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"SAVAGE ANGUISH": LOATHSOME REALITY AND SUPERIOR ARTISTRY

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ABSTRACT

Renowned Assamese writer Syed Abdul Malik's short-story "Savage Anguish" is included in "Splendour in the Grass" published by Sahitya Academy in 2010. In craftsmanship, in exciting pathos and sting of conscience, this story deserves the place of being one among the few first-rate fictional narratives based on India's partition. The story explores the deplorable consequences of fanatical, communal riots and exposes its demoniacal, inhuman and unnatural character. This it does through using two alternating and contrasting points-of-view—one that of the middle-class narrator and the other that of the disgraced and oppressed. The former visualizes the surface reality whereas the latter unveils the actual core of reality. Dramatic irony, suspense and surprise, symbols etc are skillfully applied. The message of the story may be particularly effective in the current ambience of communal and sectarian malice.

Keywords: savage, anguish, loathsome, appearance, reality

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Introduction

Syed Abdul Malik, Sahitya Academy awardee, renowned Assamese poet, novelist, short-story writer, is best known in Assam for his exquisite story-telling qualities in the realistic, humanist tradition. One of his famous short-stories, "Savage Anguish" (the expression "Loathsome Anguish" could have come closer to the meaning of the Assamese title "Bibhatsa Bedona") is included in "Splendour in the Grass", a selection of Assamese short-stories in English, published by Sahitya Academy in 2010.

In pathos, in artistry and in inciting sting of conscience, this story, like "Toba Tek Singh" by Sadat Hassan Manto, is unique among the short-stories founded on the partition of India.

Story-line

Here it will be convenient for the reader if we allude briefly to the main story-line.

The action takes place around six or seven years after India's Independence. The narrator is an agent of some foreign company. He comes to a certain town for commercial dealings but fails to manage a seat in some cheap hotel. He, therefore, puts up at the house of Uma and Padma (actually it's not their own house) as a paying guest for a few days. But, their environment and circumstances are gradually becoming strange and mysterious for the narrator. For instance, although the narrator knows that the family has a masculine member called Deepak, yet he has not encountered him for several days. In the mean

time Padma lets him know that they are refugees from West Punjab. As refugees they got only twenty five rupees as relief from the government.

The narrator one day witnesses a strange incident at a shop of the town. Some goonda appears and in broad daylight strips a European lady naked by raising her skirt and flies away. On another day, when the narrator is returning home with Padma after having enjoyed cinema, a "goonda" snubs Padma and warns her. Finally, one night the narrator faces an unimaginable situation when he accompanies Padma back home as she is late in returning. Deepak takes away Uma's clothes leaving her stripped naked and in the glaring light of the lamp the naked Uma narrates the heart-rending, loathsome and agonizingly pathetic story of hers, Padma and Deepak. How on the soft bodies of many women like them "Pakistan zindabad" was carved with some sharp weapon like knife after having them victimized to violent sexual harassment in the ambience of communal frenzy during the time of partition; how Deepak, presently turned lunatic, lost his "Laxmi"; how even today insane Deepak takes many ladies for his "Laxmi" and by raising their clothes wants to check if scars of disgrace are there on Laxmi's body_ Uma and Padma explain this strange and indescribable reality to the narrator by stripping themselves naked. The very next day the baffled and discomfited narrator makes his way back to hotel.

Critical Appraisal of the Statement

The power of the theme presented in the story can be discerned even from this substantial summary. Through the viewpoint of an almost self-centered middle-class character of Post-Independent India, who is absorbed in the dream of self-establishment, the horrible reality of fanatical, communal riot along with its demoniacal, inhuman and unnatural character and its deplorable consequence has gradually been unveiled. Religious fanaticism itself is a form of insanity and under its impact; therefore, the germ of insanity is spread even among its victims. For this very reason Deepak is insane. Affected by it, Uma also thinks, "perhaps our brains are also not quite sound."

In the beginning the middle-class narrator, whose first preference goes to his own business interest, is indifferent towards Uma's and Padma's life-struggle. Gradually, through day-to-day casual conversations and several strange experiences he can sense their misfortune and wretchedness; within his comfort-zone he feels a little compassion towards them; he wants to purchase two dress materials for them and actually purchases that.

But the action reaches its climax before he can offer those clothes to them. In the absence of the narrator and Padma, the insane Deepak comes, strips Uma naked in the darkness and snatches away her clothes. Uma holds the perplexed narrator's hand and leads him to her room and in the lamp that Padma holds in her hand, the narrator is startled to discover that Uma is stark naked. Sharing the scanty clothes of Padma both women go on telling the narrator their unspeakable story. The middle-class narrator, who is incapable of redressing the disgrace of these characters who are the images of conscience-stinging, naked and rotten reality, comes back from the hellish world of Uma and Padma to his world of comfort and ease. This escape of the middle-class character from the stark reality bears significance.

But, contrary to this all-pervasive inhumanity and opportunism, the victims of oppression, Uma and Padma, practice humanity as far as they can. These endangered characters form a family among themselves; they extend support to one another. They honour the paying guest as a guest; keep an eye all the time on his conveniences and inconveniences and refrain from taking any undue advantages from him. Uma's sense of responsibility for Deepak, the lunatic, is touching, "I have never let him see my body. If he sees that I, the Laxmi of his imagination, too am carrying scars of disgrace, he will kill himself by banging his head against something. That's why when he comes I blow out the lamp."

