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Representations of The Victim And The Victimizer In Partition Short Stories

Abstract

The era of the Partition experienced various unexpected, unforeseen and inexplicable incidents. These incidents had an equally unfathomable impact on people. Since everyone was losing either their family members or their possessions, the Partition put man in a fragmented state of mind. It became a challenging task to think straight and stay optimistic during such hard times. There are also instances when even the most clear-headed humans started behaving irrationally. The effect of the social upheaval of the time was such that their actions too became baffling. The Partition resulted in major shift in the personalities of the people. The adverse circumstances forced the victims to become victimizers. They succumbed to punishable means in order to either avenge the death of their loved ones or to take back what they thought was rightfully theirs.

Writers like Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Krishna Sobti, and Gurdev Singh Ropana delineate unforgettable characters in their short stories which clearly reflect on the plight of the victims of the Partition. They also bring forth the torment of the time which led man to become a loathsome perpetrator.

Keywords: Partition, victim, victimizer, dispute

Partition literature is dominated by stories which reflect on the lives of people who suffered as a result of the events of 1947. The way in which the characters are delineated and developed throughout Partition short stories is worth noticing. Every story ended up defining the loss which got incurred upon the masses. As a result, the character of 'the victim' of the Partition got defined simultaneously.

With the demarcation of the border, communal rifts became apparent. As a result, age-old relationships suffered. Everyone's identity was also at stake. Society, on the whole, went through a major challenge in defining themselves by choosing a particular side of the newly-created border. It was a time when "conflict between religiously defined communities" (Nair 3) reached an unbelievable height. The border resulted in "the acute sense of disbelief" (Nair 3) among the conflicting communities. Apart from the easily discernible physical violence, the uncontrollable and epidemic distrust partnered with Partition. The "relations between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs" began to be "described as steadily deteriorating" (Nair 2). This led to a dubious and unforeseeable migration of Hindus and Sikhs to the east and Muslims to the west. In other words, "Partition swept away a shared world, disrupted the lives of generations, and sundered the deepest friendships, seemingly without any warning" (Nair 2).

Various types of representations of the victims emerged in Partition literature. Because of the widening of the gap in relationships, multiple labels got constructed in order to categorise the population either as followers or disbelievers of a certain religion. If anyone stepped outside the boundaries of their religion, they were subject to strict scrutiny and punishment from the rest of the community. This was a conscious way of controlling the number of followers of a religious ethnic group. Similarly, various types of treatments were meted out to people which labelled women or girls as 'abducted', 'raped', 'kidnapped wife', 'slave'; children as 'abducted'.

Terms like 'refugees', '*muhajir*' and '*kafir*' also came into existence during the time. Since it was a time when people were forced to stick to an identity based entirely on a specific religious side newly differentiated by the border, it became urgent for everyone to leave their place of birth and shift to different places with unknown surroundings. "It ripped apart the operation of everyday life in cities across North India and...made ordinary life altogether impossible" (Khan 207). For instance, the Muslims who wished to move westward were termed *muhajirs* in order to differentiate between the native Pakistani Muslims and Indian Muslims

during the process of displacement. But, this way of labelling further divided the Muslim-specific nation state into two; namely, the natives and the outsiders.

An increase in the number of victims was highly inevitable as a result of a political decision gone wrong. It is interesting and shocking at the same time to see the role reversals that the events of the Partition led to. Various victims of Partition slowly started turning into victimizers. They chose to don the role of perpetrators of violence under the wave of 'nationalism'. In order to protect themselves, their families, and their nation from any kind of violence, many rendered it fit to demean the other community by turning themselves into perpetrators.

Many acquired the status of a refugee as they shifted across the border from either side. "As they navigated a new world of opportunities", they began to seek "a greater say in the governance of their homeland" (Nair 4) which was newly constructed and defined on religious lines. Soon, newly-acquired sense of nationalism got defined by "doing the other community down" (Nair 4). Khan raises a serious question here. "How to record these acts and disentangle rationality from madness, political intent from momentary insanity?" (Khan 130) It is thus urgent to find an answer to this question to solve the dilemma which the society often gets in during excruciating times.

