

## SHIV K.KUMAR'S *A RIVER WITH THREE BANKS*: A STUDY

**Talluri Aruna Kumar**  
Lecturer in English  
APSWRS/JC, Vakadu

### Abstract

Shiv K Kumar is one of the greatest literary celebrities in India. His erudition, lucid style of writing, with equal felicity and control, in divergent disciplines of literature make us feel that he is a major creative genius of India. He entered the fictional mode of writing in the late 70's. He has five novels to his credit. In each novel he has presented an intense study of life's agony and revealed the heights of ecstasy with freshness. Kumar migrated from Lahore to Delhi in 1947 when the communal holocaust was at its worst. He has used for backdrop the partition of Indian sub-continent. The heavy loss of lives in the wake of communal violence, the displacement of a large number of people on both sides of the border are some of the tragic consequences of partition that Kumar has described in his novel **A River with Three Banks**. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity may be taken as the three banks that condition the flow of the life-stream of the nation.

**Keywords:** Partition, communal holocaust, violence, tragic consequences, Indian sub-continent.

Shiv K Kumar, in 1947, like several other Punjabis, had to cross the border burdened with harrowing memories and wounded personalities. He had closely known some of the most gruesome incidents of rioting and looting, of young children butchered, massacred, women raped and slaughtered, old men killed in cold blood in their home streets by none else but their neighbours. The barbarians sent train loads of dead bodies as gifts to the other country. Partition therefore remained with Kumar as a cataclysmic experience and found recurrent expression in some of his poems. Those poems also formed the central theme of his novel *A River with Three Banks*. He begins his narrative with the description of violence during the troubled times when men were killed like dogs for no reason what so ever, except the fact that they belonged to the other religion. The author pictures the brutal killing of a Muslim by a frenzied Hindu mob in front of St. Johns church:

“It was the quietest day of the week – comparatively speaking, of course. Only one death reported in the press: ‘a member of minority community’ shot by ‘some unknown person’, from a speeding jeep, near the Red fort. Although censorship had sternly warned all media against attributing such killings to any community, it was never difficult to guess which community had committed any particular crime. From the report of the solitary killing that morning, it was, for instance, clear that some helpless

Muslim had been gunned down by a fanatic Hindu in yet another act of vendetta for what the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan had suffered.” (p.14)

The title of the novel *A River with Three Banks* has a religious interpretation. Shiv K. Kumar says:

What I had in mind was three religions. The relationship between Gautam and Haseena was consummated through three religions. Gautam, a Hindu becomes a Christian in order to get his divorce and then accepts Islam to marry Haseena. So these three banks of the river—a sort of confluence that brings Gautam and Haseena together. <sup>1</sup>

Kumar’s novel has been one of the recent creative responses towards the partition. Kumar has tried to fictionalize the theme of partition in order to drive out the pangs of partition. In his interview to Mohanty, the author accounts for his fictional articulation of the partition:

I ....am a migrant from Pakistan. I was born in Lahore and migrated to Delhi in 1947 when the communal holocaust was at its worst. You know every Punjabi writer has to get the trauma of partition out of his system sooner or later. <sup>2</sup>

Gautam, a Hindu, whose marital relationship with his wife, Sarita, is in shambles, besides to embrace Christianity not because of his love for the religion but for securing scope for divorce. He wants freedom from the constraints of the Hindu law of marriage. Baptism in Christianity will give him a passport to this freedom. For Gautam divorce is a means of obtaining release from the shackles of family. The domestic drama of divorce takes place during the partition riot. Gautam approaches Father Jones for the purpose secretly in order to avoid the possible ripples of religious controversy. When Gautam goes to the church to meet the Bishop, he witnesses the murder of a Muslim man called Abdul by Hindu fanatics. Gautam Mehta is a journalist working for *The challenge*. He manipulates the Bishop about his conversion by saying that this is a matter of spirit and heart and that he was influenced by Cardinal Newman and Catholic writers like Francois Maurine, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene etc. His sheer effort to embrace the Christianity is prompted not by values of Christianity but to get divorce from his wife Sarita. The novelist says:

