



HISTORICAL DRIFT IN COLONIAL BENGAL: STUDY OF QURRATULAIN HYDER'S *FIREFLIES IN THE MIST*

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ABSTRACT

Bengal was an important region in Indian political history. It attracted many Orientals with its natural richness. It was ruled by many potent rulers and borne a lot of tumult and clamor in colonial and post colonial period. As a result of Ottoman Orientals its population accumulated with hybrid cultured people. After decline of Nawab Nizams it became crucial colonial hub for the English. British established their housing colonies and institutions and greatly transformed its society. Bengal had been divided twice by British that caused polarization among people. The present paper discusses the social and political polarity in Colonial and post colonial Bengal.

Keywords: Colonial Bengal, Political and cultural polarization, Qurratulain Hyder, *Fireflies in the Mist*.

Bengal was one of the important such trading centers, later it became a crucial presidency among many along with Bombay and Madras. The Nawab Nizams of Bengal and Orissa ruled the provinces of Bengal and Orissa between 1717 and 1765. However, they were only nominally subordinated to the Mughal Empire; they ruled complex masses with considerable flexibility in religion and culture. Until Sirahj-ud- Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal was betrayed by Mir Jafar in Battle of Plassey, Bengal flourished and enjoyed in the reign of Nawab Nizams. In 1765 the system of Dual Government was established, in which the Nawabs were reduced to mere representatives of the British. In 1772, even that system was closed down bringing Bengal into direct control of the British. Afterwards cartography of Bengal was changed twice in two great divisions it had undergone.

In 1905, Bengal had been divided into East Bengal and West Bengal having largely Muslim and Hindu community respectively. And for the second time it

was divided after independence, East Bengal transforming into East Pakistan. Partition of the Indian subcontinent, in 1947, was the single most important determining factor of India's destiny even it had greatly affected Bengal.

The novel *Fireflies in the Mist*, is written in Urdu first with the title *Aakhir-e-Shab ke Hamsafar*. It spans the history of East Bengal from the time of the nationalist movement against the British, to the creation of East Pakistan, and finally to Bangladeshi independence. The novel centers around Deepali Sarkar, an educated free willed good natured and young middle class Hindu girl who becomes drawn into the extreme left wing of the nationalist movement. And she gets attracted and attached to Rehan Ahmed, a Muslim radical with Marxist inclinations who introduces her to the life of the rural deprived. Rehan and Deepali share common political thinking and drawn into unfruitful love affair. Through this pair author established conflicts and at the same time cultural harmony between

Hindus and Muslim in Bengal during and after freedom movement.

Hyder discovers the reconstruction and overhaul of culture and practices in colonial India by putting previous generation Characters Nawab Qamrul Zaman's, Romesh Babu and Mr.Benarjee in contrast with their next generation Rehan Ahmed, Jehan Ara, Deepali and Rosie Benarjee. Uma Roy, a modern and believer of Badralok appears to be a negative character with possessiveness towards Rehan and self centric behaviour. And other characters like servant group, other relations of main characters form a kaleidoscopic frame of novel. The novel is plotted in three parts. First part introduces Deepali's house hold and her friends and her relations with party. In the second part depicts Deepali's struggle personally and politically and her decision about not involving in party issues and affair with Rehan. Third part discovers the situations after freedom and partition of India into three parts, India; Pakistan; and East Pakistan.

Bengal Society in colonial India: Brahma Samaj, Christian Missionaries and Communist Party

It has been natural phenomenon that people repel the new policy and thought old is better for them, slowly when the new became old they accustom to it. India had been bearing the misery since centuries at that time; miseries were like ebb and flow come and go. In the course of time India absorbed many cultures in her and witnessed many new practices among them Brahmos is one of important religious movement that contributed to make modern India of those times. It had been started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a learned and English educated social reformer. They avoided polytheism and even idol worship. As educated in English they were greatly influenced by British culture and religion. But for a common man, his crises were never ending, whomsoever the ruler or policy maker, life of a commoner remained as it was ages before. In the novel Abdul Qadir, a coachman of Chandrakunj thought prices of essential commodities had gone high. He was told Russain would invade India or Hitler would invade the whole world.

Spreading colonial religion and culture among colonies was vogue in every colonial culture.

And vulnerable Indian caste system gave a enormous scope for caste conversions. Until British stamped on the Indian rule, Muslim rulers forced native to accept Islam and a few got magnetized towards Sufism. In British imperialism the conversions into Christianity were made with great intensity and volume in the notion of reformation. But changing instantly the practice and belief what one is following since birth is unattainable state of mind.

