

When Freedom Came: A Journey from Insanity to Sanity, Immaturity to Maturity

Prin. Dr. D. R. More

Shri Shahaji Chhatrapati Mahavidyalaya,
Kolhapur-416 002. (Maharashtra)

Indian novel in English has been a gradually evolving literary genre. In the course of the last hundred and fifty years, since the publication of Bankim Chandra's Rajmohan's Life (1864), it has become rich in its content and wider in its range. At the beginning its subject matter was essentially social which shifted to political during the first half of the 20th century; after independence, however, it became more democratic widening its content and range by dealing with the themes like human relationship, voices from the margin, gender inequality, struggle for existence and various other local and global issues. The theme of alienation especially in the Diaspora novels from the last quarter of the 20th century have added flavor to the genre. Resultantly, a good number of novelists have bagged several international awards, including the Nobel equivalent Booker Prize.

The partition of the Indian subcontinent that took place in 1947, has attracted the attention of the entire world. It has become one of the most tragic incidents in the world history. A well-known reviewer on the history books written on partition, A.G. Noorani calls partition as "one of the ten great tragedies in recorded human history" (Frontline March 9, 2012). Undoubtedly, it is an unforgettable event specially for the Indians living on the Indo-Pak border, the people of the Punjab, to be more specific. The people who were inextricably linked together for ages with brotherly feelings; the people who fought unitedly against the British; the people who used to participate in all day-to-day activities of each other; the people who were ready to do anything for the sake of humanity, turned into inexplicable enmity immediately after the devastating decision of the divide was declared. They were suddenly forced to choose a new country and were separated from their relatives, friends and neighbours. While doing so they met with large scale violence. According to Urvashi Butalia, a well-known chronicler of the partition : "roughly ten to twelve million people are said to have moved, within the space of a few months, between the new, truncated India and the newly-created Pakistan. Between 500,000 to one million people are believed to have died, hundreds of thousands of children lost and abandoned, between 75,000 to 100,000 women raped and abducted" (UB 208). The agonies of the partition found place in the literatures of the affected states – in their regional languages like Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. The very first novel written on this theme was written in Urdu. It was penned by Ramanand Sagar under the title Aur Insaan Mar Gaya (1948) and the first novel written in English was by Khushwant Singh entitled Train to Pakistan (1954).

II

Right from Khushwant Singh to Shiv K. Kumar who wrote his novel very recently on the theme of the partition under the title Three Banks of the River in 2008, a good number of novelists have dealt with this or that aspect of the partition. Sharf Mukaddam is one of them. He has written his novel When Freedom Came in 1982; unfortunately, however, it has been totally neglected by the intelligentsia. In fact, this is one of the best novels written on the theme of the partition, that too by a Maharashtrian Muslim novelist, a novelist born and brought up at a place far away from the partition affected region. One can understand the

immediate or late reaction and response to such a traumatic incident by the novelists born in the affected area. Their diagnosis of the situation may be emotional as well as partial. On the contrary, a novelist born and brought up in a far away place like Mumbai or Konkan region of Maharashtra has a chance to be more objective and hence impartial. Again the passage of time also plays a vital role in the depiction of the most horrific incident like the partition. This geographical as well as emotional distance from the actual locale of the partition has helped Sharf Mukaddam to remain detached from any personal as well as political prejudice. The aim of the present paper is to diagnose this so far neglected novel on the theme of the Indian partition from a purely aesthetic point of view.

