

Canvassing Culture and Civility: Re-visiting Partition Literature through Nanak Singh's *Hymns in Blood*

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Abstract- The genuflection that independence brought to the Indian mind, for a nation that 'signed its "tryst with destiny" at the stroke of midnight on 15th August, 1947, still persists as a benchmark for the Indian mind, socially and literally. And yet, the accolades have hardly been able to gloss over the brutality and pain that partition brought in its train. Literature and other mediums of expression, till date, represent the event of partition by constructing a verisimilitude of the times when it took place. Two patterns were discovered herein: first, that these representations predominantly focus on the goriness and absolute anarchy witnessed then, coupled with the déshabillé language and a cultural stasis represented through its conspicuous absence. Secondly, the 'ugliness' dwindling in intensity with the passage of time and the representations closer to partition bearing the imprint of the agony more than those that followed them.

An exception to both the patterns is Nanak Singh's *Khoon de Sohile*, a novel composed in 1948 and translated into English, as *Hymns in Blood*, by his grandson Navdeep Suri in 2002. The paper tries to assess how Singh, constructs the ordeal of Partition of the Punjab and the Punjabis. An attempt shall be made to express how Singh, 'deviated,' thematically and structurally, from the norm of Partition Literature in vogue in the immediate aftermath of Partition and yet, in no lackadaisical manner, foregrounded the pain and trauma of Partition. Finally, the paper shall strive to ascertain the authenticity of the literary sensibility of Singh in relation to the event of Partition.

Keywords: Partition, Culture, Language, The Punjab

The speech of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru at "the stroke of midnight," heralding the independence of India highlighted that "...we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams. Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart." Ironically, it was a time when India, as a nation, faced its very first crisis: Partition. At a time when Nehru

spoke of a "closely knit" people across the world, India was going through an agony that could not be glossed over by the euphoria of Independence: Partition. Juxtaposing Nehru's speech was Nanak Singh's "Foreword" to his 1948 novel *Khoon de Sohile*:

...the biggest casualty was humanity itself...Many of our countrymen would regard 1947 as an auspicious year, one that would usher in the long-awaited independence to India. But to me, this was an accursed year for our country...Who would believe that Gods and angels of this ancient land would strip one another's daughters and sisters naked and dishonour them in public? (Singh, x-xii).

The difference between the actual and the expected was discussed and debated in historical and the literary narratives, and in the variegated documents and constructions the one constant was: Genocide that followed independence. Partition, however, was not a momentary event chronologically but one whose historicity commenced well prior to the event *per se*. Nanak Singh, in the "Foreword", reiterates the same when he says that it was with the invitation to the Congress to form an Interim Government that the dice of events started rolling: "Sure enough, the first round of this infernal canon was fired in Calcutta by none other than Huseyn Suhrawady, prime minister of the Bengal Council" (xv).

Partition marked an episode of bloodshed and cruelty in world history, falling 'in sync' with the debate of literary representations and constructions of such debilitating events in a nation. Adorno said, "Writing poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz" (Qtd. in Bhattacharjee viii). However, unlike George Steiner's opinion, "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason" (ibid), literature offered space to traumatic events because "giving in to the urge for

silence will mean ‘surrendering to cynicism’” (Bhattacharjee ix).

The literary narratives represented Partition through the construction of a cultural stasis by focussing only on the atrocities of the event, employing a language lacking the aesthetic sublimity of literature. Partition of India evoked a literary register that adhered to the “naked” expression of the emotional turmoil, an “art of atrocity” (Bhattacharjee ix). This mode of representation is referred to by Harish Narang, “Why should jute be presented as a piece of silk cloth...Can denying reality help us become better human beings?” (Qtd. in Bhalla, 80).

Consequently, a literature, particularly the one written in the urgency that followed Partition was marked by an intensity and atrocity in themes and an equally déshabillé language. Saadat Hasan Manto stands as a perfect epitome of this tendency in Indian literature. His works carry the “nakedness” of partition in its most glaring form. Manto’s “Khol Do” concludes with:

The doctor looked towards the cadaver lying on the stretcher. He checked the corpse for a pulse then told Sirajuddin, “Open the window.”

There was movement in Sakina’s dead body. With her lifeless hands, she untied her salwar and lowered it.