British set up missionaries and started their presses and published abhorrent literature about Hindu religion and culture that created repercussions in Indian society It was noted in the novel *Fireflies in the Mist* by Dr. Marshman that Indians were such stupid even Christianity could not reform them. It's true that the British hold Indian in low esteems but they were very particular about converting them to Christianity, undoubtedly, to gain stability in India. But changing a religion is not so simple as if changing a dress." The Brahmos shunned idol worship and polytheism, and had also been influenced by Unitarian Christianity. The Tagores were Brahmos, too. Brahma Samaj and modernism had almost become synonymous in Bengal (FM: 32)". Brahma Samaj instituted with both new and old beliefs. So, many learned people find a novel community without absconding the all old beliefs and inventing the novel rational principles under the label of Brahmos.

Middle class Hindus never cast away their cultural practices, so they invented new practice and stream in society and named it 'Bhadralok'. In *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, David Kopf opined that Brahma Samaj was emerged as blend of Hindu belief and liberal religious outlook.

No middle class Bengali Hindu would deny that much of what he accepts as his normal belief and attitudes- from his liberal religious outlook to his appreciation of a certain style of literature, song and dance-was largely the result of Rabindranath Tagore's Hindu Brahma synthesis. And it might be added that Rabindranath's influence was considerable among Bengali Muslims, as well. (313)

David Kopf noticed that young generation of colonial India was blend of novel and foreign

notions and principles. They produced a new strata of society that never believed old customs and values respective of cast and religion. He observed that Rabindranath Tagore's influence was much on Bengali Muslims. So, educated Hindu and Muslims both got attracted to Brahma Samaj. In this work David Kopf put across the differences between Brahma Samaj and communism.

Communism in Bengal

Young Rosie had many doubts and confusion regarding her social status. She was a Christian still she was not valued and respected duly by other English women in society. She felt uncomfortable at Arjumand Manzil after knowing her mother had worked as maid a few years ago. She was an Indian, but she was a daughter of 'Black Padre'. English society preached the Christian values and baptized many Indians successfully but could not create a respectable position for many of them. Mr. Bannerjee was a ardent Christian and strict follower of English. He was satisfied with his life and never complain about anything. Esther Giribala, Rosie's mother basically a Bengali Brahmin married to an Indian Christian still, indifferent to cultural identity. Rosie felt her parents would not understand her turmoil moreover she observed Deepali, her friend gained a strange attitude and moving with strange people who she came to know party sympathizers.

Her own "native Christian" society had been created by the British and was generally loyal to its founders. Rosie's saintly father had resolved the dilemma long ago and was happy in his situation. She could not explain her problem to him, he would not understand. Despite her conversion, Esther Giribala was still basically a Bengali Brahmin housewife, uninterested in problems of cultural identity. (FM:60)

Native Christian society was exceptionally loyal to British Raj and its English servants but they were seldom held them equal to English. When Rosie visited Mrs. Cantwell, she was not considerably treated by Mrs. Cantwell. This incident made Rosie thought about her position in society. She was confused about the entire system. She observed her saintly father completely submitting to British. Despite her conversion, her mother Esther

Giribala was still basically a Bengali Brahmin housewife, uninterested in problems of cultural identity. In *An Advanced History of Modern India*, Sailendra Nath Sen voiced the similar notions, he said missionaries were very active in converting people.

The number of Indian converts was very insignificant compared to the vast population. The majority of them were from the lowest strata of the Indian society. The serampore missionaries confessed in 1833, 'We do not disguise the fact that there were stations in our Mission, where not astound has been turned to god, that there are converts in whom we have joy and that there Churches sunk almost to nothing.' (1888)

Sailendra Nath Sen discussed the situations and conditions of converted Indians that, many low strata people converted into either Islam or Christianity. He added that the number was meager compared to vast population of India. Many missionaries confessed that the concern of people could not be measured or gauged on scale of faith towards religion.

Deepali disclosed about her study circle what she was attending and asked Rosie to come along from next week. She said that they could learn important things and many of their doubts would be got cleared. In early 1940s many young men and women got attracted towards the violence forced freedom fighting. They called themselves communist comrades and government alliances found them terrorists many of them embraced death in honour of party policies. They taught next comrades *Marxism*. Many Muslim young men went to Russia and became followers of Stalin and returned as ardent comrades.

