

HOPE AMIDST CHAOTIC STATE OF AFFAIRS IN INTIZAR HUSAIN'S BASTI

Poonam Charan*

ABSTRACT

Basti is a narrative of remembrance and memories. During turbulent times of war, Zakir remembers his childhood days more frequently. In order to survive in the present, the narrator relives and retires to his past experience. The idyll city of Rupnagar, its seasons, markets, temples and karbalas and Zakir's beloved Sabirah always surface in his memories. The meaning and significance of the title Basti indicate a permanent settlement, and the word Zakir means one who remembers. Zakir searches for a balance between two different worlds; he is nothing but a mere observer in the outside world, and within the interior world, he is lonely. Despite suffering and disillusionment, the text emphasizes the values of carrying a cultural past and seeking solace from it.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Reintegration, Cultural Past, Hizarat, Trust.*

Introduction

Basti is a saga of lost memories and their intertwining role in the life of an individual. Based on the events following Partition, the tale is all about suffering and disillusionment in the life of those who witnessed the terrible communal massacre at the time. Originally published in Urdu in 1979, Intizar Husain's Basti acquired wider acclaim after its translation by Frances W. Pritchett in 1992. The story is set in the different cities of India and Pakistan, namely- Rupnagar, Vyasapur and Shyamnagar, wherein the protagonist Zakir spent his best of times and worst of times.

The early literature of the Partition was about coming to terms with the suffering of refugees. Narratives about brutal forms of violence were followed by issues regarding rehabilitation and reintegration of victims into society. The writings of the 1940s and 50s about communal relations and the collective violence during the partition depicted the breakdown of communication between communities. The 'Ganga-Jamuna' Indo-Islamic culture referred by Intizar Hussain was severely damaged by partition violence. The second and third generation of writers carried the burden of memory as communicated by other members of the family and parents. This shift has included a greater sensitivity to refugee experience in anthologies, oral testimonies, memoirs and in short stories.

One of the major themes that appear continuously in the novels is that Partition not only caused material and physical loss but also unendurable emotional loss and pain. However material losses could be remunerated, for one could gain the loss of the land, wealth and home but emotional loss was hard to compensate as it tore apart the refugees mentally. The beastly cruelties which they witnessed created deep scars on their mind and soul which were hard to erase. The pang of Partition was emotional suffering that created a vacuum in their lives. Apart from this were the humiliation and moral degradation they experienced in refugee camps. Their mind drifted between past and present remembering the peaceful days when communities lived together happily. It is only through memory and nostalgia that they can embrace their past and relive their childhood.

Intizar Hussain portrays the experience of migration meaningfully in terms of retrieval of memory in his narratives. After migrating to Pakistan, he began writing short stories about the ancient traditions and folklores and other narratives of loss and exile. He started analyzing the Indian Muslim culture of which he was a part. Zakir is not able to detach himself from Rupnagar, even after so many years. Rupnagar is symbolic of all those cities, which were pure and full of innocence and therefore part of that lost world which he inhibited. In his heart, he prays for the welfare and peace of the city of his birth.

* Assistant Professor (English), Government Dugar College, Bikaner, Rajasthan, India.

The detail study of the narrative eventually underscores the fate of those migrants who willingly left their home in search of a new homeland and in hope of a bright future. The imaginary landscape of cities like Rupnagar and Vyaspur symbolizes the beauty, charm and untainted spirit of bygone days is in a sharp contrast with the city of Shyamnagar symbolizing rupture and havoc wrought by the division. The novelist equates the experience of migration to the holy *hizarat* to Medina. Unfortunately in the course of the action Zakir and his friends were torn apart by the failure of dream of religious accord and peace in the pristine land. The Bangladesh Liberation war wreaked havoc in the lives of Zakir, his family and his friends, and the nation witnessed the madness and trauma again. The division of hearts and lands is always painful, as evident in the writings of numerous authors on the event of Partition. However, to start from scratch and resettling lives after the painful event creates a vacuum and is further deepened by its memories? The title of this research paper is entirely different from the novel's theme, wherein only memories survive and resurfaces in the present. Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar comment: "*Basti* alludes to the long history of changes in the fate and status of Muslims in South Asia, through eras of secular and sacred time, many of them coloured by suffering as much as by glory."

Zakir remembers his childhood during pre-partition days and relives them quite often in the present. It could be remarked that in order to survive and accept the present, he finds solace and shelter in the past. The idyll city of Rupnagar, its communal harmony and serenity and Zakir's beloved Sabirah are constantly addressed and remembered. The novel's title indicates the meaning and significance of having a permanent abode, a neighbourhood and a dwelling place. Husain explores the relevance of the term *basti* through his exilic condition. The shreds of hope and desire mingle with the calamity within and the chaos outside. Zakir's constant dwelling on past memories rekindles the spirit of acceptance and adaptation. Zakir's father, Abba Jan, has been portrayed as a true prophet and disciple of God. The unwavering faith and trust in God makes him apart from all the characters in the novel. He could be witnessed as a messiah preaching humanity and perseverance to lost souls. His teachings and philosophies help Khwaja Sahib to continue the quest for the lost son. The positive affirmations in the trauma driven society benefits the reader to hark upon the journey to accept God's denials and delays.