The certificate of Baptism was all that he wanted to grab. That was his passport to freedom. (p.8)

Gautam’s wife Sarita has illicit relation with Mohinder, a fellow journalist of Gautam. Gautam’s parents migrated from Lahore to Delhi due to the partition of the country. They suffer not only from division of the country but also from division of the family:

His parents had arrived in Delhi after many harrowing experiences on the way from Lahore. Though they were fatigued and their nerves were frazzled, Gautam could not keep them with him more than a few days. They had been looking forward to seeing their grandson, but soon they felt un-housed—their second partition. (p.31)

During the disturbances that were occurring in India soon after the partition, a Muslim girl called Haseena gets kidnapped from Allahabad by a gang of abductors, headed by Pannalal. She, along with many other Muslim girls was being forced to prostitution in Delhi. Haseena father’s Abdul Karim, who had gone to Delhi in search of his daughter, gets killed by an angry Hindu mob. His murder was witnessed from a distance by the protagonist of the novel, Gautam Mehta, a journalist in Delhi. The letter addressed to his wife (Abdul’s wife) found in his pocket after his

murder exposes another face of brutality. It gives a clue to the fact that in the nefarious trade of prostitution both the Hindus and the Muslims (Pannalal and Suleiman Ghani) were co-sharers:

This morning I talked to a Muslim shop-keeper in Urdu bazaar, near Jama Masjid. I was shocked to learn that most of the girls abducted from Allahabad, Lucknow and Patna have been brought to Delhi where they are forced into prostitution. Oh Allah! And, in this nefarious business both Hindus and Muslims are operating as close accomplices. I shudder to think of our dear child. (p.10)

This shows that the evil doers are a class by themselves whose religion is crime against humanity. They are neither Hindus nor Muslims nor Indians nor Pakistanis but the sons of devil, the forces of disintegration indulging in mindless violence. Abdul, the old man wandering in search of his daughter, Haseena, who was abducted from Allahabad, on the other hand, fails to get a quick entry into the church and is stabbed to death by the blood-thirsty rioters. Abdul knocked frantically for getting into the church:

Oh! Jesus is it another crucifixion? This man knocked frantically for admittance, but we couldn't let him in. (p.9)

This shows a note of repentance in Father Jones' words. The killing of Muslims in India is a sequel to the similar treatment meted out to the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. The words of the tonga-wala Sardar reflect the outburst communal frenzy:

My family had the worst of it... two of my sister's were carried away. My old man's throat was slit before my mother's eyes. Then he was roasted alive. I was the only one to escape. Oh! Those blasted Muslims.... But we got one Muslim this afternoon, near St. John's. And old bearded fellow. That was a good catch. (p.14)

Gautam came into contact with his friend Berry. Emotionally bruised, Gautam allows himself by his friend Berry into spending a night with a call-girl. It is in this way that Gautam meets Haseena in a brothel. Gautam helps Haseena to escape from Delhi to Allahabad. There she joins her family. There is a duel between Pannalal and Gautam on the banks of Ganges. In that duel Pannalal was killed. Pannalal is a pimp. Exploiting the situation of communal frenzy Pannalal had taken Haseena away when she was an undergraduate student and forced her to prostitution. Many underworld dons found the chaos of the partition congenial for abduction of women. They exploited the situation for their business. After releasing Haseena from this dangerous situation, Gautam falls in love with her. He puts the proposal of marrying Haseena before her mother. He is asked to embrace Islam by swearing Kalma. After fulfilling all this, Gautam assumes the name, Saleem. Born Hindu he converts himself to Christianity for the sake of divorce and again Islam for the sake of marriage. Gautam's conversion to other religions was a play but his love for Haseena is true. It is a love that grows on the debris of her suffering with a passion and vigour to transcend all socio-religious barriers. The novelist brings the couple to Allahabad, the sacred Sangam city where the subterranean flow of river Saraswati merges with the Ganga and the Jamuna and where the trinity motive is also associated with the Allahabad fort which was built by Ashoka. Gautam also gets the permission and blessings of his orthodox father Shamlal. After a little resistance, his mother also expresses her willingness to this. His father Shamlal is an orthodox Arya Samaji but internally he is not so. The episode of Gautam and Haseena suggests that the essential harmony of life does not lie in one's adherence to religious dogmas and ritualistic discipline. It lies in mutual understanding and trust. The novelist has used the love-episode of Gautam and Haseena as a symbolic anodyne to heal the battered and bruised

