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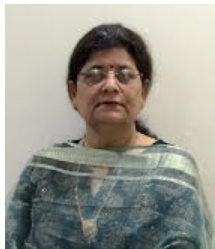
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**INTERROGATING PARTITION: PROBLEMATICS OF IDENTITY IN MUKUL KESAVAN'S
LOOKING THROUGH GLASS AND SHIV K. KUMAR'S *A RIVER WITH THREE BANKS***

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ABSTRACT

The partition of India is one of the most traumatic and complex event not only in the history of the Indian subcontinent, but also in the world history. The decision of Partition left its people with identities, which were communal in nature and overpowered all other identities —gender, class, caste, and region that had existed in the country so far. Religion, which had hardly been an identity marker in pre-partition life, suddenly began to play an essential role in the Indian politics. This was in contrast to the daily experiences of people at many places, where people of different religions were living with great peace and understanding. The present paper attempts to examine discourse of identity through the reading of Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* and Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks*. Both texts are distinct in its delineation of identity politics. Religious identity, which was so exclusively enforced on people at the time of Partition, appears as a symbol of exteriority in these narratives. The paper has four sections. The Introduction proposes the aim of the paper and discusses the concept of identity. The second and the third sections trace the ways the selected novelists have projected and problematized the issues of identities especially in the pluralistic domain of Indian sub-continent in the wake of partition. The last segment of the paper will serve as a conclusion.

Key words: Partition, religion, identity, individual, communal, nation.

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INTRODUCTION

Partition and Identity-politics: The partition of India is one of the most traumatic and complex event not only in the history of the Indian subcontinent, but also in the world history. The process of nation formation, which was expected to include people in historical process, excluded them from their own history. The poor people who had all the rights to celebrate the long awaited freedom were forced to mourn the death of their hopes, sense of belonging, loss of past life, identity, home, land, fields and separation of near and dear ones and much more.

Partition history is the history of losses, not of gains. Instead of solving anything partition of India aggravated and triggered problems; By drawing Radcliff line once, it created innumerable fine cracks which are very dangerous and alarming for the existence of both the nations even till to date. The politics of India and Pakistan are still muddled with the history of partition.

Partition signifies a period, which saw the emergence of dual identities, as the personal became political and *vice versa*. At this juncture, political nationalism gave way to religious

nationalism and religious sentiments of people in their divisive and exclusionist sense became defining forces of identity. "In what is called historical role reversal phenomenon, the new identities such as histories, nations and nationalism become subservient to the older identities of people such as ethnic cultures and religions" (Komalesha 126).

According to Gyanendra Pandey "Partition is a defining movement in shaping and strengthening communitarian consciousness. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were all redefined by the process of Partition" (Pandey 2001). Partition subordinated other identities—gender, class, caste, and region to an exclusive religious community: a monolithic religious community.

Thus, the process of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 not only demanded a re-evaluation of national and personal identity, but indeed created new concepts of identity altogether. The process of establishing new identities, based on shifting national, religious and cultural communities, meant that identity became a conscious part of people's life. People who had never been out of their locales were suddenly forced to choose a country they didn't know the whereabouts.

Problematics of identity in *Looking through Glass*:

Kesavan's novel *Looking through Glass* interrogates the hegemonic aspects of official history by retrieving suppressed history of the marginalized people. Kesavan voices the local and the particular. In fact, Kesavan doesn't dismiss history but retrieves various other versions, which have been left out of the domain of official history. According to Mukul Kesavan his novel "is about people in the midst of great change, about ordinary people who do not have any great lasting convictions, people who are attached to the lives they lead" (T.R.K. 1996).

The novel critiques the official version of secularism and attempts to map the agony of the nationalist Muslims who were sidetracked from the mainstream politics. Centering on the Congress's version of the Quit India Movement, the novel contests the notion that in a nation fragmented by class, race, religion, there can not be a single,

completely objective viewpoint giving history in totality, therefore emphasizing the need to record the histories of those who are silenced by hegemonic discourses of history.

