

Retaining Humanity in the Partition Mayhem: A Study of Short Stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna

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ABSTRACT

Partition still evokes a mixture of emotions among the people. If the partition turned human beings into monsters, then it also allowed the triumph of humanity. Sarna's stories are rooted in his own experiences. His stories dwell on the past when the communities shared cordial and friendly relations, and at the same time show how these cordial relations turned sour with the announcement of Pakistan. Sarna's stories show that the people may have lapsed into monstrosity but this lapse is momentary. According to Sarna a firmer and stronger building of relations will be built on these ruins.

Keywords: Violence, Partition, Muslim, Sikhs.

INTRODUCTION

Partition is one of the greatest tragedies that occurred in the Indian subcontinent. The partition itself as an event was not a tragedy, but the events that followed were gravely tragic. The violence that accompanied partition was unparalleled. Human beings became monsters and started destructing everything they came across. The sanctity of every relation and every institution was violated. The number of people who lost their lives in the mayhem exceeds any other tragedy. However, it must be kept in mind that statistics regarding the loss of lives are misleading. Paying attention only to the loss of lives hides the real gravity of tragedy. The psychological problems that ensued from violence still plague the individuals and mistrust that was created among the communities still continue.

However, it must be acknowledged that if the partition became the site for the monstrous actions of mankind, then it also showed the best of mankind. Some people become monsters, but there were some who presented the best of humanity and became glittering examples for people to follow (Pal, Where 56).

A huge body of literature has emanated from the partition in all three countries: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Many writers have written about the tragedy of partition, but the tragedy was so colossal that nothing seems repetitive. Everything a writer comes up with in a new work, a new fact of tragedy comes up. Literature on partition has appeared in many languages: English, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and Bangla. Many of the greatest chronicles of the tragedy were hidden behind the veil of regional languages. Saadat Hassan Manto is one. His genius was discovered by the world when his

stories were translated into English. Similar is the case of Mohinder Singh Sarna, who originally wrote his stories in Punjabi. His civil servant son Navtej Sarna has translated his stories into English. The stories which were obscured by Gurmukhi script are now available for people to read in English.

One important thing about Mohinder Singh Sarna is that his stories are rooted in his own experiences. His family also experienced the tragedy of partition and was uprooted from Rawalpindi in Pakistan. His stories show his knowledge of areas of Pakistan and the flavour of local culture. However, it must be acknowledged at the same time that his stories show the triumph of humanity. His stories are objective in the sense that they do not show the bitterness of uprooting. Most of the works on partition have strong political undertones. Most of the partition literature is marked by the feeling: “Never before in South Asian History did so few divides so many...” (Hassan 43). Partition literature not only describes the tragedy but also lays the blame on politicians. People who were uprooted by the partition are often bitter in their criticism of politicians (Pal, Anatomy 148). The general feeling in partition literature is that it was orchestrated by the politicians. However, Mohinder Singh Sarna’s stories are free from this blame game. He does not concentrate on politics or politicians. His stories show the triumph of humanity. The greatest achievement of Mohinder Singh Sarna is that bitterness is nowhere visible in his stories. The achievement is remarkable because the partition was “one of the bloodiest upheavals of history: twelve million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half million were killed; over a hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated” (Batra 83). Mohinder Singh Sarna himself writes about his stories:

I did not lose faith even when faced by the barbarity of partition. My partition stories pass knee-deep through dark quicksand of black and crushed bone, but they keep their head, on which they carry their bundle of hope, clearly above the quicksand. The hope is kept intact even in the whirlwind of barbarity and brutality. (Sarna, Navtej XIII)

His story “A New Taj Mahal” shows that humanity is the greatest religion for human beings. The Partition may have resulted in temporary mayhem, but humanity has again gained ground among the people. In the story, a Sikh man goes back to Pakistan to meet his old friend and to repay his debt to a shoe seller. The man whom he owed the money for the shoes refuses to accept, and tells the visitor: “But I cannot take this money. If my father had been alive, he too would have not accepted it” (15). The Man not only refuses the money but also gifts him a new pair of shoes. The narrator writes:

Despite my remonstrations, he made me wear the shoes. They were such a marvelous pair, gripping my feet so perfectly that I couldn’t have taken them off even if I had tried. I had been searching for such a pair for many years, but had been unable to find it anywhere in Delhi. (15)

The shopowner refuses to accept any money for these shoes also. The response of the owner of the shop shows that the shopowner does not treat the man as a customer or a Sikh man; the only relationship is that of brotherhood and humanity. The response of the shopkeeper shows that humanity has triumphed over the past.

