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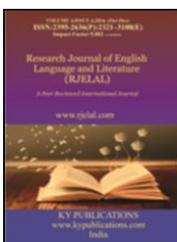
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**CATAclysmic OR LIBERTY – AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS FROM THE SELECTED
WORKS OF (ABDULLAH HUSSEIN AND BHISHAM SAHNI)**

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ABSTRACT

The title Cataclysmic or Liberty-An historic analysis from select works of (Abdullah Hussein and Bhisham Sahni) gives the picture of calamities and the loss that happened during the partition by referring to the novels *Tamas* and *The Weary Generations* which demonstrates the picture of the turmoil of partition in the wake of communal violence. It aimed to achieve the political ends most of the time; catastrophe on a large scale is expected. Radical politicians and political unwillingness to stop the carnage and turmoil in society in partition days, in other words the politics was at the base of all turn arounds. Religious influentials, revolutionary groups and fanatics had given air to the situation, which was already critical. The title of the Novel *Tamas* suggested it is an attempt to depict and condemn the forces of ignorance and darkness involved in communal violence on the eve of partition India. The implementation of the plan of partition neither with preparedness nor with foresight led to a grave human tragedy. The Muslims who killed a hundred thousand Hindus must have believed that they have exterminated the Hindu religion. But the Hindu religion is alive and will remain alive and well. After putting away a hundred thousand Muslims the Hindus must have celebrated the liquidation of Islam, but the fact is that Islam has not been affected in the least. Only the naive can believe that religion can be eliminated with a gun. It is clearly understood that faith, belief, devotion call it whatever is a thing of spirit and it is physical, Guns and knives are powerless to destroy it. The second chapter deals with the communal clashes which occur between the various communities with the Hindus and Sikhs on one side and the Muslims on the other. The third chapter gives the picture of religion which was used as a tool to aggravate the people into committing unimaginable atrocities upon each other. The fourth chapter gives the picture of victims and the hatred which the people exhibited can only be explained by considering them to have descended into madness, leaving them unbound by morality. The conclusion focus on the victims who suffered because of the partition and the effects it had on their lives and identifies the reason behind the complete chaos.

Key words: Partition, Victims, politicians, violence, liberty, religion.

INTRODUCTION

Partition of India having been conceded, on 15th August 1947, the British rule came to an end

and the two Dominions-India and Pakistan took shape. There was large scale migration of population with untold violence, murders, looting, rape and

what not. The sufferings of the people surcharged with blood, the blood of the innocent victims due to the vivisection of the country. The partition did not solve the Hindu-Muslim problem, for the Muslims remained a large minority in India and Hindus remained a relatively small minority in Pakistan. Jinnah must bear the blame for not promoting Hindu-Muslim unity. Movement led to the destruction because of the unplanned way the leaders proceeded to partition the country. As Urvashi Butalia writes,

“It was not only a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also a division of hearts. And these aspects of the partition— how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in find little reflection in written history.” (Butalia.18).

Partition was one of the largest recorded migrations of people in modern times; it was the cause for destruction both of human life and property. Millions of people were killed during the exodus and many more were displaced rendering those homeless. Independence was gained at a price which was partition and a deep rift was created between the two communities (Muslims and Hindus) based on religion. History texts focus on the independence struggle and its achievements, highlighting the heroics of our martyrs and the great leaders who were responsible for their leadership in mobilising the masses to work together toward the ultimate goal of freedom. Literature on the other hand, particularly the ones which deal with partition depict the reality of partition and its effect on the people which were the result of political, religious, social, cultural elements. The selected novels *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni and *The Weary Generations* by Abdullah Hussein do not shy away from describing the horrific events which took place as it serves as a reminder of the chaos which ensued on grounds of religious fanaticism.

Communal Clashes and Victims

Tamas is an account of true events which happened during the riots of 1947, it is a recollection of the violence and madness which ensued during the chaos which was partition. It is derived from the author's memory therefore the novel lacks structure but is rather episodic in its storytelling with no clear plot. The title of the novel *Tamas* itself means darkness and ignorance which is clearly portrayed in the mindless communal violence between the three communities: Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. While the common people were engaged in clashes and rioting with each other based on communal differences, the various leaders, and politicians were busy with raising their own status in society. The indifference of the British administration is also highlighted when they took no action to quell the riots deciding to wait till hundreds of villages were burnt and many lives lost.

