

VOICES OF HOPE AND COURAGE IN THE PARTITION STORIES OF MOHINDER SINGH SARNA

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Abstract

The article explores the note of positivism that emerges in the stories of Mohinder Singh Sarna, translated by Navtej Sarna. In almost all his stories the voice of hope and courage refuse to die and prevail loud and clear for everyone to hear and it shames the brutish and meaningless violence that is seen in much of the Partition literature.

While the Indian subcontinent ushered into independence, the Partition of the country into two, on sectarian grounds led to despondency and gloom that washed away the euphoria of freedom. Writers on both the sides decried the loss of lives, and mourned the loss of innocence, love and values. Many writers recreated the loss in the form of “romanticized nostalgia” as Ravikant and Tarun K Saint point out in the introduction to the volume of short stories, **Translating Partition**, [xiii]. In fact the Partition was a “watershed, which brutally severed them from their own past.” [xiv] Writers rued the loss of their homelands, mourned forced dislocation and the chaos that followed the meaningless exodus. They capture the shock and disbelief that followed in those unruly times and for many writers images, metaphors of their past was the only connect with it. Writers like Sadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni or Krishan Chander were negotiating the disconnect between the known and the unknown, the absurdity between the euphoric celebration and the utter breakdown of humanity and meaningfulness.

Many Partition narratives in fact abound with bloody tales, gory details and voyeuristic violence that led Alok Rai to term it as “pornography of violence” in his article, “The Trauma of Independence: Some Aspects of Progressive Hindi Literature, 1945-47.” While most writers talking of the Partition recreated the horror and relived those moments when bodies were dismembered, communities were eroded, women raped and dishonoured, men and children killed, Mohinder Singh Sarna’s stories, compiled in the volume, **Savage Harvest: Stories of Partition**, ring with hope, and cheer the human spirit to bring out the inherent goodness of hearts that prevail despite the madness all around. Other writers have talked about the fragmented psyches, displaced and dislocated selves and communities, uprooted families, and wrecked villages and lands, Sarna has, as he proclaims never discredited the goodness of human heart. It is indeed worth noting that he is able to see the beauty of the human spirit in the madness of gory violence, and futile bloodshed. He says that, “I did not lose faith even when faced by the barbarity of Partition. My Partition stories pass knee-deep through the dark quicksand of blood

and crushed bone, but they keep their head, on which they carry their bundle of hope, clearly above the quicksand. This hope is kept intact even in the whirlwinds of barbarity and brutality.”[**Savage Harvest**, xiii] Like many writers of his generation he had seen the excesses of Partition and suffered its consequences. He was one among the thousand displaced and he had seen horror and suffering on both the sides of the border. He knew at close hand what it meant to suffer and lose loved ones since he too was one among the thousands that had suffered the post-trauma as the protagonist of the story, ‘Of One Community’ does.

The story, ‘Savage Harvest’, with which the volume with the similar name, opens is recounted through the perspective of the old ironsmith Dina, who forges new axes and other weapons to meet the demands of murderers like his own son, who are busy hacking members of the other community. Despite the tragic ending of the story, the narrative is laced with images of positivism like the images of the field, harvest, green fields, “On the right of the path stood the cotton crop, and the puddles of water in the fields occasionally flashed silver. On the left, the ploughed furrows awaited the seed.” [**Savage Harvest**, 2] These contrast with the images of the fiery furnace that spits instruments of destruction, of the axes and spears that he was making to carve another Pakistan that existed in the minds of the hate-mongers and hounds like his own son. The melodious “lilt in the songs” of the swaying fields is juxtaposed, and pervades the reader’s mind, with the grating beat of the hammer, which also shows how the sensibility of Dina is torn between his desire to be a farmer who longs to cultivate and spread greenery and plant new saplings or seeds but is forced to be an ironsmith and make weapons. The farmer that he wishes to be and the ironsmith he has become is the central motif of the story. His anvil creates Pakistan, which already existed in his own village, and he realizes that borders were created without him knowing it, and that borders had divided the harmony of the communities, disrupted lives as it had severed hearts. In his final descent into madness, he pleads and begs the marauders of his sanity to spare the old woman who they had given refuge or the innocent girl, Preeto, who was assaulted and then killed. His helpless pleas in the end show that he is weak and feeble. He realizes too late that his deeds were helping to sow killing fields and bloody harvests, “What kind of wheat would grow in this blood-drenched soil? And what kind of a harvest would it be after this bloody season? The shower of blood that had reddened everything had been caused by the axes he had fashioned. This crop of bones and flesh had been sown by spears made by his hands.” [**Savage Harvest**, 10]

He runs away unable to bear the guilt of lending a helping hand to his sons, of being the instrument of death and destruction. His wife, unnamed in the story is the lone voice of sanity and good sense. She is the solitary voice of courage and optimism, who in her own manner, tries to assert herself against her own son. She actually inspires Dina to speak and assert himself too and motivates him to be firm against the threatening sons, “Are they your sons or someone else’s?”[4], she asks him mockingly. She even says, “You know that they shout at me and curse me. But I don’t go making axes for them.”[**Savage Harvest**, 4] She makes him realize that Dina’s crimes are higher than what he imagines, “The killer kills one or two or at most, a handful of people. Each axe made by your hands kills dozens.” [**Savage Harvest**, 4-5] She also gives refuge to the deaf, old fragile woman, fevered and lonely and helpless hoping to save her from the prowlers of death and violence. Dina’s wife, despite her feeble efforts to prevent further violence, is the voice of hope and sensibility. In her act of sheltering the old woman, she is asserting that sensitivity and the spirit of humanity will always prevail. It is the resurrection of hope and life when death and despair prevails everywhere.