The old Sirajuddin screamed with joy, “She’s alive...My daughter is alive...”

The doctor was drenched in sweat from head to toe. (Manto)

The goriness of the event is foregrounded more in the reaction of the father than in the reaction of Sakina. However, in the midst of the culturally static literature represented through an ‘unpoetic’ language, Nanak Singh’s *Khoon de Sohile* emerges as a conspicuous exception. This exception, rather than being accidental is a conscious choice made by Nanak Singh. In the midst of a sectarian frenzy that offered literature an unpoeticness that was ‘obvious,’ Nanak Singh chose to be artistically different. In the “Foreword” he says, “...I am impelled to write this book because of a fear that the prevailing climate of sectarian hatred might sway the narrative in a particular direction. ...I can only say that I have done my best to stay impartial” (xxi-xxii). *Khoon de Sohile*, then represents an alternative mode of narrative, structurally different in spite of constructing poignantly the gruesomeness that

accompanied partition. The inevitable repercussions of the times and literature’s quality of imitating the social order, is explicitly visible, with all its aesthetics of violence in *Khoon de Sohile*:

Young women being hauled away on brawny shoulders, legs flailing helplessly. Screams falling on deaf ears. Trunks, baggage, bundles and other loot piled up for distribution. Corpses of men and women kicked around and searched. Earrings and necklaces ripped off the lifeless bodies. (Singh, 203)

However, alongside the genocide and atrocities, Nanak Singh highlights a surprise, distinct from goriness:

They abandoned their intent of going to the road for help and got to work on their arduous project, lifting the bodies by the arms and legs and heaving them into the hollow. It was tough work and it needed a hardened soul to carry out. And who was doing it? A seventy year old man and a wispy eighteen year old girl. God alone knows where they found the mental and physical strength to perform the task. Without a thought to their weary bodies, they searched the caves for the corpses and paused only after they were sure that they had carried every single one of them to their final resting place. (220)

The courage that Baba Bhane Shah and Naseem execute in the midst of death and destruction offers the text a peep into the cultural nuances of the Punjab and the character of the Punjabis. Nanak Singh exemplifies courage, and the trauma of disaster is seamlessly replaced with a sense of heroism and courage in the face of doom. His choice of words is impeccable and “arduous”, “hardened soul”, “without a thought” and “weary bodies” evoke hope and optimism, inherent qualities in the Punjabis and the Punjabi culture. Nanak Singh, in spite of the use of words with notoriety, constructs a picture of positivity and optimism, rather than disillusionment. Words like “grim”, “soaked in blood” and “washed the blood off,” in conventional partition literature symbolize destruction and death, which they do in the text as well, but they assume greater significance and meaning than merely that, evoking wonder and praise at the hardiness of the two, raising them and their culture to a sublime level of courage and steadfastness.

Naseem's courage, as a minority, and the sole accompaniment of a nearly blind person, makes her an ideal representative of the Punjabi warrior spirit, a trait that stands as one of the defining features of Punjabi culture. Apart from this, Nanak Singh incorporates other components of the cultural dynamics of the Punjab in his narrative. Love, the most significant facet of culture of the Punjab finds a significant space in the novel. The story commences in the past, with two characters in love with each other. The girl calls the boy Yusuf, "*Ranjheya*," while the boy calls the girl Seema, in spite of her Muslim antecedents as Naseem. Nanak Singh's language to complement and elaborate their relationship is equally sublime, "But seeing the impact of the humiliation that she had wrought on her young lover was a bit too much for our tender-hearted lass" (Singh, 8). Their love story, then serves as an extension of the famous love stories of Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal and Sassi-Punnu.

The intrinsic life of the Punjabi culture is also delineated through an order where the Hindus and the Muslims live in harmony, through utopian words, "The village's Khatri community was fairly small in comparison to the Muslims. But their lives were closely interconnected in so many different ways that neither community could imagine a life without the other" (24). Several literary expressions of Partition refer to the same so as to juxtapose the pre and post partition times. However, Nanak Singh is extensively in contrast to the stereotype as his is a "lived experience" representation of highlighting trust in the village, beyond religious and gender boundaries. Yusuf attempts to molest Naseem, is foiled by Allahditta who threatens Yusuf: "Let me show you what happens when you mess around with girls from our village" (ibid, 67). When Yusuf pleads to him to not disclose it to anyone, Allahditta reaction is, "What will she say? That her village folk have all vanished?" (ibid, 68).

