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Views from the Margin: A Reading of Select Partition Stories from Bangladesh

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Abstract: The 1947 Partition is a cataclysmic event that affects the social, political and cultural life of the Indian subcontinent till today. It saw massive transfers of population both in the eastern and western parts of India accompanied with innumerable violent deaths, murders, rapes, abduction of women and sectarian violence. But the Partition experience in Bengal province is quite different from that of the Punjab. The influx of refugees across the porous border of Bengal has never stopped till date. This unending flow of people makes Partition an everyday reality on the eastern border. The portrayal of this human tragedy in literature largely tells us of the experiences in the western and eastern parts (mainly West Bengal) of India. There is little light shed on the Partition narratives from Bangladesh, which is quite different from rest of the Partition stories, in Partition studies. This paper tries to examine the varied narratives of the select Partition stories from Bangladesh. The horrific reality of the Partition experienced in riots, arson, looting, murder and in the hairbreadth escape is evident in the stories. The tales also explore the sense of loss, separation, nostalgia and belonging accompanied by the issues of migration, displacement and identity. This endeavour will show that the hitherto unexplored area of Partition stories from Bangladesh can open up new horizons in literature for the in-depth understanding of human society. It can articulate the little narratives against the grand and the unofficial histories against the official.

Keywords: 1. Partition, 2. migration, 3. displacement, 4. violence, 5. identity, 6. refugee.

Introduction

The 1947 Partition of India was a cataclysmic event which resulted in violent deaths, murders, rapes, abduction of women and sectarian violence. It also initiated mass migrations in the eastern and western parts of India. Nearly eighteen million people were forced to uproot and migrate at that time (Tan & Kudaisya 139). The Partition also resulted in the abduction and rape of nearly seventy-five thousand women (Butalia 3). Human death estimates during Partition range from twenty lakh (the contemporary British figure) to two million (a later Indian estimate) (Butalia 3). These genocidal figures point to the fact that the 1947 Partition is one of the foundational tragedies in South Asia's collective history.

Literature has been able to capture the impact of the 1947 Partition on the quotidian lives of ordinary people which is otherwise absent in official histories. The trauma, loss and suffering



due to Partition are portrayed in different literary works across languages (i.e. Bengali, English, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, etc.). Hence literature has been considered as 'an alternative record of the period' (Didur 4) other than the official histories. But Partition literature is largely dominated by the experiences of the Partition-in-the-west whereas Partition-in-the-east seldom gets attention and focus. Moreover, narratives related to Partition-in-the-east focus mainly on the Indian/West Bengal part; experiences from Bangladesh fail to get its due share of attention in the discussions of Partition-in-the-east.

To fill in this lacuna the present article will try to examine the select Partition narratives from Bangladesh. It will explore the sense of loss, separation, migration and nostalgia felt by the communities experiencing the trauma of Partition not only at the time of actual event, but also long after it. This study will be based on two short stories- 'The Exile' by Hasan Azizul Huq (Ghosh & Ali 211), and 'Loknath o Mohammadi Panjinama' ('Loknath and Mohammad an Almanac' in English) by Imtiaz Shamim (Saha 275).

Discussion

Hasan Azizul Huq's 'The Exile' (1964) tells us about an escape of a rural lower-class Muslim agricultural labourer and farmer during the riots in 1947. The setting of the story is a village in rural 'Rarh' region of Bengal. Bashir, the protagonist, is a small farmer and agricultural labourer by profession. Wazddi, his uncle, also follows the same occupation. During the Partition, both of them heard about the probable communal disturbances in their area. Bashir asked Wazddi to escape their homeland in order to save their lives. But Wazddi refused to leave as it was unthinkable to him to have a second home or motherland. At night the rioters attacked their village and ransacked it. They killed Wazddi and set fire to their home. As a result, Bashir's wife was burnt to death and his eight-year-old son was brutally killed by the rioters. Bashir became traumatised after these disastrous incidents and escaped to another land. During his escape, he encountered another lonely stranger fleeing like him. Suddenly in a feat of rage, he attacked the stranger and killed him with the strike of an axe. But when Bashir looked at the eyes of the stranger whom he had killed, he saw the blood-stained, horrified, surprised face of Wazddi, his uncle. Now he realised that the homeland which he had left, and the new home where he had arrived were essentially the same. He felt as being 'an alien' in both the lands.

The story portrays not-so-talked about experiences of Muslim minority people in West Bengal during the times of the 1947 Partition. The victims are lower-class marginalised people who suffered at the hands of the rioters from the majority Hindu community. The story also dispels the conventional myth about minority community of being not-so-patriotic as Bashir and Wazddi both decided to stay in their homeland despite the news of impending riots. The portrayal of violence in the story is also remarkable in the sense that most of the Bengal Partition literature avoids the representation of violence. In *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal* (2020), Suranjana Choudhury observes: 'It is noteworthy that to date, the majority of whatever Bangla literature has been produced on Partition addresses primarily the issues of migration and strategies of rehabilitation instead of addressing direct violence and the wounds of Partition' (25). At the end of the story, Bashir realised after killing the fleeing stranger, that the man he had killed and Wazddi, who was killed by the rioters, are actually the members of the same human community who are the victims of communal violence. At the time of death, both their faces were marked by the appalling wonder of being killed by the strangers who had no reasons of enmity