The partition of India took place in 1947 and Sharf Mukaddam wrote his novel in 1982; thirty five years after the actual event took place. He has thus ample time with him to think about the reasons and the aftermath of the partition. That is why, in spite of his being a Muslim he has not taken sides with his community. On the other hand, he has very impartially diagnosed the politics of the partition. He tries to objectively analyse what happened when freedom came. How the freedom was accompanied by death and destruction, hatred and malice, massacre and bloodshed, abductions and rapes, insult and humiliation and the most inevitable part of it was the consequent migration of the millions from both sides of the newly demarcated Indo-Pak border. In addition, Mukaddam has tried to expose how this most tumultuous incident was received by the Muslims in Maharashtra. Mukaddam has concentrated on the Muslims of the Konkan region in general and that of Bombay in particular. He has very rightly pointed out that the poison of communalism – Hindu-Muslim was more perceived in the city and less in the rural area of the state of Maharashtra. But the effect was visible, was a fact. When Freedom Came thus deals with not only the bloody and inhuman atrocities inflicted upon both the communities by themselves, but it mainly deals with the psychology of the Muslims in big cities as well as small villages situated far off from the actual partition-affected area.

When Freedom Came concentrates on how the Muslim mind even in the remotest village like Devnagar in the Konkan region of Maharashtra developed schism and how it was betrayed by its own leaders and how they had to reconcile with the changed situations, unwillingly though. It shows how the political decision proved disastrous and despicable not only with reference to the people living on the newly created Indo-Pak border but also those living in every corner of the Indian subcontinent. The locale of the novel is a small village – a hamlet – in the Konkan. Fakir Bhikoo Ultay is the central character on whose development from a simpleton boy to a politically charged youth, the entire story is based. There is a Hindu counterpart in his village, named Shankar, who is Fakir's close friend. Fakir is an innocent crab-eater, a very simple Muslim boy, goes to Bombay in search of daily bread. He lives with his uncle, Jaffer. He gets a job of a domestic servant in the house of Seth Rajab Ali Lakdiwalla, a rich Bombay Muslim. The Seth's daughter, Nargis, asks him whether he knew anything about Jinnah, Fakir answers very innocently and ignorantly, "I have never heard Jinnah Sahib's name before. Of course, I have heard about other great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. We sing songs about him in Devnagar" (WFC-43).

The same Fakir, however, in the course of time, finds himself in the company of the communally lunatic Bombay Muslims, and begins to hate the Hindus. He joins a night school where the teacher is an ardent Muslim. Thus in the house of his master, at home, in school everywhere he experiences the inimical attitude of Muslims towards Hindus. It is under this impact of the communal Muslims that he writes a letter to his mother thus : "I have learnt many new things, and I am no longer an ignorant village boy. At night school, Habib Master discusses many important matters with me, such as the fate of Indian Muslims and how Islam can be saved. Mother, have your asthma treated not by some superstitious Hindu doctor, but by a good doctor – we can afford it" (WFC 49). Thus, we can see a sea-change in this little

boy when he begins to live in Bombay. Here he learns everything about the partition at the Seth's house first and then at the Collector's house and then at Behram Seth's. Consequently, he becomes a staunch supporter of the Muslim National Guard, a hand of the Muslim League and participates in almost all anti-Hindu activities. Now he would seek revenge on those, "Kafirs who piled all kinds of humiliation on the Muslims" (WFC 125). "He was a volunteer of the Muslim League, a worker in the cause of Islam, a defender of its glory and way of life, a repository of its honour" (WFC 126). This simpleton Devnagar boy in the course of time goes to the extent of cutting off the "tongue which uttered a single word of criticism about the great leaders : Jinnah, Liakat Ali Khan and the others" (WFC 126). The poison of communalism thus spoils the simple youths like Fakir. Fakir is a representative character who represents thousands of Muslim youths who were first misled and then betrayed by their beloved leaders.

