasises its idyllic harmony. During the summer of 1947 even though there is widespread rioting and bloodshed at the frontier, it is suggested that the Partition has no meaning at Mano Majra, where Sikhs and Muslims have always lived in peace. Life in this village is regulated by trains which rattle across the nearby bridge on the river. The Sikhs and the Muslims are interdependent and the Sikh priest waits for the Mullah to call before he gets up for a bath and a prayer. Invariably the Sikhs and the Muslims meet in the Gurudwara to discuss their village problems. Even the *peepal* tree in the triangular common ground in front of the Sikh temple and the mosque is symbolic of the unity of all creation because it gives shelter to everyone without distinction. This unity is also visible in the way in which the village Sikhs treat a blind Muslim weaver and his baby girl, Nooran.

The topography of Mano Majra and the concrete details of village life

lend authenticity to the novelist's thematic concerns one of which is to present an unruffled rural community. Religious diversities are held together by a common centre of divine power, a three-foot-tall "slab of sandstone", which is worshipped by all the people of Mano Majra. It is the local deity and it is worshipped by all the three communities. Thus, not only is Mano Majra free from the fratricidal war of 1947 but the traditional amity between the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Sikhs remains undisturbed.

It is not easy to believe that there could be such a sleepy village and such a peaceful life so very close to the border when nearly the whole of Panjab was in utter turmoil. This shows either lack of imagination on the part of the novelist or simply wishful thinking. Mano Majra is supposed to be the most important village on the border and yet no one here knows that the British have left and that the country is divided into Pakistan and Bharat. The arrival of fifty odd refugees is not considered dangerous by the Inspector who argues that these refugees have not suffered much in Pakistan and are therefore not a threat to the village. The wonderfully stoic people of Mano Majra are absolutely sure that the Muslims are their brothers and mean no harm to them.

In portraying such abundance of love between the village communities Khushwant Singh is not quite convincing. At the inter-personal level such strong ties certainly existed, but to deny that conflict and hostility existed at the inter-community level is to mislead the reader. Khushwant Singh's repeated insistence on peace in Mano Majra is probably inspired by two factors. One is the concern for dramatic effect which can come if peace finds a contrast in violence. The other factor is related to the novelist's wish to treat the village as a laboratory to observe the interplay of various forces in the drama of Partition. Yet it is hard to believe in the reality of the village, particularly when one realises that it is flanked by two topographical identities. For the village is by the side of a railway station and trains carry not only people but also news. Also, being on the border it should be all the more sensitive to the political events.

Even though one would like to place Khushwant Singh in the tradition of realism in which we find a close and detailed correspondence between the events as they are described and the actual events, one would still find it necessary to add that he lacks a realistic perspective. His realism is confined to details but does not include a total understanding of the chosen situation. This is so in the context of his portrayal of Mano Majra as an insulated, idyllic place. For we know for certain that Mano Majra, located on the border as it is, should have been vulnerable to the political and communal forces unleashed by the announcement of the division of India. It is also possible that in exalting the countryside Khushwant Singh is surrendering to the nostalgia that is characteristic of the urbanites' romantic fascination with the supposedly pure, innocent, conflict-free rural society.

This nostalgia is not peculiar to Khushwant Singh alone. Raj Gill in his novel *The Rape* and H.S. Gill in *Ashes and Petals* also exhibit it. They also

paint a rosy picture of the rapport between Sikhs and Muslims in Panjab villages. With the division of the country, this kinship vanishes in the air and yesterday's brothers turn into today's enemies. Raj Gill focuses on the irrepressible strength of their traditional accord despite grave provocation. This he does by introducing a love affair in the novel. His emphasis on the affair between Dalipjit and Laila reflects his optimistic view that all is not lost and that once the convulsion is over the people will stand by the ravaged Mother India as Dalipjit does by a violated Muslim girl.

The novel begins when the country is already divided and a ghastly drama is being enacted. Gill goes out of his way to tell the reader that

[i]n the pre-Partition days when the boys played *gulli-danda* on the village dung heaps, the Sardars had rubbed shoulders with the Muslims. As co-tillers of the fields the Muslims and the Jat Sardars had toiled together and appreciated each other's ways even though so divergent⁴

Even after the macabre drama, Ajit, the protagonist, insists on marrying Salma, a Muslim girl, and argues with his grandfather that the cutting up of the country is not going to change the basic relationships in the community. After all, people lived together before the Partition, and, since the Partition, too, they have been living together.