The novel begins with the introduction of Nathu, a tanner who unknowingly becomes the cause for creating the sparks which incited the violence between the different communities in the village. As a common man whose occupation was to skin the hides of dead animals, he is given money by Murad Ali to kill a pig which was supposedly needed for veterinary purposes. Being a poor man he accepts the proposal and kills the pig after great difficulty

“Nathu thought of his wife again. His troubled mind would find comfort only when he lay by her side and conversed with her in soft, confiding tones. He longed for the torture to end and to go back to the haven of tenement in the chamars' colony” (p.10).

Unaware of what was to happen, he goes about his daily business and longs for the touch of his wife, the ordeal of killing the pig had exhausted him, yet five rupees, the money given to him was a substantial amount for a poor man like him. The pig's corpse was left in front of the mosque and it escalated the tensions which were already mounting with the rumours of partition in the village. After rioting had started, Nathu felt sick, he now realised it was the same pig which he had killed that had been used to offend the Muslims. He blamed himself as the reason for the killings, he could not

confide in anyone, what he sought for was comfort, he had been tricked and now he felt desperate.

“Nathu was deeply disturbed. Sitting outside his house he was puffing at his hookah incessantly. His heart would sink every time he heard about the killings. He would try again and again to console himself: I am not a know-all. How could I know for what purpose I was being asked to kill a pig? For some time he would overcome his uneasiness and feel reassured. But he would again lose his peace of mind when he would hear about some other incident” (p.204).

The Congress committee had set out on their usual “prabhat pheri” which was composed of members from different communities with the intention of cleaning the drains in the Muslim locality.

“By the time the group of prabhat pheri activists, making their way through the maze of lanes, reached Imam Din Mohalla, dawn was giving way to bright morning. Along the way they picked up brooms, shovels, and taslas from Sher Khan’s house” (p.55).

The people worked together regardless of their religious beliefs and were part of the Congress whose ultimate goal was partition. For this purpose they worked together and to be closer to the people they had decided to clean drains

“what we are doing is only for symbolic expression of our patriotism; it brings us closer to our people, to the poor. When we come, clad in khadi, brooms and shovels in our hands to their locality, they regard us as their own; it inspires confidence in them, which it won’t if we come in the western attire of coat and pant” (p.62).

They were being praised for their efforts by the locals until the pig’s body was found on the mosque steps, after which they were pelted with stones, threatened and chased away.

“Clear out of here at once if you don’t want to be skinned alive! He shouted in his high pitched voice. His chin trembled and his cheeks turned pale. Enough of your nonsense! Just get out of here. Aren’t you listening? Rascals, clear out of here” (p.63).

The group decided to remove the carcass from the steps so that people could enter the mosque, feeling it would somewhat resolve the situation.

“What did you say Mehtaji? That we should slink away and allow the tension to aggravate? It would have been a different matter if we had not seen the carcass” (p.68).

The damage had been done and a cow was killed in retaliation. The sacred animals of the Hindus had been killed and the pig which was offensive to the Muslims had been placed right in front of their place of worship. The rumours of partition had flared up tensions in the town and now a riot was inevitable. The belief that the Muslims were ahead in terms of preparation for conflict led the Hindus to panic and discussions to join forces with the Sikhs were set in motion. There was a belief that the Muslims were stockpiling weapons in the Jama Masjid according to them

“This is the biggest shortcoming of Hindu character. We think of digging a well only when we are thirsty. The situation is fast deteriorating; the Muslims have already stocked weapons in the Jama Masjid, whereas we are thinking now of buying lathis” (p.75).

This led to the Hindus and Sikhs joining forces to prepare for the conflict which seemed imminent in the form of Mohalla Committees. In times of trouble as is the usual case, the older men wanted the youngsters to be the ones who would risk their lives and do the actual killings. They wanted them to be trained in wielding lathis, swords and lances. Ranvir the chairman’s son had to pass the initiation test to be included in the Youth Wing of the Hindu committee, to succeed he had to kill a live hen. It can be seen that even the children were not free from communalism being indoctrinated to the belief that all other communities were lower than them and only the people belonging to the same community were to be respected. The very act of killing an animal to ready the young boy to do the same to a human being shows the inherent barbarism present in the people, their savagery is unmatched and it was a sign of what was to come in the event of any slight provocation from the enemy.