III

The novelist has created the character of Shankar as a balancing scale. Fakir and Shankar are childhood friends from Devnagar. When Shankar sees the metamorphosis in his close friend after his interaction with the Bombay Muslims, he is terribly shocked. He does not believe that his best friend has converted into a hard core communal Muslim. He decides to play a neutralising force and tries to convince Fakir of the futility of his dream. For him Fakir is "not like other Muslims of the city" (WFC 128). For Fakir, however, Shankar is like all other Kafirs of Hindustan. Once Shankar tells Fakir thus : "Today's Muslims in our country are being misguided. You can't help feelings that perhaps religion could have been better used than is being done now" (WFC 139). But Fakir argues very strongly by retorting : "The Muslims are willing to live in peace with others – but will others let us ? A Muslim is born to rule. He ruled this land for centuries. The British took power away from the Muslims, and they must return it to them, and not to anyone else" (WFC 140). Fakir thus wholeheartedly dedicates himself to the cause of Islam in general and Pakistan in particular. This impact of schism or separatism that he gains from the metropolitan city like Bombay makes him a hardcore, fanatic, communalist who views every Hindu as the enemy of the Muslims. Even when he goes back to Devnagar, he carries with him these germs of separatism and begins spoiling the silent and slow life of the placid, small village.

Shankar tries to convince Fakir of the futility of his involvement with the devious activities. He puts before him the factual information about the situation. The wise and experienced Mutawalli, the head of the village Muslims also retaliates Fakir and his friends from Bombay thus : "For many days I have been noticing that busy bodies have been going round spreading the germ of hatred in the minds of our community members, particularly those who are home on holiday from the city. We are grateful to our lads from Bombay. They contribute money to the coffers. They support their families in the village. They bring some good, modern ideas from the city – but they also import concepts which are harmful, harmful to the village, the community and to themselves. They sow discord – unwittingly, perhaps – by declaring that Muslims are a nation by themselves" (WFC 299). In spite of this advice of the Mutavalli and Shankar, Fakir and his friends from the city remain adamant. On the contrary, they injure and cause the death of the old Mutavalli and are imprisoned. It is in the prison that the moment of the great betrayal is experienced by Fakir. He reads in the newspaper about the partition of the Indian subcontinent and Jinnah's parting message to the Muslims left behind in India that, "they should remain where they were" and be slaughtered like "teeming flocks of sacrificial goats to satiate the thirst of a vengeful majority" (WFC 234). It is here Fakir realises how the Indian Muslims were used and

abandoned to their fate by the leaders like Jinnah, Liakat Ali Khan and others. They were thus betrayed by their beloved leaders when they saw freedom coming into reality.

In fact, the Mutavalli had warned Fakir and his friends about the futility and meaninglessness of their demand for a separate Muslim country. When he is again and again said about the history of the Muslim kings, the veteran Mutavalli says thus : “But I do know something about geography, and that says that Muslims have to live among Hindus, no matter what your Muslim League thinks. We in Devnagar have been living with the Hindus for generations and we cannot turn a blind eye to that reality” (WFC 229-30). The sane Mutavalli is thus a highly practical person who knows the history as well as the geography of India. But the misguided and the misled youths like Fakir fail to understand the significance of the elderly Mutavalli’s advice. It is only after they realise that they are not only duped but also betrayed by their own leaders that they find themselves in a highly repentant mood.

IV

Fakir thus represents the Indian Muslim youths of the most tumultuous days of the partition, who in the beginning are very simple but the city atmosphere changes them beyond imagination and they dedicate themselves to the creation of the Pakistan and get disillusioned at the end. The journey of Fakir’s life begins in Devnagar and with his home-coming it ends in the same village, thus completing a cycle. The journey from Devnagar to Bombay and again to Devnagar is the journey from insanity to sanity, immaturity to maturity. His journey from his village to Bombay is of insanity, emotional hatred and immature anti-nationalism and the journey from Bombay to Devnagar is of sanity, maturity, repentance, reason and quietude. The first part of the journey shows his emotional imbalance, whereas the latter part shows his rational balance. The adolescent immaturity is in course of time replaced by growing maturity. His case thus exemplifies adolescent psychology.

When Freedom Came, in this sense, is a novel of initiation of a youth into external world. Fakir passes through a tortured period of his adolescence and learns to be realistic. This creates two possibilities. One, he would be a totally frustrated Muslim, which is not a good outcome and two, he would be realistic enough to be truly nationalistic in order to realise his full potential of a free citizen of India. The novelist here suggests the second alternative. Only at the fag end of the novel, Fakir is seen taking a sensible and mature decision, symbolising thereby many such Muslim youths misled by a sheer fit of emotion and then brought to senses by reason.