The Hindu novelists writing on the Partition place the action in an urban setting. In contrast to their Sikh counterparts, these novelists do not insist upon complete harmony. Instead, they depict the inter-community relations in a state of lull. Masked under a thin veneer of amity lies contention.

In *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) Manohar Malgonkar delineates the simmering discontent and hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims. He focuses on the dissension and acrimony between them both before and after the Partition. He reveals that the dissension and acrimony was not an abrupt process but had been growing over the years. Malgonkar believes that the Hindus and the Muslims were united by a negative force, by their common hatred for the British and their desire to throw them out. With the political changes in the country, the latent discord surfaced and changed the very hue of India's freedom struggle. The fragile bond of amity snaps at the dawn of independence.

Azadi (1975) by Chaman Nahal renders the ominous silence just before the division of the country. The first part of the novel describes the amity which exists between the three communities, but soon the conflict is also shown. Nahal does not fail to describe their old rivalries and resentments. Communal names given to educational institutions such as Arya Samaj School, Islamia School and Khalsa School, implicitly convey the prevalence of differences. There are also separate Hindu and Muslim mohallas, which signifies that people were living in communal spaces which could be cordoned off by installing gates and barricades. Despite the close ties of friendship between Lala Kanshi Ram and Chaudhri Barkat Ali, there are

perceptible differences in their ways of life and thought. They are the best of friends and yet certain lines are drawn which are not to be crossed. Nahal is also able to convey a certain uneasiness and lack of warmth between the three communities prior to the vivisection.

In *A Fine Family* Gurcharan Das tries to depict the inability of the Hindus and the Muslims to live together. He questions the so-called harmony through Bauji's introspection.

Some of his friends argue that Hindus and Muslims had lived together in peace for hundreds of years. They would continue to do so for hundreds more. This was a temporary insanity created by Jinnah, they said. After all, most Indian Muslims had been Hindus earlier who had been converted to Islam. So why shouldn't they live together in peace. . . . He was not so sure. Indian Muslims being recent converts were likely to be more fanatical. And was it really true that the two had lived peacefully together? Ever since he could remember there had been tension and clashes between the two communities.⁵

Attia Hosain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* comments upon the combined political front of Hindus and Muslims against the British. But she is not unaware of the fact that there were accepted differences even among close friends. Ranjit's grandfather did not eat with Baba Jan, although he was his greatest friend.⁶ Implicit in this great friendship is the difference of not touching each other's food. Attia Hosain asks:

What can you expect from a religion which forbids people to eat and drink together? When even a man's shadow can defile another, how is real friendship or understanding possible?⁷

This argument lends authenticity to the narrative as the author keeps close to the historical facts. Though the Hindus and the Muslims had co-existed for a long time, warm relationships at the social level were not really possible.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, the only novel on the Partition by a Parsee writer, reveals a peculiar love-hate relationship between Hindus and Muslims. Like a maladjusted couple the communities keep quarrelling but are as unable to separate as to live together. As the story unfolds, we find a superficial amity quickly sliding down towards discord in the city of Lahore. In contrast, Pir Pindo, a village thirty miles away, is depicted as a sanctuary of tranquillity when Lenny first visits it.

Not only is the life in the village contrasted with the life in the city but even Lenny's second visit to Pir Pindo is in total contrast to the first one. The presence of outsiders has created an ominous chill in the warm atmosphere of the village.

While portraying the amicable life led by the two communities prior to the Partition, the novelists introduce a love affair between a boy and a girl, each belonging to a different community. In *Azadi* Arun is in love with Nur;

in *Train to Pakistan* Jugga loves Nooran; in *A Bend in the Ganges* Debi and Mumtaz are in love with each other; Dalipjit loves Laila in *The Rape*; Ajit and Salma love each other in *Ashes and Petals*; Bauji and Anees are the lovers in *A Fine Family*; Kuldeep loves Satbharai in *Twice Born Twice Dead*; and Biri loves Salma in *Jadon Sawyer Hoi*. It is interesting to note that all the writers have made the beloved a Muslim, the male lover being either a Hindu or a Sikh. This suggests an intention on the part of the writers to intensify the pain and agony consequent upon the Partition by adding to it the agony of separated lovers whose somewhat idealized romance gets disrupted due to it. In *A Fine Family* Bauji is madly in love with a Muslim girl named Anees. They also get separated because of the Partition. However, Das's novel marks a departure from the pattern in that it starts with the premise that such an affair was doomed from the start. The significance of the affair lies in an entirely different direction and has nothing to do with the Partition. It represents the mystery of life itself and what happens to two people while they are deeply involved with each other. It brings out the life-enhancing and profound impact of a beautiful romance on the human mind.