The novel is unique in accepting the fact that religious identities are not substitutes for national identities. Identity is a complex and multidimensional concept: it consists ethnic or religious background, gender, social and economic status. The whole idea of purity and Identity is questioned in the novel. The novel interrogates the kind of identity politics that puts religion in centre. Names and other external religious markers/signifiers are unreliable indicators of identity, proving the point that real identity is not dependent upon them for its creation. Identities can be easily transformed or shifted, religions adopted or abandoned, or falsely constructed by society, but the inner being remains, anchored in its existential moorings. Identity is not solely dependent on religion; the need to base it in religion arises out of a political necessity for counter defense.

If we look at the identities of the characters, most of them have misleading identities. All these characters foster the idea of humanity as well as secularism and plead for non-differentiation among individuals. Their identities are symbolic of the inclusive culture of India. One of the simplest ways of identifying the victim is through external markers like *Tilak, Bindi, Cap, Burka*, turban or bodily one like carving of *Swastik* or circumcision. But these markers appear to be superficial and shifting in the novel *Looking through Glass*. The whole idea of identity as fixed entity is interrogated through the identities of various characters who have multi-layered identities. All these characters foster the idea of humanity as well as secularism and plea for non-differentiation among individuals. Their identities are symbolic of the inclusive or assimilative culture of India.

The narrator who is a Hindu lives and is adopted by a Muslim family. He starts his journey as an unnamed traveller with the intention of immersing his grandmother's ashes in the Ganga and is being transported from the 1990s to the 1940s. He is exposed to various phases of history, which he was not aware of. He becomes part of

historical happenings and is injured during the assault on *thana*, he has been “shanghaied in the name of the nation and pressed into serving a doomed rebellion”(LTG 103-04) He is sheltered in Varanasi in *Pant Ram Ka Akhara* where he is cast as Sita in the nationalist Ramlila. By the end of the novel, he is circumcised, thus leaving his Hindu self and assimilating his identity in the minority class. He takes shelter in the *Purana Quila* with the Muslims of Delhi while the riots of 1947 continue outside. In the end of the novel we find the narrator willingly including himself in a group photograph of Intezar's family.

Another character Parwana has multiple shades of identity. She is Chandrakanta, then becomes Ruth and finally is named as Parwana: Each name is associated with a different community. Her identity gets more complex when she is found kissing Asharfi. She gets shelter in a Hindu family, in Kaushalaya Devi's (Dadi's) home and is wildly loved by Masroor, a Muslim boy. There Kaushlya Devi tries to change her by dressing her in Khadi but her body revolts and breaks out in rashes signifying resistance against any impositions on her body.

One more character Tojo also represents shifting paradigms of identity. His real name is Ram Lakhan but after the Japanese overran Malaya he had changed his name as Tojo to fight the British.

Masroor's father Intizar turns out to be the son of Kalidass Ganjoo who was a Kashmiri Brahmin. For his love for Urdu and Musaddas and for Kulsum (Ammi); his love, he embraced Islam. Charandass's adaptation of Islam further complicates the demarcating line between the two communities. But his present name Intizar he had adopted even before he marries Kulsum. “He had chosen it because it staked his claim to poethood....Intezar. Waiting. Stern, silent poet waiting for the Muse”(LTG 26). The author has introduced chronicled family history of Intizar entitled as “The History and Destiny of the Ganjoos,” a story of their migration from Kashmir to Lucknow and their prosperity first in the court of the Nawab of Awadh and then won by siding with the colonizers. However, the ‘Destiny of Ganjoo’ remains incomplete as the only heir changed his

religious faith to be a poet and to marry a Muslim girl. The grieving father, who used to take pride in his ancestry, right from the days of Kalhana, died broken hearted, ‘trying to write his way out of his destiny's dead end.’(LTG 27).