Thus When Freedom Came is a solitary partition novel which instead of dealing with the stock situations of abductions, rapes, train-attacks, migration and such other inhuman acts, deals with the then psyche of the Hindus and Muslims who were living far away from the actual scene of the partition.

V

The plot construction of the novel is very simple; the novelist goes on narrating the facts in a very plain manner. He uses simple strategies of contrast and parallelism in the choice of his characters. Hindus are opposed to Muslims as Shankar is opposed to Fakir. The city is opposed to the village. The city stands for hatred, moral degradation, violence and disharmony; whereas the village stands for love, peace and harmony. The opposites clash violently on the international border and cities but are more quickly reconciled at the village level. Shankar stands as a buffer between the opposites as it were. He is thus a symbol of reconciliation between the two communal extremes. It is he who brings reason and peace to Fakir. Without making use of the same, repetitive scenes of atrocities used by other partition

novelists, Mukaddam has dealt with the psychology of the event, that too through 'adolescent boys' remotely and indirectly related to the horror of the partition that had engulfed the entire Indian subcontinent.

The novel is mainly character oriented in which two major characters – Shankar and Fakir – dominate. Shankar is presented as a more mature youth while Fakir is presented as a headstrong, shallow and immature youth who can be easily led astray by any one like Uncle Jaffer with whom he lives in Bombay; Nargis, Seth Lakdiwala's daughter, a beautiful young girl in whose love he falls; Behram Seth, a restaurant owner and homosexual; his friends Inquilab, Mehmood and even Gulbadan, a very lusty and beautiful wife of Murad Seth and so on. It is due to his immaturity on one hand and poverty on the other hand that he becomes a mere puppet in the hands of all those men and women. He even finds himself indulged in immoral relationship with Gulbadan. It is at the fag end of the novel that we find him as a mature and sane character when he begins to hate his own leaders for their betrayal of the Indian Muslims. He realises that all his involvement with the communal forces was a mere illusion and the only reality was that he has to live with the Hindus. His journey from Devnagar to Bombay and vice versa is thus a journey from immaturity to maturity, insanity to sanity.

Shankar, a Hindu boy, is presented as the most secular and sane person in this confused and chaotic atmosphere. The novelist has deliberately projected him as a very liberal and secular youth. When as a child, he is brought up by Fakir's mother by breastfeeding. Hence he considers himself as a brother to Fakir. They are thus inextricably tied together. After his schooling is over Shankar too goes to Bombay for service. Just as Fakir comes in contact with the MNG (Muslim National Guard) Shankar comes in the company of (Rashtriya Swayansevak Sangh) leaders, his uncle Kesho Appa who persuades him to join the RSS but he does not like to be indulged in the activities of either of the organisations. According to Shankar all Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs in India have a right to stay where they like. India is the land of the Hindus as well as of all those who have been living here for centuries. His is a fine philosophy of universal brotherhood. About the MNG and the RSS, he says, "MNG is an arm of the Muslim League. Any organisation which inculcates hatred in people is to be avoided, surely the RSS is just as bad" (WFC 131). He is also presented as a follower of Pandit Nehru and reads books written by his beloved leader. Shankar is thus a representative of those socialist-minded secular Congressmen within the Congress party at the time of freedom. It is Shankar who succeeds in convincing Fakir of the futility of the movement launched by the Muslim League. Thus Fakir and Shankar are the two centrally important characters around whom the entire novel revolves. Their actions and reactions to the hectic activities happening around the days of the freedom are at the core of the novel.

The novel When Freedom Came has thus come out as a fine piece of creative literature by virtue of its fine characterisation, restrained depiction of the bloody events of the partition tragedy, objective stance of the novelist and above all its message of universal brotherhood.

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