The retrospective narrative technique, the abrupt end of the text and allegorical representations in the novel categorize *Basti* as a modern text. The complexity of the terms- home, nation and belonging pressurized the natives of *basti* to negotiate the past. The reference of Cain's murder of Abel sets the theme of the communal disharmony wherein the notions of universal brotherhood, acceptance and tolerance are utterly rejected. The narrative also refers the *hizarat*, Jataka tales and Mahabharata. Tarun K. Saint in *Witnessing Partition* remarks:

He makes a conscious effort to restore a sense of the Indo-Islamic cultural amalgamation and other strands in the civilization of the subcontinent that had been deemed other by official nationalist ideologies in Pakistan. (109)

Afzal has been portrayed as a freelancer adapting multiple roles in vivid circumstances. In his Introduction to *Basti*, *Mohammad Umar Menon* claims: "Within the novel, many have seen Zakir's close friend Afzal as based on the character of a poet Nasir Kazmi". Afzal imagines himself taking the role of Pied Piper and chasing the mice away from the city into the ocean. In another instance, Afzal can be seen writing names of good people in his diary and comments: "Remember that the world is never without beautiful people" (52). His inner urge to find and maintain a record of good people could be seen as an attempt to save the city from destructive claws. The elements of nature are as soothing as the memories of the past. Trees, birds and seasons carry a dominant role in the retrieval of memories of *basti* dwellers. The song of koyal is seen as having mesmerizing effect on the troubled psyche of Ammi. The sight of lost trees, birds and their songs reminds of the long-forgotten past and a desire for its continuation. After arriving in Pakistan, Zakir earnestly searches for Neem trees but initially fails and calms with the thought that: "but we never had to search for neem trees. In the afternoon when the desert wind blew and in the rainy July days, their greenness always proclaimed their presence". (77)

With the passage of time, the new city with all its hustle and bustle became part of Zakir's consciousness. New houses replaced the filthy lanes and fragmented buildings. Shiraz was the ultimate spot for Zakir and his friends where they discussed matters ranging from politics, war to entertainment. He explains how friends assimilated from different paths and mingled in the aura of Shiraz. It was the place where they became oblivion about their worries. After the calamity is over, people tend to move forward, accepting the past and keeping it within the darkest spheres of mind because up rootedness does not last long, and neither troubled memories.

Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* states: "Nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which- as well as against which it came into being" (12). Pakistan's history and roots are intermingled with Indian culture. Husain was part of the rich cultural amalgamation of Indo-Islamic culture, and he expressed its varied shades in all his writings. Afzal emphasizes the need to safeguard Pakistan, to make it beautiful again, as proclaimed by its leaders. The white-haired man shares his emigration experience with Zakir and his friends. It could be seen as an attempt to save the young generation from following the path of peace and mutual trust and saving the nation from further deterioration. Tasneem Shahnaaz and Amritjit Singh state:

His narratives signal the hope for reconciliation by reimagining a new world in which peacocks, royal swans and ducks live in harmony with humans. Such a reimagining would include the Jataka tales, stories of *Baital Pachchise* or the *Panchtantra*, *quissas* and *dastaans*. He subscribes to an all-encompassing pluralistic civilization. (266)

Surender's letter from India regarding Sabirah's fate as a melancholic one rekindles the suppressed feelings of nostalgia and unrequited love. The open ending of the text carries a multiplicity of meaning regarding Zakir's wait for a sign. This sign could be imagined as termination of ill will between truncated countries or perhaps a letter from his beloved for the final reunion.

The development of Indian English Fiction has set a new benchmark with every passing decade. Novels written during 1930s and 1940s were influenced by Gandhian ideology and the discourse was set to retrieve the golden past. During 1950s and 1960s, the main concern was to depict the alienation and identity crisis of natives of newly formed nation, with its emphasis on peculiarities of motives and deeds. In 1980s and 1990s, a strong sense of national identity and nationhood prevails and it marks the second wave of Renaissance. Although the theme of Partition is dominant in all the decades, for its reference and pain cannot be ignored altogether.

The narrative construct of cohering affirmative memories in the form of safeguarding heirlooms and antics is a way to rise above bitterness and hatred. Abba Jan's recollections of a past and a home to which they no longer have any claim depict a tale of fond memories of pre-partition years. Husain's graphic portrayal of kindness amidst the turmoil, trust amidst betrayal and hope amidst disappointment unfolds a narrative of expectation, belongingness and resilience. Abba Jan hands over Hazrat Sajjad's prayer collection, a small tablet of earth, a rosary, and a bunch of keys of Rupnagar's house to Zakir. The things were sustained long after the Partition and were kept secure. The hoarding of family heirlooms unveils the presence of a cultural past to which all the basti dwellers abide. Abba Jan's final words present a more comprehensive perspective beyond narrow strands of nationalism, borders, religion and war:

The world, as Hazrat Ali has said, is a guesthouse. We and our desires are guests in it. Guests have no rights. Whatever the earth designs to bestow on us guests, it is a favour, and the earth has shown us great kindness indeed. Guard this trust and remember the kindness shown by the earth we left, and this will be your greatest act of dutiful behaviour. (179)

References

1. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York. Verso Books. 1991.
2. Husain, Intizar. *Basti*. Trans. Frances W. Pritchett. New York: New York Review of Books. 2012
3. Saint. Tarun, K. *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2010.
4. Shahnaaz Tasneem and Amritjit Singh. Partition and Beyond: Intizar Husain's Quest for meaning and Vision in Amritjit Singh, Nalini Iyer and Rahul K. Gairola (ed) *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited. 2016.
5. Stewart, Frank and Sukrita Paul Kumar. *Crossing Over: Partition Literature in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Doaba Publications. 2008.