The young boys had been brought up with stories of how the Hindu rulers had defended against the invading Muslims and fought various wars with them. This created an even greater sense of enmity, misguiding the people to the wrong path, away from brotherhood. As seen in the case of Ranvir who imagined himself to be Shivaji before taking on Aurangzeb.

“Standing on the balcony they felt the same way as Rajputs of yore did, who, taking cover behind rocks and dunes waited for the mlechha hordes to enter Haldi Ghati before they pounced upon them” (p.192).

The character of Richard represents the interests of the British authority at the time in India, their attitude towards the Indians and their involvement or the lack of in Indian affairs. Richard was

“the mouth-piece of British imperialism when he took upon himself the task of putting into practice the policies and imperialist designs of the British ruling class” (p.40).

When the committee consisting of members from the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities visited the Deputy Commissioner to find a peaceful solution to the rising tension in the town, Richard does not help them. He had no intention of interfering into the matters of the public for it was not the problem of the British administration that the two Indian communities were in conflict with each other. Abdullah Hussein's novel *The Weary Generations* includes the experience of Partition in its entirety; it includes background, the principal events, and repercussions. The story encompasses not only one generation as in *Tamas* but many generations who struggle for their survival. The novel also contains many important events which shaped the freedom struggle in India. Events such as the First World War, the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre, Dandi March have been depicted in the novel where the characters were themselves part of it. The common people suffer not so much because of their own mistakes but due to the political leaders, who were unconcerned about the public, but rather cared only about their own desires. Ultimately it was the common people who suffered, the leaders were safe in their high offices, for when it came to getting their hands dirty, they were content with giving

orders, choosing to observe rather than actively participate. Not only is the political scenario the focus, but the sorrows of migration are portrayed vividly, the mass migration which forced people to leave their homes, the death and destruction caused by the rioters who had been consumed by madness and hatred. The feeling of loss and alienation in an unknown land, a future which seemed bleak and uncertain, hopelessness and desperation, the end result of independence which had come at the cost of partition. Hussein focuses more on the weariness which the generation feels with the constant struggle for survival, search for employment and the feeling of worthlessness, unable to make a mark in the grand scheme of things.

The novel begins with the story of how Roshan Ali earned the title of Roshan Agha, it begins thus:

“Roshan Ali was a clerk in the district collector's office in Rohtak. Being middle pass, he was considered an educated member of his small community” (p.5).

This was during the time when Indian soldiers had revolted against their British superiors. Roshan Ali saves the life of an Englishman who he later discovers was a member of the English aristocracy. For this Roshan Ali was rewarded handsomely as thus “in a befitting ceremony, bestowed upon him a khil'at that bore the title of Roshan Agha, in addition to granting him the right to go and round up as much uncultivated land as he could manage inside of seventy-two hours anywhere in the country” (p.8). Through this reward Roshan Agha had amassed ten thousand acres of land which now constituted Roshanpur where he regarded as a Nawab. The title of Agha was now to be transferred to his son with whom he had been disappointed, yet chose to forgive him during his final moments. This is how the village of Roshanpur came to be, the village is a representative of all the other villages in the country which faced similar problems due to the indifferent British administration and also from their Indian leaders.

The protagonist of the novel Naim Beg is an idealist who throughout the novel displays a sorrow which arose from the futility of his idealism, and a

deep dread of failure regarding the magnitude of the problems at hand. The novel largely depicts Naim being carried away by circumstances and incidents which were beyond his control. The character of Naim is best described by

“He [the hero] generally possesses a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to a capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion” (The Historical novel).

Naim had been taken away by his uncle Ayaz beg to Calcutta, after his father had been arrested by the British. He had received an English education in the best schools available at his level. After he had grown up, Naim is told about his father Niaz beg and how he had lost everything owing to his hobby, how their family had been embarrassed in Roshanpur. Naim decided to go back to his village to meet his family and during the journey by train he witnesses a particular incident which highlights the cruelty of the British and their actions devoid of any consequences. An old man trying to catch the train, tries to board the third class compartment. He latches on to the footboard of the first class compartment. A white passenger from the first class, then proceeds to kick the old man because the first class was not meant for Indians, it was reserved only for the Sahibs. Although he suffered a violent beating, the old man didn't let go and held on till the next station which was Roshanpur. After reaching the station

“Two Anglo-Indian sergeants of the railway police came force the peasant's arms from the carriage handles and put him down on the station platform, where he lay in a lifeless heap, looking quite naked without his bundle of possessions” (p.55).