The comrades explained Deepali and Rosie about many revolutionaries involved in party and how they endeavored for Indian freedom struggle. The Gadhar conspiracy was famous of its kind. The plot for mutiny was honed to final shape, according to plan 23rd Cavalry in Punjab was to seize weapons and kill their officers while on roll call on 21 February. But it was infiltrated by the Punjab CID successfully through Kirpal Singh (cousin of Balwanth Singh, the trooper of 23rd Cavalry). Richard Gabriel Fox's *Loins of Punjab: Culture in*

Making and Seema Sohi's Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America ascertained the Ghadar conspiracy.

Rosie attended communist study circles and learned many things about party and government. Comrades told her that Indian press was under great censorship so, they deployed an underground press to educate their masses. Party comrades told Rosie and Deepali that, many Indian Muslims went to Russia and returned as communists.

Rosie Bannerjee's education in the study circle was progressing satisfactorily when the Second World War broke out. The comrades told her California-based Indian patriots had planned a mutiny in India in 1915, that's why they chartered a Japanese ship and came home. Before they could land in Calcutta a traitor informed the Government -forty-two of them were hanged. (FM: 65)

Comrades informed Rosie about communist roots in India. They told her that, Ferozuddin Mansur, Fazal Ilahi Qurban, shaukath Usmani, Mian Afzal Shah. Amir Hyder Khan became a member of Communist party of the US. Indians who went US for education attracted to communism and they brought the roots of its to India. They enquired whether her father know where she was going every week. She answered that, her father was not a foggist. Comrades went underground with some apprehension. Deepali also became tight lipped, Rosie thought as she belonged to a Christian loyal family all was not disclosed to her. This made her again rethink about her roots in India as Indian Christian.

Muslim entered India around thousand years ago at the period of medieval since then they had/had been assimilated, accustomed or absorbed the Hindu culture. Muslim and the Hindu riots were little recorded till British entered India. Though there were wars among native rulers and Muslim rulers, they were power and political wars and common people were nothing to do with those battles. In the novel *Fireflies in the Mist* Communist Party members explained about Hindu Muslim relations in India. They said, " Remember two very important points: If you read the history of India in careful detail, from the time of coming of Muslims,

a thousand years ago, you will not find a single Hindu -Muslim riot mentioned by any historian. There were battles between rulers-no riots, till we come to the last century. (FM:127,128)". Rafiuddin Ahmed and Joya Chatterji strengthen the same argument in his works. Comrades explicated to Rosie, Indian Muslims assimilated with Hindus and developed a hybrid culture in Bengal as well as different parts of India. When British entered and established their rule here, Hindu and Muslims fight with British united. But, British Raj created differences between them.

Comrades told Rosie and Deepali, in communist party, Hindus and Muslims worked together during national movement even the main member Rehan was a Muslim. In party comrades never practice any religion and it was observed in India many occasions both communities amicably work together.

It's true that Muslim rulers were more popular than British colonizers among Indians. Bengal, what used to be rich province under rule of Nawabs, reduced to mendicancy in colonial rule, with the immense impose of taxes. Many of these villagers either became fisherman, destitute peasants or burglars. They probably spent their whole life in one place and would die in that very place unknown and unsung. When Rehan and Deepali visited Bengal villages they saw poverty and destitute people who were leading miserable lives. They met a few peasants in nearby villages of Sunderbans, Deepali feared that some of them would be informers to British but Rehan explained her they were poor peasants who fought against British a hundred years ago.

Rehan recalled that when he met left wing intellectuals of England, he was treated with due respect. Superiority complex what British put on, in India would not be found when Indians visited Britain, but in their colony they behave like masters and treat natives inferior. Many well to do families of India sent their children to Oxford or Cambridge for studies, there Indians developed friendship with English, but when they returned India they found English treating them differently. Rehan concluded that, British were not bad people in their own

country when they cross the Suez they became different beings.

British Attitude towards India

Really British created a splendid colony here in India. And British looked down upon their own religious followers. Most Indians who converted into Christianity were poor. The British called Indian priest Black Padre, and sometimes wondered how one could change their religions and faith as if they were peeling their skin and attaching new one.

Mr. Bannerjee was a passionate follower of Christianity and from the time he embraced Christianity he felt he got his path. But his daughter Rosie Bannerjee seemed not impressed by her father's beliefs and practices and debated with him about rationality of Christianity. Rosie said "...."Look what Christians did Jews in Europe and Russia. And when you talk of the untouchables, can a chimney sweeper or a charwoman dine with a lord in England." (177)". She said in Europe women were burnt at the stake as witches. And Christians took a oath that they would wipe out Jews in Europe and Russia. Rosie voiced against to her father beliefs that made him worry about her path.