The world created is representative of the innate "we" feeling and a sense of community bonding in spite of the presence of the daily tussles and crisis situations as that of the attempted molestation of Naseem. Naseem, then becomes representative, not of a Muslim, or a woman, but of the solidarity that identifies Chakri as a community. This community feeling is reflective of an order that is culturally "naive" against the modern paradigms of self-centredness, much like the situation in Partition. Singh, through the use of "village"

foregrounds the "we" feeling, a classic feature of the Indian countryside and countrymen. The same camaraderie is evident when a group, eclectic religiously, acquaints Baba Bhane Shah of the incident. A gardener, carpenter, Muslim and a Brahmin make up the motley crowd, with a singlehanded agenda, thereby highlighting the basic character of Chakri, of being a typical village.

The novel also retains orality as the principle vehicle carrying its nuances. The very first chapter "A Tree of Love Starts to Blossom" exemplifies it:

The older girls were in an equally boisterous mood. Away from the prying eyes of men and inebriated by the magic of the moment, they shed their inhibitions and sang with full-throated abandon. The fields soon resonated with melodies about the joy of meeting ones' beloved and about the sorrow of separation, songs that tugged at the heartstrings of young women. The most powerful, though, were the songs about the newly-wed brides who had gone off to the distant homes of their husbands and were pining for the familiarity of their own village.... (4)

The singing of girls highlights the cultural significance of songs as an exponent of the oral tradition in the Punjab. The language of Nanak Singh, then, is a manifestation of the oral indigenous literary expressions, as Ramanujan says, "Writing was an *aide memoir*, a mnemonic device for materials to be rendered oral again" (98). The references to songs, "boisterous mood" and being "inebriated," rather than on the actual songs, demarcate the essential orality of the Punjabi culture hidden behind the glory of the written counterpart. Nanak Singh, in the use of his language to showcase the Punjabi culture, retains what Spivak, in "Can the subaltern Speak" interrogates, "In the slightly dated language of the Indian group, the question becomes, how can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak? Their project, after all, is to rewrite the development of the consciousness of the Indian nation" (Spivak, 27). Singh, in *Khoon de Sohile*, touches successfully the "consciousness" of the Punjab and the Punjabis, even though he delves into an investigation of their politics. In addition, what makes his text unique is that the concept of the voice consciousness of the subaltern, does not emerge as all

the characters are offered equal, independent and conscious “voices,” as Bakhtin calls it, thereby questioning the very positionality of subalternity.

Khoon de Sohile, then, generates an alternative narrative, one that complements the tradition of writings on partition, especially those written in its immediate aftermath, by offering a linguistic and cultural dignity and refinement to the narrative. However, this alternative, does not gloss over the primary objective or romanticize it in the least: “A novelist has the license to maintain the flow of the story by abbreviating some incidents, even as he expands on others, all the while trying to stay true to the essential facts” (xxii). Consequently, his literary sensibilities, in tandem with his ‘naive’ writing style, constructed a text carrying a sense of optimism whilst constructing the trauma of partition. Seemingly contradictory and paradoxical, almost oxymoronic, Nanak Singh, successfully creates a dialogue of the two in the text, leading to an overall tone of positivity and faith in humanity and human values even in partition.

In doing so, he also paves the way for a significant aspect in writing: developing a register distinct from “art of atrocity,” to represent traumatic scenarios; something that does not evoke despair and yet succeeds in picturing the catastrophe of an event. His construction of the narrative presents a distinct “voice of” the cataclysmic events, but foregrounding another facet of a faithful representation.

Khoon de Sohile also projects the tenability of engaging independent and equal voices in a literary sub-genre fanatically obsessed with the “self” and the “other;” the victim and the perpetrator; and the premise that it is the subaltern that struggles for space as the “dilapidated other.” In the novel, the linguistic nuances and language, elements of the aesthetic, engage with the social brutality, each interrogating the other, and yet, both emerging successful victors:

“I would accordingly request that my readers neither place this book in the fiction category nor see it as a historical text. They could, perhaps, see it as a novel based on historical events, a story that flows naturally between the two banks of imagination and reality” (xxii).

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