The women in the stories of Sarna display more courage and valour than the men folk. They are the silent sufferers, the victims of hatred and anger. Their bodies become the pawn on which victors cast their dice and loot and plunder. The women had everything to lose- families, their honour and their bodies, yet they in their own silent manner articulate positivity. In the story, 'Basant The Fool' the widowed mother of the fool Basant lets her son pawn his chance to escape the bloodshed. When the narrator comes with an aircraft to fly his people out of the bleeding land, everyone wants a seat in the aircraft and the young girl Kanta is bereft of a seat and everyone is aware that she is betrothed and has to make it to the other side of the border. In such a situation when no one is willing to exchange their seats with hers. The mother knows that her son might never get another chance to escape or to make it. She is also aware that the others had all their lives made fun of her son, mocked him, pelted him with stones but when it came to do an act of honour and to save another's life, her son left all the so-called sensible people behind. She can also see that her son despite his paralytic face, his hanging lower lip, limping gait and walk is in fact is more beautiful than the perfect symmetries that he tried to save. His act is angelic and beautiful and contrasts with the ugliness of hatred, death and destruction. The "mute acquiescence"[38] of the mother shows the tragic realization what the act can lead to. She does not protest or stop her son or even object to his decision. She knows that her son has risen far above the ordinary, self-centred people around them.

In the other story, 'A Woman's Integrity' Sayida who appears in the last section of the story is also the voice of sanity and righteousness. She can see clearly what even Noora with his clouded vision cannot. Though he tries to protect his employer, Sampooran Singh, with his last breath, it was not enough and the metaphorical flames of hatred and loathing reach the latter and engulf him into everlasting silence before Noora cremates the remnants of his dead body. Noora's love and gratitude cannot guarantee security and safety to the beleaguered Sikh. When he brings home the spinning wheel of Sampooran's wife, which Sayida had all her life longed to possess, the latter's response really surprises him. She refuses to take what does not belong to her saying, "Return what is not yours, and only then show me your face." [145] He is really surprised by her integrity and honesty which is unadulterated even in that direful hour. Noora wishes that there were more like her and that women were handling affairs of the world, it would be peaceful and harmonious. Her voice is the beacon of hope in a world of loot and arson, where people were claiming the lives, property and honour of others without giving a thought to honesty and reason. Noora is shamed that he too had succumbed to the temptation of taking something that was never his and in a larger context her act was quite thought-provoking and leaves the question large in the minds of the reader. Such a simple truth has so many philosophical ramifications- how could people take anything that could never be theirs. In fact it was not bodies that were killed and lives lost but souls too were dying in the acts of looting and killing. Communities were killing each other and destroying trust, faith and love for each other. In a world where values and truth and honesty are eroded, Sayida clings to her values and refuses to give in.

In the story, 'The Parade' Abnaash, the protagonist is the lone crusader fighting for the honour of two young girls who are paraded naked to settle scores with offenders on the other side of the border, who too had done something meaningless. It is as if every thoughtless abuse would be replayed with another equally inconsiderate act. The story situated in the post-partition Delhi, relives the horrors of the genocide of the Partition, once again when anti- Muslim riots break out in Delhi and the trauma is recreated. Once again the woman's body becomes the battlefield or the warring space where men settle their accounts. It is the most vulnerable thing and every rape and every dishonour point to that. What shocks the protagonist, Abnaash, is the

fact that even women are immune to the horror of the parade as is visible in the glee of the overseer's wife, who is secure in the cover of her religion and community. The manner in which the people refer to the spectacle is laced with the poison of communalism. The two girls are called 'Musli' a term rotting with disgust.

It is clear to Abnaash that most of the spectators had not witnessed the reality of the Partition but had simply heard of it through reports safe in their own havens and now they wanted to witness the riots as some kind of gladiatorial performance, where they could see the descent of humanity to the deepest pit, "Those who had received their freedom while sitting in comfort in Delhi, and had celebrated the fifteenth of August by flying the tricolour on their own houses, saw the Delhi riots as a spectacle, and desperately wanted the spectacle to go on for their enjoyment." [179] She can clearly see that the mob was nothing more than "cavemen with their weapons of bones" [180] As she pleads with the crowd to come to senses, she faces the typical rhetoric that their own community women had faced worst situations on the other side of the border, her question is laced with irony and anger, "And did these two girls go to Pakistan to tell people to parade your sisters and daughters?" [181]. The men are surprised that this lone woman has the courage to take them on, she nonetheless challenges them with a proposal and says that only the ones who went through a similar trauma should carry on with the parade, "only the people who should be here to take revenge are the ones whose own sisters or daughters have been dishonoured in Pakistan." [181] Her Christ-like appeal strikes chords in the hearts of the crowd and they disburse unable to face the scathing and torching reality. In her act of clothing and covering the poor naked souls, she redeems herself and towers over everyone else. She is amply rewarded when she the dislocated and displaced being hears from her eldest daughter, Jasbir, that they had reached safer shores and found refuge. She reunites the two unfortunate girls and is in turn, reunited with her own family.