Partition opened up a space of intimidation and trepidation. "The anguish with which [people] on both sides of the new border locked their homes and left the land of their birth and their homeland, scarcely believing it would never again be part of a united nation" (Nair 2) had reached an unimaginable height. The trauma that the loss of their social spaces led to, became unbearable. Society was in for a toss. Settled life was unnerved. Every soul wandered the bloody streets with excruciating hopelessness. The victims "succumb[ed] to labels like 'loyalist,' 'communal,' 'liberal,' 'extremist,' or 'nationalist'" (Nair 4). This helped them to justify their violent actions for themselves. Thus, the vicious circle of revenge garbed in the façade of nationalism spread across northern India whose outcomes were innumerable killings, loot, and rape.

Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi's short story titled "Parmeshwar Singh" is about a quandary faced by the eponymous protagonist after he comes across a challenging situation in his life. The story engages the reader to move with the lost child named Akhtar and feel the diverse

reactions of Singh and his family, and the entire Sikh neighbourhood towards this child of “more than five years old” (Qasmi 159).

Akhtar comes in touch with Singh when he gets separated from his parents about fifteen miles from the border of Pakistan. It is here that a group of Sikhs catch hold of him. After identifying him as a Muslim, they decide to slaughter him with their *kirpan*. One of them wants “this kirpan [to] first fulfil its sacred duty” (Qasmi 160) of killing a Muslim child. It is only after Singh’s intervention and sensible discussion with his group members that Akhtar could be freed from their shackles. He explains to his group members that “this child was created by Waheguruji as the one who created you and your children” (Qasmi 159).

After talking to Akhtar, Singh comes to the realisation that there are many similarities between him and his lost son Kartar who too got separated from him during the said time of upheaval. Singh’s extreme liking of and bonding towards Akhtar is revealed quite early to the reader. When Akhtar is enquired about who gave birth to him, “Khuda or Waheguruji” (Qasmi 160), his innocent reply, “I don’t know... My mother says that I was found in hay in a small barn” (Qasmi 160), makes Singh emotional and moves him to draw a parallel between Kartar and Akhtar. He wails in front of the other Sikhs that “all children are alike, yaroon. My Kartara also used to say the same thing. He too had been found by his mother in hay in a small barn” (Qasmi 160). Looking at the crying Singh, the Sikhs decide to free the child and let him stay with Singh on one condition. They ask him to “take care of him. Let him grow his hair long, name him Kartar Singh, treat him like your son” (Qasmi 160). In other words, he is asked to change his identity entirely in order to survive in the Indian side of the border. He was asked to let go of both his name and his appearance in order to be accepted in the Sikh community.

Further, the actual trouble emerges when Singh takes Akhtar to his house where he lives with his wife and daughter called Amar Kaur. Both the women of the house have been anti-Muslims ever since incidents of rapes and murders began to take place as the consequence of communal disharmony. It is told in the story that they used to live in Lahore *zila* before the Partition. Their house was located near a mosque where “the azan at dawn had sounded beautiful” (Qasmi 162). Here, Qasmi captures the change in the perspective of people towards religion-specific aspects. He writes,

“It seemed to [Amar Kaur] as if the morning light spreading in the east was singing. But ever since the day her neighbour, Pritam Kaur, had been raped by a few young men

and then cast away like a torn rag on a garbage heap, she heard screams in the muezzin's call. The very mention of the azan now filled her with dread." (Qasmi 162)

Both Amar Kaur and her mother therefore look down upon all of Akhtar's actions as he reminds them of the ill deeds of the men of his religion. Because of what happened to their neighbour, they firmly believe that he will grow up to be exactly like those anti-social members of his community.

On the one hand, Singh can point out similarities between Kartar and Akhtar. On the other, Singh's wife is only met with extreme revulsion at the sight of Akhtar. She can't stand him in her house. She retorts in a demeaning tone to Singh's replies.

"Idiot! What's wrong with you? Can't you see that he is a mussalla? Take him away and dump him where you found him. I'll be damned if he steps into my kitchen!" (Qasmi 164)

It is here that Qasmi brings forward the shift in perspectives ever since the Partition took place. People lost any trust that there was among people of different religions because of innocent lives being taken away. Even though it is told in the story that Akhtar is a child, Singh's wife is extremely prejudiced towards him. She believes that he will harm her family in some way or the other because of his "mussalla" identity. Unlike Singh, her character is delineated in such a way that echoes strong aversion to Akhtar.