A still greater surprise awaits the narrator in his house. When he finds his old house in the city of Rawalpindi, he is astonished to find that his books have been carefully preserved by the owners of the house. Not only the books, but the occupants of the house have also kept the soul of the house intact. The narrator's grandfather's photograph still adorns the house. The new occupants of the house were also displaced by the partition. They also showed empathy towards the original inhabitants of the house and kept the soul of the house intact.

Another important aspect of partition-related violence in Mohinder Singh Sarna's story is that the violence seems to be done by the young men only. The older generation is the protector of values. For the older generation relations did not depend on religion, the daughter of the village is a daughter to everybody. These relations are Cherished and showed the shared heritage of the people. Religions might be different, but their heritage is the same. That is why there is no difference between the daughters. In the story "Savage Harvest," readers see that Dina the old man contrite for the doings of his son Bashir:

It was a rotten thing that Bashir had done. Defending the honour of the women of the village was a common burden. Everyone's daughter were just like your own. The loss of any woman's honour was catastrophe for all. (9)

Dina is an old man for whom everybody's daughter is the same. He considers Preeto as his daughter, but for his son Bashir Preeto is only a body; a sexual object to satisfy his carnal desires. These men have been inebriated by the creation of Pakistan; in his state of inebriation, they wreaked havoc on the people and started looting to celebrate partition. This momentary lapse turned these young men into monsters who turned the world upside down and destroyed the relations that were cultivated over the centuries.

In another story "A Village Called LaddewalaVaraich," Mohinder Singh Sarna introduces us to another old man Khuda Baksh Varaich who is the "old Choudhary of the village" (24). He feels helpless in front of the younger people: "The riff-raff of my own clan, those whom I've brought up with my own hands now stare at me with murder in their eyes" (28). He is the old Choudhary, who could not differentiate between his granddaughter Salma and Chanda Singh's daughter Jagiro. However, the younger people have turned into monsters and they violate the young girl Jagiro who is only fifteen years old. The old man can face this ignominy. He commits suicide to escape from this world now ruled by monsters:

His own children had destroyed him. They had trampled on his old bones and rubbed his white beard into the dust. His disagreement was visible everywhere. There was a time when people didn't dare to look him in the eye. And now his sons and grandsons had raised their axes against him. There was no point in living anymore. (32)

Choudhary Khuda Baksh has to commit suicide because the values he had guarded diligently have been desecrated by his own progeny. The younger generation has forgotten all the values and turned into monsters. That is why Choudhary Khuda Baksh feels that his life has no value.

In another story "of one community," Mohinder Singh Sarna shows that both the communities suffered during the mayhem. He is one among "many writers [who] have realized that stories cannot be written to highlight violence only" (Pal 100). The common experiences of violence can

breed the same problem among the people of different communities. The common problem shows that under the outer coverings of religion, human beings are the same. That is why people from different communities respond to violence in the same way. In the story “of one community”, Mohinder Singh Sarna introduces us to two; one Sikh and one Muslim; who suffer from the same problems because they have gone through the same kind of experience.

At the beginning of the story, the readers are shown how the mother of the Sikh gentleman is repulsed by the arrival of her Muslim neighbour. She associates all the Muslims with the tormentors who had inflicted violence on the helpless people in newly constructed Pakistan:

The riots that had accompanied the partition of the country had left deep wounds on my mother’s soul and planted a deep antipathy towards Muslims in her heart. Her younger brother had been killed in Takht Parhi and a cousin of mine in Basoli. My mother’s newly-wed niece in Thoa Khalsa had jumped into a well to save her honour, while her husband died fighting the mob or rioters. And we ourselves had barely managed to make it across the border looted and bereft, after struggling in refugee camps and caravans, witnessing bloodshed and violence and escaping death by hair’s breadth more than once. (60)

The mother had developed a deep hatred for Muslims. She has started associating every Muslim with violence. “She had convinced herself that Muslims were cruel, merciless and inhuman” (60). Due to her prejudice, the mother has deep-seated suspicions against Muslims. That is why she rejects the offer of her Muslim neighbour:

Mother did not respond. She seemed taken aback by this unexpectedly early confrontation with our Muslim neighbours. Perhaps she was unconsciously comparing the visitor to the uneducated, burqa-clad Muslim women she was used to encountering in Rawalpindi. (62)