On the other end of the spectrum were the elites, those who were wealthy and occupied important positions in society. These people were the ones who were least affected by the Partition. They were merely spectators to the horrific events unfolding around them. Unlike the common man who held no value in society, these people were protected from harm. The novel *The Weary Generations* presents the reader with the experiences both of the peasants such as Naim and elites such as Roshan Agha and Azra. Roshan Agha had upset his father by

marrying a woman who belonged to a lower caste. But he was forgiven by his father, granting him the title of Agha and all the power and riches which came with it. Roshan Agha was someone who commanded authority over the residents of Roshanpur. An example of his influence over the villagers is seen when people volunteer to join the army only after his insistence. He ruled the people with an iron hand. His will could not be defied, for he was their lord and master.

“Roshan Agha's word was law. Inside of two hours, sixteen young men were enlisted. The visitors, including Roshan Agha, left the village with eighteen fresh soldiers. Women wept, old men's chests fell several layers, young girls lost all sense of tomorrow” (p.103)

While the country was in chaos, he was unaffected; it was almost as if he was not a part of the crumbling Indian society. The epilogue describes the journey to Lahore of the people who were now refugees in their own land. Killings had already begun; Muslims had begun to attack the Sikhs and Hindus, while the Hindus and Sikhs did the same to Muslims. A new state of Pakistan was created; it was for the purpose of securing a safe haven for the Muslims, fearing oppression from the Hindu majority in the newly created democratic republic of India. What started as a group of fifty people now numbered in the thousands, believing strength to be in numbers the group moved forward towards what was to be their new home. The people were reduced to a herd of animals; they could be preyed upon like cattle at any moment, fearing attackers they stayed away from railway stations, cities and 'safe camps'. The only stops were made at towns which showed signs of Muslim inhabitation, chiefly to refill supplies, most important was drinking water. The column of people moved quickly for time was of the essence; this was necessary to evade attackers by changing routes or leave a stop-over-spot. They began reducing their load, keeping only the bare minimum, food and water were scarce, and many died from starvation and exhaustion on the way. There were many groups of people travelling by foot, the group which was ahead of Naim's was unlucky, they had met with an attack, but this meant Naim's group could

pass by them safely, since they were tired from their previous attack. This meant the killings stopped not because the people came to their senses, but merely because they were too exhausted to continue, they had long forgotten their humanity and were now being driven by primal instincts fuelled by hate.

“The refugees failed to see them until they turned a corner and found themselves on top of them. The people on foot started running while the cart owners began furiously to beat their beasts. Hardly one of the attackers moved; they remained still, looking at the fleeing hers with nothing more than tired unconcern on their faces” (p.405).

The common people suffered not because of their mistakes but the selfish decisions of the political leaders, who were stern on achieving their goals. The powerlessness of the people in contrast to the leaders marked profound effect on everyone. In the end it is the not the leaders who have to have to face the consequences, but rather the public, the working man who suffers, due to their mistakes. The migration itself was unformed as it was resulted for one’s safety. Fearing the Hindu majority’s dominance in India the Muslims decided to migrate to Pakistan, a newly formed state with a Muslim majority. The forced migration was a horrific experience, which resulted in the displacement of millions of people and the death of many. The conflict between the two segments worsened with the spread of rumours and the fuel added under the banner of religion. Massacres were a common occurrence with no regard for life or property. The rioters hunted the fleeing refugees like prey, lacking any sort of compassion or empathy. The people fleeing not only agonised over physical suffering, but also psychological pain.

The rumours of partition, which further increased the hostility between the different communities: Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs caused a separatist society which was divided along communal lines. The British administration at the time still held power, but refused to do anything to contain the situation, allowing it to get worse, since it was their policy of non-interference with religious matters or rather with Indian matters. Richard who

is the Deputy Commissioner, aware of the rising tensions between the Hindus and the Muslims, yet decides that it was not the policy of the British government to settle. As any ruler he has no concern for his subjects he is content with the fact that if the people fight amongst themselves, the ruler was away from harm. The policy of the British regarding Indian affairs was indifference which can be seen in Richard’s response to Liza, when asked to resolve the differences between the two communities.