Another significant character Haasan, mistaken by all for a Shia Muslim, a permanent entity in Masroor and Ammi's household is in fact Haasan Yamanachar Narasimhamurthy, Iyengar Brahmin from the town of Hasan in Karnataka. Haasan has moved to Mysore and then Calicut where he was obliged to trade with Mappila Muslim Communities to make a living by selling banana chips and pickles. He is compelled to assume an identity of a Muslim because he hears “rumours of British Garrisons being put to flight by mobs of rampaging Muslims.”(LTG .82) and rumours about Muslim “rebels forcibly converting Nambudari Brahmin families to Islam”. His uncle insists that he will be secure in an area with “Muslim rebels on rampage” if he dresses as a Muslim. So Haasan dresses himself “a beard recently grown trimmed Muslim fashion, a small lace cap, another name Ali Musaliar” (LTG 82) whenever he goes on his business tours. Although Haasan hesitates in going the only place for eating vegetarian place at Garudapuram, “a fanatically vegetarian enterprise where Brahmins looped with sacred thread, serve food.” He is not treated well there. First the food arrives with a cockroach swimming in it. When he objects, he finds the coffee in his face and then:

Someone kicked my jaw and then another by temple.....Someone shouted cut it off, cut it off and another laughed and someone else said no.....and then terrible line of fire and pain spread across my chest....They have etched him with the logo of their faith. This swastika.....But it was his fault that he'd been mistaken for a Muslim. The initial markings had been his: cap, lungi, and the careful beard....The cook had simply gone by appearances (LTG 85).

Therefore, he, mistaken and branded for being a Muslim, voluntarily assumes that identity in order to rid himself of all signs of identification through religion. In fact Haasan's character

foreground the fears and fortunes of many a marginalised people. His ethical code while talking of generalities "love for" all essential humanity, unclassified, unclothed," establishes his commitment firmly with those who are weak, victimized and suppressed.

Outward appearances turn out to be complex identities, if not disguises. When Ammi, the matriarchy of the narrator's adopted family decides to contest an election and make a separate party Anjuman Bara-i-Tahaffuz-i-Haal, photographers and interviewers through the lens of stereotypical ethnicity see her. They all want to see a Muslim woman dressed in a Burka. But she says that it "is not a Muslim party---it is the society for the Defence of the Present." She affirms that her party is a secular party. When asked "Didn't she want to live in the Muslim Homeland, in Pakistan?" rejects by saying, "But it won't be Lucknow" (LTG 330). She totally rejects the religious and communal prejudices and outward markers of identity such as dress (burka), party (Muslim League) and branding of language (Urdu) on the basis of the religion. Ammi strictly retorts against the extraneous parameters 's essentiality for identification.

Another character who has mistaken identity is Bihari. The real name of Bihari Halwai whose ladle moves from right to left on the *karahi*, inscribing the Koran in *jalebi*, a line a day, is Omar Oureshi.

In fact the novel, through the identity of various characters, emphasizes on the act of belonging and affirms that all other markers of identity like name, language, external signs are/ can be unreliable and mistaken.

The end of the novel *Looking through Glass* is quite symbolic. The Hindu narrator along with Haasan joins the Muslim Refugees at the camp at Purana Quila. Narrator's inclusion in Ammi's family photograph is a significant sign on behalf of a Hindu-self integrating itself in a Muslim family. The end of the novel does not show the scene very common in most of the partition novels: Muslim leaving India from refugee camps to Pakistan. Instead of going to the 'Promised Land' for the Muslims, they opt to go back to Lucknow: to their ancestral home. Thus the novel challenges the

official nationalist version both by applying a corrective lens and by removing the lens between history and life. It does not reject the nationalist history altogether, but rearranges the national politics with a more committed to local people .

Issues of Identity in *A River with Three Banks*:

Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* (1998) is one of the recent creative responses on Partition. Shiv K. Kumar recaptures the pain and sufferings of those who had to face the tragic consequences of an event for which they were nowhere responsible. Kumar visualizes the time of 1947 with all its brutality, romance, agony and ecstasy. Along with human depravity and hatred, there is also a plea for universal kinship and a hope and commitment to the cherished values like love, compassion and forgiveness.

Religious identity, which was so exclusively imposed upon people at the time of Partition, appears as a symbol of exteriority in the novel RWTB. When Gautam watches the dead body of Abdul Rahim killed by the riot mongers he "Suddenly recognized a striking resemblance between Abdul Rahim and his own father—the same wheat-ish complexion, arched eyebrows, chiselled chin and nose" (RWTB 11).