Except for this unusual love affair in Das, the novelists' preoccupation with the theme of love in the Partition novel appears somewhat redundant and factitious. This is of course not to deny the possibility of attachments between young boys and girls belonging to different communities; these did develop since the communities lived, in best of times, in amity and peace. However, at no point in history were such inter-communal love relationships considered socially acceptable and many times they would lead at least to disruption, a kind of violence of imagination and raising of eyebrows. So when the novelists make the love theme a recurring feature suggesting that the Partition was a personal crisis, too, this strikes one as a pretty invention. The novelists seem to imply that but for the Partition these affairs would have ended happily, in marriage. No one hints that such an alliance was not permitted in the first place, that Partition or no Partition it was a doomed affair in any case. The obsession with romantic love indicates both sentimentality and a desire to create an aura of romance and emotion around a vast political catastrophe.

While writing on the Partition, whether in English or in Panjabi, the Indian novelist introduces and elaborates on the theme of people living an amicable social life before the Partition. However, there are some significant differences between the writers belonging to different communities. For example, barring Tasneem all the Sikh novelists emphasise total peace among the three communities before the Partition. This is perhaps because these writers set their novels in a rural setting where the majority of Sikhs lived in the pre-Partition period. These novelists ignore the complexity of the whole situation when they deny the element of disunity between the Hindus and the Muslims. Incidentally, the Muslim novelist, Attia Hosain, like Mehar Nigar Masroor, also emphasises absolute harmony in the village and lull in the city. Bapsy Sidhwa also follows the same pattern. Thus, Chakri in *Khoo*

de Sohle, Dharmyal in *Twice Born Twice Dead*, Mano Majra in *Train to Pakistan*, Hasanpur in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Pir Pindo in *Ice Candy Man* stand for total peace whereas Lucknow in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Aligarh, Delhi and Lahore in *Shadows of Times*, Lahore in *A Fine Family* as well as in *Ice Candy Man*, Duriabad in *A Bend in the Ganges*, and Sialkot in *Azadi* are cities which represent serious differences between the power elites of the communities. The struggle for power with a certain amount of political consciousness determines the relations among the three major communities and these relations vary from hushed serenity to actual violence.

The above-mentioned differences between the different groups of novelists in regard to their depiction of an amicable social life in pre-Partition days can be accounted for in terms of several factors. First, the idealisation of the countryside is a recurrent feature of much of literature the world over, including the political literature of the twentieth century. It is a part of the writer's literary sensibility to look back at the village with an eye at the back of his/her head, so to speak. Secondly, the novelists have been true to the facts when they blame outsiders for creating disaffection between the village communities. It has to be remembered that although the trouble had been simmering for a long time, the villagers were not conscious of the changes in politics which were of course felt keenly in the cities. It is also true of course that village life has a rootedness and interdependence not evident in the city. This interdependence determines the relations between the communities. More important still, in big cities the anonymity of existence makes it easy for people to indulge in violence; in the countryside people have been traditional neighbours and therefore do not find it easy to harm one another. Having said this, one still needs to add that the novelists tend to forget in their emotion of regret that there were accepted differences between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs even in the countryside. In fact, one feels these novelists make a deliberate attempt to erase these differences. Life in the countryside might have been cohesive but it was not by any means integrated. It was a fragile co-existence which needed only a push to result in a blood bath. Very few novelists have been able to convey clearly that the inter-community relations lacked depth and intimacy. Let alone inter-marriages, there was not even inter-dining between Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand and Muslims on the other.

The failure of the Partition novel to grapple with the relationship between the communities in all its complexity is not just an artistic deficiency. It is more than an artistic omission and suggests a national inability to introspect, analyse and face up to a most intractable problem of our political, social and cultural life. We seem to make do with bogus jargon and clichés. In these novelists, there is a genuine humanistic idealism to be sure, but it does not make up for their sentimentalism or their deliberate erasures.

NOTES

1. Nanak Singh, "Introduction" to *Khoon de Sohle* (1948; rpt. Amritsar: Lok Sahit Parkashan, 1982), p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
3. Sohan Singh Seetal, *Tootan Wala Khooh* (1973; rpt. New Delhi: Lok Geet Parkashan, 1988), p. 19.
4. H.S. Gill, *Ashes and Petals* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978), p. 128.
5. Gurcharan Das, *A Fine Family* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 20.
6. Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961; rpt. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1987), p. 197.
7. *Ibid.*