Craftsmanship

Such powerful statement of the story has been powerfully presented with the support of Malik's appropriate craftsmanship. Let's have a glimpse of this craftsmanship.

a) Double Narrator: Bi-polar Points-of-view: To enhance the credibility of the story, Malik, instead of choosing an omniscient narrator, chooses such a one who is at the same time a major character participating in the action of the story. The lion's share of the story is narrated from the middle-class point-of-view of the pro-establishment narrator who has never seen the dark recesses of social reality. The real core of the story is narrated through Uma's mouth, that is, from the point-of-view of the disgraced. The viewpoint of the middle-class narrator brings within our view the superficial character of reality, that is, appearance, and the viewpoint of the disgraced and oppressed Uma makes perceptible the actual core of reality.

b) Structured Contradiction of Appearance vs Reality: Malik takes good care to gradually shape this main inner structure of the contradiction between appearance and reality with the help of several small incidents. For instance the narrator's guess about Uma's age proves to be wrong. "She looked around 35/36 years of age." But towards the end of the story Uma says, "My actual age is 24 years." The narrator makes an idea that Padma is Uma's daughter. Uma says, "Daughter! I am not even married." Deepak initially seems to be a goonda; but later it's proved that he is insane. When it is seen that Uma remains stark naked with Deepak in the darkness it is conjectured that physical intercourse has taken place between them. But, Uma's statement ascertains the futility of such conjecture. Thus the structure of appearance and Reality are accumulated in a cumulative manner and it reaches its climax through the contradiction between the superficial reality of the narrator's narrative and the actual reality of Uma's narrative; through the opposition between the surface reality seen through the middle-class point-of-view and the pathetic core of social reality exposed from the point-of-view of the oppressed.

c) Suspense and Surprise: Skilful application of dramatic suspense and surprise also takes place in the story. For example: in the very first night Uma comes to the narrator's room at around 12 PM and tells him to sleep only after closing the door; the incident where some unidentified goonda stripped a European

lady naked raising her skirt in broad daylight; the long absence of Deepak who is known as a member of Uma's family; gloominess and silence of the beautiful young girl, Padma; the strange experience of Deepak's chiding and warning on the narrator's return with Padma after having enjoyed cinema; that Uma forbade Padma to bring lamp in the dark night of the climactic incident; the nudity of Uma in front of the narrator_ all these slowly and cumulatively build up intense dramatic suspense. At last, Uma's autobiographical narration puts an end to all this suspense and astonishes us through the revelation of unutterable, loathsome reality.

d) Dramatic Irony: The application of irony is a unique embellishment of the story. The narrator thinks in beginning of the story that to go back to the hotel from the house of Uma and Padma is "perhaps the right thing to do" and adds that "All right things are not always done." But the subsequent narrative shows that the right thing to do was not to come away from Uma and Padma, from the disgraced and oppressed, but to stand by them. Once the narrator says, "But both Padma and Uma always covered their bodies with care." After our suspense melts away we come to realize that this is not the natural covers of the bashful women of our society, rather an attempt to cover up the taints of cruelty born of communal frenzy. Further the narrator first says, "Bring the lamp, Padma_it's too dark." But later when he sees the naked, oppressed Uma in the light of the lamp, he says, "The light of the glowing lamp became unbearable." Such skilful application of dramatic irony is an instance of high-class art.

e) Appropriate Symbolism: The symbol of woman's nakedness becoming visible in the light of lamp is a very successful craftsmanship. The sight of the unclothed bodies of Uma and Padma in front of the eyes of the narrator and the words "Long live, Pakistan" (Malik doesn't mention "Pakistan" but clearly indicates it) embossed in black on them, is suggestive of the naked reality of our society dehumanized by religious frenzy. The nakedness of Uma and Padma is nothing but the loathsome nakedness of our social history; the spots and scars on

their raw, soft flesh are just the stigmatic spots and scars of our society and history. The glowing light of the lamp is the symbol of conscience. If we see in the light of reason or conscience we will see not the appearance but the naked reality of the body of our society, we will see its spots, scars and stigmas. Such view of truth is unbearable to the self-centered, self-complacent middle-class.

Faults: I have noticed two faults in this otherwise beautiful and penetrating story. The first is in the context of the dress materials purchased by the narrator for Uma and Padma. No indication is there in the story that the narrator had offered them the dress materials at any time _ not even when he “saluted from heart” the two sleeping, half-naked young girls and came away from them for ever. The matter does not occur to him let alone offer the clothes. The second fault is in relation to the title of the story. There are both loathsomeness and anguish in the story. But, can we call the anguish of Uma-Padma-Deepak or the anguish we feel for them “loathsome”?

Conclusion

At any rate, this story and its artistry is powerful enough to agitate our self-complacent minds and to lash our conscience. It will remain as one of the first-rate fictional narratives based on India’s Partition. Especially in the current ambience of sectarian malice, the message of this story may be particularly effective.

Reference

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