towards them. The feeling of Bashir of being 'an alien' comes from the fact that he comprehended the full realization of the actions or happenings around him. He realised both the lands-the one where he was going and the one which he was fleeing were essentially the same as in both the lands people were being killed mercilessly in communal violence with respect to their divisive communal identity. Therefore, he was 'an alien' in terms of being 'a human' in both these lands. This understanding or the feeling of being 'alien' of Bashir makes the story a remarkable human document of Partition 1947 due to which innumerable people had suffered irrespective of caste, class, creed and gender. This suffering humanity is the only truth that beckons Partition 1947. The Partition violence, depicted in the story, points to the indispensable relation between community identity and violence. During Partition such kind of violence determined the image of the community by supplying it more power and strength in comparison to another rival community. Therefore, the execution of such violence was normalised and sanctified in the respective narratives of each rival community. But Bashir is able to penetrate this parochial notion of community after his own act of violence. In his case, violence brings on the full realization of truth about the reality of the times and society.

The next story to be discussed is 'Loknath o Mohammadi Panji Nama' by Intiar Shamim. The title refers to the two kinds (i.e. one Hindu and another Muslim) of 'Panji Nama' or almanac. They contain different laws and policies related to religious customs according to each date in a specific year. The story is set in a village of East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Aftab Khalifa, the protagonist, was deliberating about the usefulness of keeping two kinds of almanac for his tailor shop. He knew that this system of keeping two kinds of almanac was first started by his father and so he hesitated to change this system. He often thought of asking his father about this peculiar system but forgot to do so as he was busy with his mundane life. His shop was not running well and his assistant, Musa, was inefficient and lazy. So, he pondered over his state of affairs. His younger brother, Ashraf, also worked at the shop but without any kind of remuneration or share of profit. He deliberated about what would happen after Ashraf's marriage; if the shop would be divided into equal shares for the two brothers. Such tensions occupied Aftab's mind and he forgot to ask his father about the almanac. His father was paralysed and immobile at bed. But he remembered perfectly well his childhood friends Atin and his younger sister who left for India suddenly without saying a word to their friends during the Partition. Aftab's father remembered his visit to Atin's home just after their departure. At that time the emptiness of Atin's home struck him immediately. He found a left-out Loknath almanac there. He took that almanac to home and his father taught him to read that almanac. By reading that almanac, Aftab's father was able to contemplate about the socio-religious activities of Atin and his family on a specific day on the other side of the barbed wire in a forlorn land without friends. Aftab's father visualised them regularly in his dreams and desired to meet them. His desire to meet his childhood friends was so acute that when he realised that he was going to die, he became relieved as he was sure to meet Atin and his sister after death.

The story is steeped in irony and satire as we see the futile attempts of Aftab to weigh the two kinds of almanac to know which is heavier. Aftab's father was haunted throughout the story by the displacement of his childhood friends during the 1947 Partition. His visit to Atin's home, after their sudden departure, exposes us to his love for Atin and Atin's sister. His finding the Loknath almanac there and taking it home reinforces his unforgettable love for his childhood friends. His concern and love for Atin's family is heart-wrenching as he pondered over the daily activities of



Atin's family on the other side of the barbed wire. The trauma and suffering of severing of ties of friendship and love of early childhood haunted Aftab's father throughout his life and it controlled his entire course of life.

Partition literature has seldom focused on the trauma of those who stayed on the land with respect to those who departed. Here the story lays bare the deep wounds and scars inflicted on the minds of people who had to painfully accept the departure of their friends and neighbours due to Partition. This story explores their trauma and pain which perhaps weigh no less than the physical wounds and suffering wrought by the catastrophic events of Partition 1947. Such pain and suffering haunted them throughout their entire life with unresolved and unspeakable scars deep in their mind. Aftab's father is a case in point. The remarkable exploration of Aftab's father's trauma, pain and suffering is starkly contrasted with Aftab's own indifferent attitude to his father's feelings and emotions. Aftab father's desire to meet his friends even after his death highlights the inseparable ties of love and friendship among people which Partition failed to sever.

Conclusion

The stories under consideration expose different human dimensions of Partition 1947 in unique ways. Whereas 'The Exile' explores the rarely discussed experiences of a displaced Muslim labourer, 'Loknath o Mohammadi Panjinama' illustrates the much-neglected effects of Partition on the people of the majority community who had to accept the painful departures of their neighbours and friends due to Partition. The stories also go beyond the mere historical facts and touch ordinary people at their sensitive and contemplative best. In a way they heal and humanize through their narratives and provide an emotional map of Partition 1947. The stories also recreate a shared past of living in harmony of different communities and illustrate at the same time that the stories of human suffering across the barbed wire are the same irrespective of caste, class, creed and community. The select texts highlight the neglected voices from Partition 1947 which is largely dominated by Punjab centrism or Indocentrism. Sayeed Ferdous rightly comments that 'Punjab centrism or Indocentrism often suppresses the divergent voices and makes them the "other" stories from "other" places' (xiii). Therefore, the select stories from Bangladesh disrupt the unitary, hegemonic master narratives by recreating the multilayered experiences and images of the Partition through its retellings of the affective, the personal and the local narratives vis-à-vis Partition 1947. The stories also teach us not to repeat the violence, hatred and sufferings of Partition 1947 but to learn the lessons of love, empathy and indomitable human spirit.

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