psyche of partition. Shamlal seeks the common link or universality in all religions and finds it. He manipulates his own thinking to suit that of his son. He reconciles himself to his son's conversion to Christianity. He portrays Christ as a Yogi who wants into a Samadhi and emerged unscathed—his explanation for Christ's resurrection. Similarly, Shamlal reads the Quran and discovers what Prophet Mohammed said in his discourse. Shamlal says that all mankind is one family and God sends his messenger as a bearer of good tidings to punish evil and reward virtue. He draws his son's attention to the fact that:

There is a clear enunciation of a sort of universal of prophethood that embraces all religions—Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. (p.191)

After Haseena's marriage with Gautam, her family decides to move to Pakistan. Through Berry's British connections Gautam safely escorts the family of Haseena across the border risking his life all through the train journey from Allahabad to Amritsar which is marked by chance encounters between rival communities. Haseena stays back with him to translate into action their holy vow to start a new race of humanity. Protesting against Haseena's wish to be addressed as Haseena Mehta, 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. (p.214)

Now they are neither Hindus nor Muslims but just two human beings—Gautam-Haseena. Thus the novel advocates liberal humanism and cosmopolitan atmosphere. At the end of the novel the novelist conveys, a message of universal religion through the description of clouds:

The sky was now covered with mountain clouds—white, inky blue and grey. They assumed all sorts of fantastic shapes—of giant dinosaurs, their long necks craning forward, of the skeletal remains of some primordial mammals of an army of soldiers on the root. Ceaselessly, they sailed across the bridge from India to Pakistan casting fugitive reflections in the tawny waters of the river. (p.214)

Standing on the other side of the border, Haseena and Gautam watch the two sides of the river and the sky common to all where the clouds sailed ceaselessly across the borders paying little heed to man-made boundaries. They needed no passports to cross over. Shiv K. Kumar seems to have emphasized universal religion against religious fanaticism and communalism and also seems to perceive the importance of universal religion through the character of Gautam. Gautam is an ideal hero and instrument of Kumar's vision of liberal humanism. Being an educated-elite, Gautam is a cosmopolitan hero, who rises above all religious practices. The novel ends with a strong note of optimism advocating liberal humanism—that we should across the religious and communal barriers for the better future. The novel is a symbolic record of man's vigorous search for harmony across the domains of conflicting social, religious or cultural dogmas. It registers the triumph of life over the forces that unsettle the world through manoeuvres like partition, riot and psychic unrest. Partition in 1947 was an epoch making even in the Indian history. This single event triggered the imagination of scores of sensitive souls into writing and reaching the responding hearts of the millions. The unprecedented acts of barbarism, insane killings forced thousands and thousands of people to leave the places of their births. Long after partition, the holocaust is still vibrant enough to excite the imagination of even those have literally have no such experiences. Like Kushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal and a host of other writers, Shiv K. Kumar delineates the melancholy and mind-boggling, unfortunate mayhem of the then sad times. Kumar has truthfully captured the different sites of partition from communal

frenzy which gutted all good aspects of the corporate life to the tale of love between Gautam and Haseena, which was also a true face of reality. He depicts uprightly the catastrophic effect the partition caused on the minds of millions in the novel *A River with Three Banks*. Gnanamony rightly expresses the cruelty of those barbaric acts:

*Shiv K. Kumar recreates the trauma of partition with its diverge aspects of senseless killings perpetrated by one community against the other, and abduction migration and the meaninglessness of all these deeds.*<sup>3</sup>

### Works Cited

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2. Ibid.
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