The deep-rooted suspicion of the mother and her habit of associating all Muslims with violence does not allow her to forge normal relations with anybody. However, the mother soon realizes that there are helpless people among the Muslims also who bore the brunt of violence; but here the perpetrators were of a different community. Soon the mother realizes that there is a close affinity between the neighbours. The Muslim neighbour suffers from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His wife tells them about the symptoms:

He begins to feel very restless all of a sudden. His legs go weak and his hands start to tremble. He gets such strong attacks of this restlessness and discomfort that it seems his life is in danger. (64)

The reason behind this Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the violence faced by the families. The Muslim family faced the same problems as the Sikh family. The mother realizes that there are only two communities in the world “the cruel and the meek” (66). Both the families realize that they belong to the category of “the meek.” This helps them in developing an affinity between them. The mother also realizes that all Muslims are not cruel and perpetrators of violence. There are peace-loving people in both communities who are able to maintain their humanity in the mayhem.

Mohinder Singh Sarna lived in the area of Rawalpindi which is why he is very well aware of the rural areas and the people who live in them. The residents of the villages were generally from one stock though some of them were Sikhs, and some of them were Muslims. In the story “Gondlanwala,” Sarna writes:

Gondlanwala couldn't be called either a Sikh or a Muslim village; It was a village of Gondal Jats and they could be Sikhs as well as Muslims. For centuries they had lived like brothers. But now the country's partition had given a new meaning to their identity. They were no longer Gondal Jats, Only Sikhs or Muslims. (75)

In the story, the readers again see the conflict between the older and the younger generations. Choudhary Karim Baksh is an old man who still cherishes the values that were nurtured by elders, but his son Manzoor and his friends are perpetrating violence against the Sikhs. Choudhary is enraged at the conduct of his son and his friends. While trying to stop his son from doing misdeeds, Choudhary dies of a heart attack. However, the grandson of Choudhary rescues the girl and takes her to her uncle. The story shows that partition did not change the character of every person. In the story, readers are introduced to a Maulvi who is not afraid of calling a spade a spade. He tells Manzoor Ali:

Kill me if you want. You are an evildoer. You have insulted Islam. You'll pay the price on the Day of Judgement. (83)

This maulvi is an exception in the troubled times when the men have become beasts. The roles of maulvis in spreading violence have been documented by many researchers. In a story titled “From Khanna to Bhikhi”, Sarna writes:

The maulvis of the mosques in all the neighbouring villages are whipping up the passions of the faithful at prayer times. They are saying that there is no place for infidels in Pakistan, created at the command of Allah himself, that Pakistan will be impure as long as it contains even a trace of the infidel. I have seen leaking flames and shining spears dancing in the eyes of worshipping as they leave the mosques (162-3).

It is important to note that Mohinder Singh Sarna and his family were dislocated from Rawalpindi in Pakistan. The place was dominated by Muslims where they looted and killed Hindu and Sikh families. However, Sarna is a conscious artist who knows that man transformed into a beast and both sides of the border. In his story “Parmeshwari” he shows the bestiality of a young Indian side. In the story he writes:

Then at high noon, we took out a procession of all those naked Muslim women. A procession of naked breasts. All types of naked breasts. Small and hard, big and soft, Virgin breasts, young breasts, middle-aged breasts. On, the sheer pleasure of that sign.

The older generation here also is sane. Parmeshwari has lost her daughter and husband to Muslim rioters in Rawalpindi, but she knows that the Muslims of Patiala are innocent, so retribution against them is useless and unwanted for. She tells her son:

Don't you ever call me mother again. I'm dead for you and you're dead for me. Didn't you see the steel bangle of your faith on your arm when you raised the sword of the Tenth Guru on innocents, you butcher? I, your mother, curse you. May you die and may you.... (220)

The response of the mother shows that humanity is still alive in the heart of some people. In the story "Qazi Da Kot", Sarna writes about a Kashmiri Muslim man Gulam Sarwar undergoes a change of heart. In the story, he is determined to carry a young Sikh Woman Anup Kaur to his house, but he undergoes a change of heart when he sees her praying. The young woman reminds him of his mother and he tells her "You are my sister; you are my mother" (244). Sarna comments that "A lamp had been lit in the darkness of his soul. Gathering the light and right like an alert guard, he followed a few steps behind Anup' (244).

Thus, the partition stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna stand out because of their themes and optimism. His stories show that everything is not lost for humanity. The times may be difficult, but humanity is not bogged down. The older generation still carries the glow of humanity in their hearts. The younger generation was carried away by the events, but Sarna shows that there are still rays of hope and humanity will triumph and harmony will again be established.

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