The shifting Identities of Gautam and Haseena from one religion to another just for survival testify the absurdity of Partition when religious identity had shrank to merely outward identity markers like Muslim fez cap, *sherwani*, *burka*, *dhoti-kurta*, caste-mark, *Kumkum* etc. and bodily one like circumcision. Gautam and Haseena have to change their cloths again and again as they go from one place to another place in order to move safely. It is with bitter irony they comment on the situation:

How funny! One's life depends upon what one wears these daysAll that one need (...) is two sets of cloths in a handbag. (RWTB 119-120).

It is very painful for Gautam who is the firm believer of universal religion that he has to undergo the humiliation of having to prove his non-Muslim-ness by stripping himself naked. It's a great irony that the frenzied mob, which humiliates him to do so, leaving within him a permanent scar, impressed by

that "desecration of both his body and soul" (RWTB 211), belongs to his same original religion:

Rip off his clothes if he doesn't cooperate
Blood mounting to his face, Gautam began
to undress---first his trousers, then his
underwear.... He felt so sick that he nearly
threw up...He wished he'd been killed
instead.

As he stood stark naked, like a pale
sacrifice offered to some demon, a
flashlight probed his groin---then a rough
hand probed him between his thighs.

No circumcision---he's a Hindu all right,
said a voice." (RWTB 211)

It is the most humiliating and traumatic experience
for Gautam having his life spared in the name of
religion because even in the midst of religious
intolerance he was able to keep himself balanced
enough to declare: "I'm now a Christian. A few days
ago I was a Hindu. [...] And I wouldn't mind
becoming a Muslim, I don't believe in these
religions-they all condone violence, instigate their
followers to kill [...]" (RWTB 80).

The novel RWTB is distinct in showcasing
the underlying unity among different religions.
Kumar uses Gautam and Shamalal as his
mouthpieces in order to represent basic
principles of all religions, the very heritage of
Indian subcontinent thus suggesting a way to
come out of the rigid framework of religiosity.
The following discussion between Gautam and
his father reveals Kumar's belief in secular aspect
of nationalism. Gautam quotes from the *Koran*:

All human beings are created as a family
A single community
Then God sends His Prophets
Bearer of glad tidings,
Who guide those who believe in Him
And punish the evil. (RWTB 191)

As soon as he finished reading, his father asked:
"Now isn't that lord Krishna also says in the
Bhagavad-Gita?

Whenever righteousness declines and
evil prospers, I assure a visible shape and move as
man with man, guiding the virtuous, punishing
the wicked...' don't you have here two Prophets
saying the same thing? (RWTB 191)

The unity is shown not only between
Hinduism and Islam but also between Christianity
and Hinduism. According to Shamalal, Gautam's
father, Christ is a Yogi. 'What Gautam reads in
English translation of the famous edict engraved
in Pali on the Ashok pillar, 'which evokes
memories of Ashok the Great, who was a
champion of non-violence, seems to be the
message of the novel:

True religion does not recognize any
barriers between one human being and the
other. It embraces all living creatures-man,
animal and bird. Compassion, endurance,
understanding and love are man's greatest'
treasures(RWTB 157).

This message of humanity is also given even in
Mahatma Gandhi's prayers:

All human beings are created as a family
A single community (RWTB 191)

.....

Called by diverse names-

Bhagwan or Allah

You are the same, O Lord!

Give every human being

Sanity to perceive this (RWTB).

Haseena who is victimized during the atrocities of
partition also conveys her view on religion.
According to her, religion should be "a matter of
conviction"(RWTB)

Kumar seems to juxtapose the universal
religion of humanism as against religious
fanaticism and communalism and also seems to
enforce the message of a universal religion
through the character of Gautam. Commenting
upon Gautam's article in the newspaper, its
editor says, "(...) You seem to be moving towards
Gandhi, as you understand him- towards a sort of
universal religion" (RWTB 195).