In many of the stories the narrative voice or the protagonist comes to an epiphany when he is rudely jolted out of his closed world of fear and aggression and faces another voice of reason and good sense. In the story, 'Jathedar Mukund Singh' the voice of Ramzan shames the protagonist, Mukund Singh, who after losing his family to the riots and killings, has become vengeful. Having formed a band that tries to kill Muslims, he wipes a couple of Muslim villages and calls himself Jathedar, the leader of the envoy or fighting clan. In one such encounter, he catches a group of people who were fleeing the village and locks them in the school to prolong their tortures and death. Three try to escape and one among the three is Ramzan, a fearless middle-aged man, who gazes steadfastly at his Sikh killer, the fearsome Jathedar Mukund Singh, betraying no signs of fear, helplessness or weakness. Ironically, the younger men, apparently stronger, plead and cower before Mukund Singh and beg him to spare their lives, Ramzan stands unfazed even at this grim prospect of death, challenging him with his steady gaze, "the man stood motionless, unblinking, undisturbed. His gaze seemed to be a backhanded slap across Death's face. It was as if he was facing the bullet with the same careless indifference with which Mansur had walked to his crucifixion." [50]

The Jathedar comes up with a strange and gleeful proposal that he would let them choose three more companions to face death. While the two youngsters choose one indiscriminately without really knowing what they were doing, Ramzan chooses his own son of seventeen or eighteen, ignoring the pleas of another old man to choose him instead, and says very calmly, "I've only got a right over the life of my son, not over anyone else's." [50] The man's indomitable courage and strength shames Mukund Singh, who realizes how low he had been and how smudged with malice and vengefulness, "it seemed to the jathedar that his face, his turban, his

beard had been badly soiled by the evil-smelling filth of barbarity.”[50] Ramzan personified truth, “decency, sacrifice” and like the Nawab of Malerkotla who had walked out in protest against the death verdict of the two sons of Guru Gobind Singh, realizing that nobody was willing to hear his voice of sanity. Historical references are weaved into the present as the Jathedar sees a similarity between the two situations – of the Nawab of Malerkotla and the courageous man, Ramzan. The courageous voice is often the lone voice but always finds a listener or a corresponding heart or ear. As in this story, in many stories of Sarna, the narrative voice or the main protagonist often gets a glimpse of positive forces that opens their eye and broadens their vision and reminds them of humanity.

The story, ‘A Defender of Humanity’ the narrative voice recounts the tale of Hussain, the brave Pathani bus driver, who drives the bus through the Kashmir valley from Rawalpindi and brings all the fear-stricken passengers to the Indian territory sacrificing his own life. He had promised the passengers that he would bring them to Srinagar and so he does putting himself into the hands of the enemies. Written in the first-person narrative the entire tale is a tribute to Hussain and he is addressed as ‘you’ as in a eulogy. The narrator acknowledges that he is alive and everything that happened to him after that eventful journey is because of the valorous deed of Hussain; he remembers the latter whenever anything good happens to him, “when the valley of my life is wreathed in smiles, when sunflowers are blooming, when my son comes back victorious from some debate competition, when my daughter makes a new design of ikebana, when my wife puts a plate of my favourite peas pulao in front of me, wipes her hands on the end of her sari and smiles at me, I remember you all of a sudden, with all my heart.” [245]

Hussain’s act is laudable because he is carrying his Hindu passengers to safety and jumps down from the bus with a sword, handing the wheels to another, to distract the attackers from attacking the bus, to fight them. The sword that he wields appears like the “gleaming sword that Guru Gobind Singh had put into the hands of the Khalsa to protect the weak. It looked beautiful in your hand because it was the sword of humanity and you were the defender of humanity.”[248] The narrator does not know what happened to him but he is sure that he is probably in heaven with the almighty. Hussain is the being that gives life to so many passengers, the lone crusader who wages a holy war against the demented forces that have no conscience or morals in them.

The stories of Sarna are relevant because every disturbance and riot is a recreation of the madness that had struck in the past. Every riot brings more Partition and lashes greater hatred, and closing of communities and people. Groups ghetto and create more borders, more walls and spew more rhetoric of hatred and malice. In such venomous atmosphere it is necessary to remember the voice of sanity and hope that echoes in the stories of Sarna

It is clear in the stories of Sarna that the borders keep shifting and that in every riot a new tale of antipathy spins and yet another voice of hope and optimism is heard. His tales herald the message of humanity and courage when there is pandemonium, lunacy and the merciless dance of death all around. Many other writers wrote tales that were filled with gruesome details of death, bloodshed and brutality but Sarna was one of the few writers who were bringing out the beauty and faith that pervades human heart.

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