

## **SOUTH ASIAN EMERGENCE OF POST COLONIAL IDENTITY**

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### **Abstract**

*The entire world over in colonies ruled by imperialist powers nationalism emerged as a force guided by the political and intellectual elite class. The colonialists while doling out preferential treatment to the Tutsi tribals and ensuring their consolidation at the time of leaving the country had ensured that the Hutus were excluded from the decision making. This divide did not take on ethno regional character, rather it assumed the colour of a nationwide clash of ambitions – a situation the Indian subcontinent has also been witness to both before and after Partition. The Indo-Pakistani dispute in Kahsmir, and consequential violence that Kashmiris face, is indeed a "Dog of Tetwal" kind of situation. The dog runs helter-skelter for safety even as the two armies shoot at it, eventually killing it, making it a martyr for one and an object of hatred for the other*

***Key words: Partition, colonization, social-cultural alienation.***

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## SOUTH ASIAN EMERGENCE OF POST COLONIAL IDENTITY

-MEETA VERMA

*Years later in 1972,  
My grandmother would visit that border again  
Pick up a handful of dirt and call it "home".  
My brother and I would joke  
That our grandmother created nations wherever she went.  
Born in Burma she was twice a refugee,  
Once in Pakistan, then India.*

The entire world over in colonies ruled by imperialist powers nationalism emerged as a force guided by the political and intellectual elite class. However soon after achievement of independence the nation state seems to be challenged by various divisive forces like ethnic and religious groups or caste politics as in India which give an impression that the boundaries of these nation states had after all been crafted by the Colonial masters only artificially without any reference to the restive aspirations of the subject peoples. The case is best described from the example of Rwanda where the achievement of freedom was closely followed by bloody clashes between Tutsi and Hutu tribes whose ambitions though Nationalistic as far as geographical area was concerned were mutually exclusive and intolerant of each other. This confrontation had its origins in the colonial past. The colonialists while doling out preferential treatment to the Tutsi tribals and ensuring their consolidation at the time of leaving the country had ensured that the Hutus were excluded from the decision making. This divide did not take on ethnoregional character, rather it assumed the colour of a nationwide clash of ambitions – a situation the Indian subcontinent has also been witness to both before and after Partition.

On a more intellectual plane this achievement of independence would throw up interesting issues like

**1. Social and cultural alienation:** as to what the new cultural identity is. In India the problem is made more complex by the fact that there has pre existed in this county (unlike many of its counterparts in Africa, Asia or Latin America) a very strong cultural background with rich traditions of epic and religious literature. Thus though the foundations of our culture were strong enough to withstand any of GayatriSpivak's "epistemic violence" of the Colonial Power and could indeed provide support and sustenance to the rootless youth were he to turn to it, yet the new generation with its fascination for western culture found to its bewilderment that it was increasingly being uprooted from its moorings.

**2. Power and exploitation:** (This though not applicable in India, may be widely observed in large portions of Afro Asian nations.) Even though the colonial power ceases to control them as a colony, the Colonizer would appear to hold power over the natives. The main question remains; who really is in power here, why, and how does an Independence Day really mean independence?The current movement against corruption may be seen in this perspective.

**3. Colonial abandonment and alienation:** The individual asks himself; in this new country, where do I fit in and how do I make a living? Having finally achieved physical independence, and in view of so much change that has taken place, the subjected people , however, could not go back to their original culture or " to Methuselah". This irony of circumstance would throw up some very disturbing questions: Whether there ought to be an attempt to restore the original culture, conformity to the culture presented by the Colonizer or the creation of a new culture which is an amalgam of both. The newly liberated people would observe that the language of colonial master which they so vehemently sought to eschew (remember Lohia) still continues to rule the world through Computerization and thanks to American Supremacy!

The use of English language in literature produced in post colonial India means that a foreign in fact "alien" idiom is being used for communication of what is very much a native sensibility. Without questioning the validity of an adopted medium it may be argued if the Indian sights and sounds could be directly

conveyed through neglecting the original native languages. Here also the creator or the poet is faced with a crisis of identity which is no less real than that of the protagonist. How many times have we not seen the wailings of an Indian thrush or the pangs of Radha's separation lose its immediacy in the trappings of the Hinglish medium?