In colonies colonizers always held themselves in high airs and colonized dwarfed behind their colonizers. In India though many races colonized her the British was the race made to feel her people inferior. They strongly believe that their colonized people were savages and never civilized before they absorbed into colony. They almost made their colony forcefully change her faith and they themselves wondered how one can change their religion as if changing clothes.

I have always wondered how one can change one's ancestral religion. how does one peel off one's skin and wear another? For instance, if I became Buddhist or a Mohammedan! Ha ha. The black padre dressed in black suit and white dog-collar looks so absurd. Comrade Rehan is absurd. I am absurd. all humanity is so ludicrous that one ought to weep. (FMM;197)

Behaviour of colonizers was well discovered by Albert Memmi in his *The Colonizer and The Colonized* that colonizers who refused the colonization tried in vain to adjust his ideology to his

life and colonizer who accepts colonization tried to adjust his life to his ideology. The same thing reflected in life of Mr. Barlow, he accepted the colonization as part of his life Being successor of civil servants, whose family members served Johns Company for centuries but found himself absurd condition of quitting India.

British found Muslim as strong enemy than any other race in colonies. They had great confrontation from Tipoo in south and from Siraj-ud-dualah in Bengal. In order to insult their enemy they called their pet dogs Tipoo and patterned their servants and peons' dresses after his dress. they fought endless wars against their enemy so that they could set up their foot and post their flag on this exotic land Called Hindustan.

Mr. Barlow, grandson of Sir Edward Barlow aware of spirit and potential of their enemy. He had many Indian friends at Oxford but when he returned to India he behaved as master. Beyond doubt, the English had invested greatly in fighting numerous wars with their co-colonizers and native rulers. The list of these wars made them to be possessive about this country and were not willing to give up their power on India.

Colonizers who accepts the system is usurper. As a usurper to secure his place safe he pretend to be reformist and show his policies were better than the colonized. For this they would have record false laws and ventured to tamper the history. Mr. Barlow recorded all positives about their achievements but deliberately forgot to mention what British had done with Mutiny revolutionaries in 1857 and Jallianwala Bagh massacre which was directed by Colonel Dyer. Albert Memmi felt that, accepting being a colonizer is accepting the illegal personality.

To be sure, a usurper claims his place and, if need be, will defend it by every means at his disposal. (...) He endeavors to falsify history, he rewrites laws, he would extinguish memories-anything to succeed in transforming his usurpation into legitimacy. (Memmi:96)

Colonizers never tolerate any strong and intelligent colonized race. They cherished to be respected and devoted as Gods and called Maa-i-Baap (father and mother). They were considerable

kind and good to their servants but hate colonized people with equal intelligence. Rehan Ahmed, by escaping many times from British hold gave a great jolt to Mr. Barlow, so he promised to get him dead or alive. He thought ruefully Rehan also Oxford returned chap their own creation.

In balmy days of colonial rule English and Indian used to be friendly and had social life gaily. But, in rough conditions English could not trust their own colonized friends. Barlow watching sketches of English and Indians in civil life of Bengal and thought his grandfather and father would have peaceably enjoyed the mild conditions of colonial rule but, he was in great troubles.

Mr.Barlow in his soliloquies explained how he was befriended with Indians in Oxford and how he changed his attitude towards them after reaching India. In his thoughts Mr.Barlow clearly articulated how he hated Indians as intellectuals and liked as faithful domestic workers and servants. He added that when he was in Oxford he could treat Indians his equal but when he return he became colonizer and they subjected.

Mr. Barlow thought his grandfather, father, uncle, and his aunts served in this country and last their invaluable lives for betterment of this destitute, worthless and ungrateful Indians. His father great researcher and written many books on flora and fauna of this country's wild life. He was killed by a Royal Bengal tiger in order to save a few unworthy villagers. And now he was serving in amidst of bomb blasts and anxiety of quit India movement in 1942.

Mr. Barlow thought it was the time to quit India as they were paying for their own deeds. All imperialists persecuted in many ways as many other imperialists like the Sassanians, the Abbasids, and the Ottomans, the Czars the Romans. But British is the most enlightened and successful colonizers of all, they gave such inferiority complex to their colonies. In his contemplation also Mr. Barlow held his religion and culture high and treated India and Indians low. He was a model of British colonizer in India.

In establishing power in India and peaceably maintaining it despite many hurdles and oppositions from different elements was a hard task

for British in early twentieth century. British Raj had faced many cataclysms in maintaining upper hand. And it had generated enough confusion among her civil folk and made them polarized by crafting cleavage between two major communities. At the time they gave up and announcing freedom made the country part into illogical fragments.

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