Every character is driven by forces of recent experiences. While Parmeshwar Singh wishes to see his lost son in a Muslim child, his wife and daughter loathe him even more. As Akhtar analyses both Amar Kaur and her mother's behaviour towards him, he develops an inevitable hatred towards the both of them. Being a child trapped in traumatic circumstances, he reacts just as any person would. With constant fear of completely losing his identity including the change in his looks and his name, Akhtar makes an attempt to distance himself from Singh's family and village alike in every manner possible. Qasmi paints each one of these characters as victims of the excruciating time.

Yunus Khan, the Baloch soldier of Krishna Sobti's short story "Where is My Mother?", does not believe in sparing the life of any *kafir*. He believes in killing everyone who chants "Har Har Mahadev" and saving all those who chant "Allah-ho-Akbar". He lost his sister in the riots of Quetta which made him take the irrational step of murdering everyone outside his

religion. He is reigned by “testosterone-fuelled ideals of martyrdom, bravery, honour and heroism” (Khan 130) and revenge. This predominant attitude “at the time... sanctioned the killings” (Khan 130). In other words, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that everyone was driven by their own sense of righteous course of action during the tumultuous time of 1947.

“Fuelled by appeals to an ideal society and determined to bring about their own interpretations of *swaraj* and Pakistan, some of the murderers no doubt operated with the mistaken idea that they were doing what was best for their nation.” (Khan 206)

For Yunus Khan, everything was fair in love and war because “freedom can’t be won without bloodshed, revolutionary wars can’t be fought without bloodshed and...and his small and lovely country had been born out of such a revolutionary struggle” (Sobti 135). The feelings of extremism had surpassed all boundaries in him. He is described to be raging with uncontrollable fire to eradicate any *kafir* from the piece of his newly created homeland. “The very thought of a *kafir* made Yunus Khan’s blood boil with anger. He felt as if all his wounds had reopened again” (Sobti 135).

It is only towards the end of the story that Khan has a change of heart. It is unexpected of him and a shocking moment for the reader when he saves a wounded non-Muslim little girl who reminded him of his lost sister. He is shown to express compassion towards her which brings him back to being the person he used to be. It is at this moment that the reader comes close to Khan’s original personality. The fact that this incident is spaced between the burning streets of Lahore and panic-stricken people trying to save themselves from murderous soldiers and hooligans under police protection is exemplary. The gravity of the events of the Partition gets highlighted in this manner. On the one hand, people like Yunus Khan are butchering hundreds of *kafirs* and on the other, somewhere they are also trying to protect them is confusing enough for the reader. They face an inexplicable dilemma during these moments. Sobti writes,

“But, there were also soldiers who joined the large gatherings of hooligans and laughed with them. Dead men lay piled everywhere like garbage. Bodies of naked women lay scattered in the deserted streets. The silence of the city was broken by slogans-slogans which were screamed loudly.” (Sobti 137)

Her story raises crucial questions. What if those soldiers hadn’t been laughing with those hooligans at the *kafirs*? Would the situation be better from the current one? What if Yunus Khan hadn’t killed those whom he eventually did in the name of his religion or faith or his

newly demarcated motherland? Would it have averted the chaos? Would it have saved innocent lives from feeling the soil of graveyards too early in their lives? Or, would there have been another soldier being a nationalist in his distinctive and peculiar manner? These questions need to be addressed to arrive at a better understanding of the reason behind the sudden shift in man's perspective towards fellow human-beings during violent times.

The narrator of Gurdev Singh Ropana's "The Mirror" is an eminent Punjabi writer whom Dennis, a French Ph.D. research scholar of Punjabi literature, has come to visit along with his plan to collect some books on Punjabi literature. Dennis is an outsider to Punjabi culture interested to know more about it. It is fascinating to see the narrator look at his culture from Dennis' point of view. Also, an Indian reader gets to see a different side of Indian culture through Dennis. He in turn becomes the lens through which the reader gets to look at and understand his own culture.

On their way to the village Ropana, Dennis discusses one of the short stories written by the narrator called "*Hava*" ("Wind"). He inquires if the road on which they are standing is actually the road about which he gives sensitive details in his story. Dennis wants to have a first-hand experience of all the places where people were massacred. He wishes to see and feel every nook and corner which was once washed with the blood of its natives. The narrator makes him feel like he is walking on historical land. Dennis is reliving the moments he had read in the story. Walking on the same road as the people of the caravan makes him even more curious about the incidents, places and characters penned in his literary work.