One additional factor special to India post 1947 was the enormity of the tragedy that partition brought into the lives across the Radcliffe line. While the number of murders, abductions and pillage could be reduced to statistics, these statistics fail to tell how for most people the deciding factor in choosing India or Pakistan was not politics or religion but insecurity. Statistics also fail to reflect on identity crises of innocent individuals at a time when identity could be altered by loot and rioting.

To his friend's query "Sir, why don't you mediate between Pakistan and India? Kashmir is your land after all." the Pakistani poet Harris Khalique reply is typical "I cannot mediate between India and Pakistan," he says, "I am an unresolved business of Partition myself. You are right. I am not Kashmiri. I am Kashmir."

Another Kashmiri, Saadat Hassan Manto, was so struck by a similar identity crisis that it was, partially if not wholly, responsible for his alcoholism and eventual death about eight years after the Partition. Rioting in Bombay and pressure from his family made him migrate to Pakistan and to lose whatever little amount of success he had achieved in Bombay. In Lahore, he found himself completely disoriented, rootless and, perhaps most of all, unemployed. In the eight years that he lived there, he failed to get a single regular job. He had earlier been vociferous against communalism, and his choice of migrating to Pakistan was based on impulse; he must never have thought the Partition would ruin him just when his life seemed to have achieved some stability.

No wonder then that his post-migration stories question the idea of nationality ("Toba Tek Singh") and the effects of the Partition on individuals ("Black Margins").

"Toba Tek Singh" describes the individual's identity crisis. Set in a madhouse the story replaces madness as a metaphor for sanity. The

topsyturvydom of nationhood is highlighted when he tells of one madman who got so "caught up in this whole confusion of Pakistan and Hindustan and Hindustan and Pakistan that he ended up considerably madder than before". The asylum is a microcosm of madness engulfing the two nations, In this society there is Bishen Singh, who is willing to make neither Hindustan nor Pakistan his home. Hindustan and Pakistan are identities that are being deliberately thrust upon and Bishen Singh crazily resists all such attempts He wants to go back to Toba Tek Singh, the village where he was born. Manto is questioning the very idea of nationhood. Bishen Singh would rather die in no man's land than make a choice between Hindustan and Pakistan.

Another story of Manto that looks at the question of identity is "The Dog of Tetwal", the plot revolves around a stray dog caught between two frontier posts of the Indian and Pakistani armies at cease-fire. Allegorically, it manages to satirize several aspects of the Partition "even dogs will now have to be either Hindustani or Pakistani!" He seems to be saying, once borders and boundaries have been demarcated. The dog of course symbolizes Partition refugees like Manto who felt like playthings in the hands of politicians. Black humour is heightened on the realization that borders are drawn by simply holding on to an army post on a mountain.

The Indo-Pakistani dispute in Kashmir, and consequential violence that Kashmiris face, is indeed a "Dog of Tetwal" kind of situation. The dog runs helter-skelter for safety even as the two armies shoot at it, eventually killing it, making it a martyr for one and an object of hatred for the other.

If there is one single symbol of the Partition riots, it is that of trains arriving at their destinations with their passengers dead. The singularity of the running train is the story's driving factor in Khushwant Singh's debut novel, *Train to Pakistan*. It is the arrival of this train with corpses that disturbs the communal harmony of a village. An example from Manto's "*Siyâhhâshiye*" or "Dark Margins":

HOSPITALITY DELAYED

*Kasri-Nafsi*

Rioters brought the running train to a halt. People belonging to the other community were pulled out and slaughtered with swords and bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to halwa, fruits and milk. The chief assassin made a farewell speech before the train pulled out of the station: "Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies. News of this train's arrival was delayed. That is why we have not been able to entertain you lavishly -- the way we wanted to."

The tone is like a reporter. There are no comments. However by juxtaposing murders with feast Manto is trying to convey the depravity of the rioters through black humour. So enormous is the inhumanity of the Partition, that no amount of sentimentalizing would suffice.

Bhisham Sahni's story "We Have Arrived in Amritsar" is set in a moving train whose passengers learn of the riots during their journey. The atmosphere inside becomes tense but is under control. A feeble Hindu, however, is enraged enough to kill a Muslim trying to get on the train. The transformation of this character is a comment on how the madness of the times made murderers out of ordinary men. This is also reflected in the character of Ranvir in Sahni's novel *Tamas*, who, having once killed a hen, can kill any human being without remorse.

In Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti", however, is a heart-wrenching portrayal of the gender aspect of the Partition. Thousands of women faced sexual violence during the Partition riots. Violence against women was a way of asserting the superiority of the aggressor's community. Many were forced to drown themselves in wells to safeguard the honour of the family. Yet another aspect was that women of the other community were abducted, forced to convert and marry. Two years later the governments of India and Pakistan decided to heal some wounds by tracing abducted women on both sides and returning them to their homes. They did not realize however that they could be creating another problem: many of these women had been married with children and may have had resigned to their fate when they were asked to re-live the trauma of the Partition. In any case, the greatest problem for them was whether their families back home would accept them now that they had been

polluted.

This was the story of Lajwanti, Sunder Lal's wife. The story presents a very realistic picture of gender roles when we are told that Sunder Lal like all men was a wife-beater, and that Lajwanti considered this a part and parcel of being a wife. But now that she had been abducted into Pakistan, Sunder Lal's views of conjugal relationships underwent a sea-change. He longs for his Lajo to return and he persuades other men to accept their abducted women.

It was, however, a particular picture of Lajwanti that Sunder Lal had in mind. When she does return she is completely changed and not just because of her Muslim dress. Sunder Lal had to reluctantly accept her partly because he could not reject her now after being a leading activist of the cause of abducted women. However, he withdraws from Lajo by raising her to the pedestal of a goddess. The silence between Sunder Lal and Lajwanti could not be broken, which brings us to the issue of silence. Such was the trauma of the Partition that many didn't want to even think about it. There was a feeling that the Partition has to be forgotten as an aberration and we have to move on. This was reflected in literature: it took several years before many authors could look back and reflect on it.

A poem circulating on the Internet after 9/11 compels the reader to wonder if Partition is an everlasting process and will never end:

For Papa

*August 14th 1947. Ferozepur, Punjab.  
You are  
eighteen years old  
sit alone and wait  
for news of your parents.  
When they arrive days later  
My grandfather, grandmother, and her brother  
offer no explanation, no report, no narrative  
of how they ended up alive in a train from Lahore, Pakistan  
Their arrival simply becomes a fact  
a fact that even the children of my brother and I  
Learn never to question.*

November 1st 1984, Delhi.

*You wait again.  
This time with your parents,  
My mother, my brother, and I.  
Murdering mobs parade the streets,  
announcing their arrival by rattling street lights.  
My grandfather sitting in front of the house  
Reads the newspaper, pretending oblivion.  
The neighbours demand he go inside.  
"I left once," he says,  
"where am I to go now?"  
You  
I know, are afraid  
But refuse to remove your turban or cut your hair  
as some neighbours and so-called friends suggest.  
You, who would not enter a temple  
mock religion and even God  
Say that you are a teacher  
And do not wish to teach submission to fascism.*

September 11, 2001 to date. Delhi, India and Carbondale, U.S.A

*You wait there  
And I here  
My brother who is visiting me  
Finds again that wearing a turban invites the name "terrorist".  
And, just as in 1984, he wants to be on the street.  
I wait here  
For news of American bombs on Afghanistan,  
While the successors of Gandhi's assassins  
Rule his birthplace,  
Drowning in blood the hopes of 1947  
Sowing land mines into the line your parents had crossed  
But one they would not let cross their heart.*

Years later in 1972,

*My grandmother would visit that border again  
Pick up a handful of dirt and call it "home".  
My brother and I would joke*



*That our grandmother created nations wherever she went.  
Born in Burma she was twice a refugee,  
Once in Pakistan, then India.*

Children know

*That if not this history there would be another.  
But if not for those who labour to make this children's belief come true,  
The only drops to fall on this desolate drought-stricken earth would be blood.*

Today

*As I imagine you eighteen years old,  
I long to take your hands into my grown hands,  
And walk into refugee camps where children still get born.*

This is what gives credence to the viewpoint that the best way to deal with Partition is not to deal with it at all. This, however, has its own absurdities: how can anyone dictate a writer not to make a literary inquiry into such a major event in Indian history, an event that Indian history writing doesn't tell us much about.



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