Gautam, the protagonist of the novel
and an ideal hero of Kumar's creation, is a symbol
of this universal religion. He is an instrument of
Kumar's vision of liberal humanism. Being a
member of the educated elite, Gautam is a
cosmopolitan hero, who transcends above all
religious barriers. He does not bother about
outward rituals and religious practices. He takes
his conversion to Christianity, the ritual in

'Triveni' with 'Panda,' and swearing 'Kalma' for Haseena, very lightly. Religious rituals and identity are meaningless to him.

When Gautam is asked about his opinion about the killing of an animal by an Arya Samajist Gopi Nath Trivedi, he says:

"Is it the aggrieved heart of a Hindu?"

asked Gopinath.

"No," replied Gautam. "It has nothing to do with my being a Hindu or a Christian.

The sight of any killing, of man or animal, sickens me (RWTB 58).

This shows his secular outlook. Hence, Gautam is a liberal humanist devoid of any bitter and biased feelings for any religion.

Another important point to be noted here is that Pannalal and Sulieman, a man connected with the business of prostitution, work together in their business. At this level there is no scope for communal rivalry. It exposes the absurdity of the religion based partition. Therefore, the Superintendent of Police comments: "Here is a real inter-communal home, with Pannalal and Sulieman Gani as its heads." (River 131) It is ironic that we find communal hatred only among the politicians and not among the people like Pannalal and Sulieman.

The novel *A River with Three Banks* is unique in its end. Gautam not only accept Haseena due to his true love for her, he gives her equal respect also by merging their names. By merging the religious identities of the chief protagonists; Gautam and Haseena, the novel suggests that the flow of humanity depends upon trust and mutual understanding and knows no boundaries of caste or culture, religion or nationality.

When Haseena asks Gautam: Now call me Haseena Mehta" (214) Gautam says:

No, my love. Not Haseena Mehta.....Just Haseena Gautam---our first names only (...)

Yes we'll start a new race---sans caste, sans religion, sans nationality. (RWTB 214)

Thus the novel ends with an optimistic note symbolizing a future based on love, compassion, free from any marker of religious identity and with an appeal for communal harmony and religious tolerance. At the end of the novel there is a

description of clouds sailing across the border and a flock of birds warbling in the sky that symbolizes an appeal for hope and coming of borderless world, as is the world of birds and other natural entities.

Conclusion:

Written within a different time framework both of the selected texts represent the history of the marginalized people and offer a trenchant critique of official secularism and fundamental discourses of majoritarian groups. By foregrounding their own inclusionist and pluralistic way of life, both of the novelists not only uncover hidden cracks in the proclaimed secularism of then representative political parties, but also offer their own subaltern ways of secularism above any religion, caste and class. They offer a solution to religious fundamentalism by taking off all the extraneous identity markers because these identity markers, whether they be of a beard, caps, *burka*, *topi* or any dress marker, circumcision etc., are shifting and fluid and should not be used for fixities of any religion. Both of the narratives critique the hegemonic versions of nationalism based on religious discriminations and offer remarkable insights into the problems of personal and national identity which advocate a de-territorialized counter-history of relationship anchored in the the assimilative and pluralistic culture of India.

Since the Vedic period, Indian subcontinent has been an embodiment of inclusive culture and civilization. Over the centuries, the continuous interaction and assimilation of different people and cultures has inculcated deep rooted traits of tolerance, a highly evolved humanism, and ethos in which any particular linguistic, religious or ethnic group is able to tolerate and appreciate the creative elements of the others. These novels also advocate a tolerant culture, a liberal sense of Humanity where all can live in peace and envision future possibilities of peaceful coexistence between different religions.

Thus, the approach of these writers is grounded in secularism or liberal humanism. Despite the depiction of communal clashes, violence, massacre, instigating acts of communal fundamentalists, these writers have advocated communal harmony, religious tolerance and a deep

humane spirit along with human values and are critical of exclusionary politics of the state. They univocally condemn the dehumanizing impact of religious zealotry upon innocent people, which caused unimaginable loss of life and property.

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