The story soon revolves around the concept of *paap* (sin or misdeed) and *punn* (virtue or righteousness). The two concepts and their interpretation by one of the characters in the story places both Dennis and the reader in a predicament. The situation is inconceivable, illogical, and ineffable. The narrator and Dennis soon arrive at a cremation ground where the pyre of "Boorha, the rascal" had been lit (Ropana 124). On inquiry, Boorha's son, Keharu, informs them that his father passed away peacefully. "His father's painless passing had annoyed the villagers, who did not consider him worthy of such a death" (Ropana 125). This is the instance when the discussion on the concepts of *paap* and *punn* begins. After hearing one of the villagers' comment on Boorha's character, Dennis is eager to know the difference between the two and understand why the villagers are of a strange opinion regarding Boorha's death.

The narrator clarifies his doubts and answers all his queries regarding Boorha's

character. He tells Dennis that the old man was “a sinner of the first rank” (Ropana 124). Once the narrator elaborates on Boorha’s character, the reader too can feel what Dennis must be going through. This is when the curtain falls on the incidents of 1947.

“During the Partition of 1947, a caravan fifteen or twenty miles long had passed down the road through the village. The looters had...killed the men and the old women and took away the young women...People were being slaughtered at the rear but the caravan moved on. The road was littered with corpses.” (Ropana 126)

This is only the beginning of the trauma. Through the instance of a caravan movement, Ropana captures the cruelty witnessed by people during the time exactly. Communal disharmony had reached its unreasonable catastrophic level which resulted in innocent deaths. This is quite similar to what happened in real life as well. In reality, roads were littered with corpses. Man’s religion was attacked.

The infants had to bear the brunt of the Partition in the story. Since the looters had spared the infants, they soon became a burden on the entire village. It was Boorha’s suggestion that those infants be sent to their salvation. Boorha stepped forward to “do the good deed” (Ropana 126).

“Boorha took them to the canal, finished each one with a single stroke of the sword and threw the corpses in the water. This was the good deed that Keharu had referred to, which had earned his father an easy death.” (Ropana 126)

Boorha’s means and ends have been antithetical. His painless passing stands irreconcilable with his terrible actions. This moment highlights the impact that the actions of men like Boorha had on society during the chaotic Partition. Similar to the villagers’ reaction, Dennis couldn’t comprehend the simplicity with which Boorha completed the task and lived freely all his life without a single hint of guilt.

Dennis is even more tormented by the narrator. He feels that he has been betrayed by what has been written in his short story “Hava”. After realizing that the caravan analogy is embraced in the story in a deceptively divergent manner, he asks the narrator one last question to confirm his distancing away from the narrator. “The caravan that man was referring to, isn’t that the same caravan in your story “*Hava*”? (Ropana 128) The narrator’s response with silence to Dennis’ question leaves nothing else to be said.

As a title, “The Mirror” can be read as a trope used to analyze literature and what it reflects about society. The story becomes a literal mirror to be looked into by man to keep his conscience in check before indulging into heinous deeds. In the beginning, the motive behind Dennis approaching the narrator is understandable. He wanted to live the Indian culture, feel and experience the space which was talked about in the short story of the narrator. To his dismay, the narrator’s work turned out to be unreal and deceitful which hid the crucial details which he thought would prove detrimental to his success. According to Dennis, narrator’s short story “*Hava*” does not reflect the society in reality. He betrays his readers like Dennis in order to lure them into the richness of Punjabi literature and cultural heritage. The narrator shows that he regrets not including the pivotal details of the caravan. But the utterance of his words hints at his aware and conscious lapse of memory. This breaks the cordial bond between the two.

The characters are quite diverse in their personalities which is evident from the way in which they keep shifting from the role of a victim to a victimizer and vice-versa. They are terribly caught in the uncontrollable forces of the time. Apart from the protagonists, other members of the society too are reflected upon in these stories. They are shown to be prejudiced towards people of other communities. Their bitter Partition experiences guide them. Even in their roles as perpetrators or initiators of violence and mental disturbance, they exhibit traces of victimized personalities. The events of 1947 functioned as undesirable catalyst for altering and reshaping society for the worst.

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