“All I can say to them is that their religious disputes are their affairs and should be resolved by them. The administration can render any help that they want” (p.53).

To show the effect of religion on the people, another incident must be examined where Iqbal Singh, a Sikh was being hunted by a gang of Muslims, for no reason other than because he was a Sikh. They chased him for a while, toying with him, like a cat that plays with the mouse it has caught, treating it like a sport, a sort of amusement. Iqbal Singh was given the choice of either death or converting to Islam, life was far too precious than one’s faith, Iqbal agrees to renounce his faith. Hearing his answer the persons who had earlier tormented him now began to welcome him to within their ranks.

“Iqbal Singh had not expected that the situation would change so radically and so soon for him, that people who were thirsting for blood would begin to embrace him like a blood relation” (p.278).

Iqbal was taken to the village, where the ceremony would be conducted to convert him into a Muslim. The amount of hate generated because of one’s religious belief is astounding, in reality it is a trivial matter, for we are all human beings, these differences do not matter in the grand scheme of things, yet so many wars have been fought due to these superficial differences amongst us. The Deputy Commissioner, Richard a foreigner remarks how the people in India belonged to the same racial stock, a foreigner who understood that the people were one and the same under all the apparent distinctions placed upon by factors such as religion,

society, whereas the natives who had been living together for many centuries, now in a span of few days, became bitter enemies and failed to understand their common ancestry. Iqbal Singh, who now became Iqbal Ahmed, was suddenly accepted as one of their own by the village.

“By the time evening fell, all the marks of Sikhism on Iqbal Singh’s person had been replaced by the marks of the Muslim faith. A mere change of marks had brought about the transformation. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer; whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open” (p.281).

The worst victims of the partition were undeniably women, as is always the case whenever any form of conflict seems to arise due to any number of reasons. In the event of a war, soldiers fighting for their country view women as a part of the territory which had to be occupied. In the case of Indian partition, women were targeted because they were the protected aspects of the enemies’ honour and self-identity. When it comes to hostilities due to religious and ethnic causes, it is the women who bear the brunt of victimisation, being subjected to humiliation: molestation, rape, mutilation, abduction, forcible conversion, marriage and death. The objectification of women and their unfair treatment is evident in the stories relating to the migration which was caused by the partition during 1947. A large number of women were abducted; some numbers estimate them to be around 75,000 to 100,000. They were taken by their abductors for the purpose of rape, murder, to be sold into prostitution or forced into marriage. The tragedy of such women was not only the physical suffering which they had to endure every day, living at the mercy of their captors but also a psychological one. The inhumane treatment which they were subjected to put a toll on their minds, it led to a loss of self, feelings of despair, hopelessness, resulting in a mental death of the person. The abduction of women and their treatment was meant as a means to humiliate not only the women, but the family, the community and the country itself. It was meant to humiliate especially the men, for being unable to protect their womenfolk and to demoralize them.

Many women decided to end their lives rather than be subjected to humiliation and bring dishonour to their family. Some chose to make sacrifices, others were killed by their own family members, for death was a more welcome choice than dishonour. The fear of being raped, forcefully converted, or sold into prostitution was more than death. The choice between a life of suffering and a swift death was clear for many women. Many committed suicide by jumping into wells or into the fire, they carried poison with them in the event that they were captured, and they asked their husbands to kill them rather than be captured by the enemy. Although honour was given such a high position by the women, willing to end their lives rather than being defiled, the men exhibited hypocrisy when it came to protecting them. These women were captured right in front of them, and the men stood helpless, unable to protect her and continued the journey on her behalf. They did not acknowledge their sacrifice and later refused to accept them.

Conclusion

The leaders of India dreamt of a free, united India, Partition killed that dream. An historical account of the true events and the decisions taken by the leaders which ultimately led to the partition would enable us to understand how the unity among the people was destroyed. It will also serve as a lesson from the past which can be avoided in the future to maintain our unity. Shahid Hamid in *Diastrous Twilight* opines

“The British are just people. They have left India in exactly the same state of chaos as they found it.” (p.18)

The instances that has been given from the two novels are autobiographical, which were clearly witnessed by the novelists. They clearly mention that the power hungry politicians were to be blamed for the partition of India and the communal riots which broke immediately before and after the announcement of Partition. It is clear that the partition is ‘Cataclysmic’.

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