



GLIMPSES OF HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL MILIEU OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Literature is inextricably linked with the circumstances amid which it is born. Contemporary politics, philosophy, sociology and religious contribute significantly in shaping the gist of literature. Hence the understanding of historical and political circumstances is necessary for the better and effective understanding of the literature. One of the main thrusts of literary study in recent decades has been to suggest the impact of a fresh understanding of historical process upon the meaning and interpretation of literary texts. History is a form of representation and interpretation of past events which affected literary texts. But when it seeps into fiction it does not merely remain a collection of facts and figures but becomes a human story. Unlike a historian who filters down facts and figures from the past in a dry form, the writer creates characters who relive history in front of our eyes, in the present. They are as much influenced by history as they themselves exert an influence on it. Historical fiction is a genre, in which the plot is set amidst historical events, or more generally, in which the author uses real events but adds one or more fictional characters or events, or changes the sequences of historical events.

Key words : Contemporary politics, History

INTRODUCTION

Pakistani writings in English are a product of the historical encounter between the native culture and western culture. Before its birth Pakistan was under the impact of foreign rulers and their culture. Pakistani novels are governed by their writer's general and social interest and awareness of contemporary issues. A majority of Pakistani English writers use contemporary historical and political situation English Fiction is an outcome of its contemporary history. According to Eagleton, politics, history, culture and literature are intricately interrelated,

I mean by the political no more than the way we organize our social life together, and the power-relations which this involves; and ... the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch... 'Literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices'¹

The relationship between literature and politics has always been a contentious affair. Some argue that they are two different things. While others challenge this view on the grounds that the social reality 'constructed' in literature with the help of the most powerful social institution that is language, cannot be free from the politics, ideology and personal beliefs of those who are involved in its making. The relationship between literature and politics is a multilane freeway with traffic flowing freely in both directions. A work of

literature is in part a product of sociological and political factors, as the personality of a writer is shaped by the sociological and political environment of the time and the society he live in; on the contrary, the works of literature influence the society in multifarious ways. Literature brings about changes in social conventions, traditions and beliefs of people thus contributing to changes in values which in turn results in social and political changes.

According to the view propounded by the postcolonial critics, literature is a social fact and, as such, fulfills a political function. Criticizing the politicization of the work of art Alain Robbe-Grillet criticized, in an essay entitled "Literature Pursued by Politics" opines:

*Writers are not necessarily political brains. And it is no doubt normal for most of them to limit themselves, in this field, to short, vague thoughts. But why do they feel such a need to express them in public at every opportunity? ... I believe, simply, that they're ashamed of being writers and live in perpetual terror they'll bereproached with it, be asked why they write, what good they are, what their role in society is.... The writer suffers, like everyone, over the misfortune of his fellow human beings; it's dishonest to pretend he writes to allay it.... The writer can't know what end he's serving. Literature isn't a means he's to place at the service of some cause.*²

As regards Pakistani fiction in English, the political motif has been especially prominent from the beginning. Politics of freedom movement has played an important role in shaping the Pakistani novel in English. Writing about Hungarian literature, A. Alvarez observes,

*(The) political embroilment of the artist- expected, honoured, almost necessary- is a tradition in Central and Eastern Europe, where the intelligentsia is much smaller, more closely knit and less specialized than in the west. It is also inevitable in countries with long histories of invasion and rule by foreign powers... In such circumstances, nationalism becomes a pre-occupation of writers. They are important not just for their art but also as teachers, helping the nation to an awareness of itself, its aspirations, its troubles.*³

This has a very close parallel in Pakistani Situation. In the pre-partition era British colonial rule provided a clear site of resistance to the writers. Apart from this the deepening political rift and social divide between various social and religious groups in India was another chief concern of some writers who addressed the political and ethnic divisions between Hindus and Muslims in their fiction. In later period communal frenzy and the holocaust of the partition, readily invited fictional treatment. However there are very few novels which can be termed as political novels, in most of the works action, character and setting would appear to be more or less grounded in politics. But in the post independence era unlike writers from other postcolonial countries, the Pakistani writers have desisted from giving a powerful creative response to the socio-political conditions. Except for a few Urdu writers like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmad Faraaz etc., majority of Pakistani writers, particularly those writing in English, have traditionally refrained from delving deep into the realm of Pakistani politics owing to repressive military regimes and the divisive and ideologically confused nature of Pakistani politics. But it doesn't mean that Pakistani literature is devoid of its history and political reality. There have been a number of writers who in spite of all the odds presented the history and socio-political reality of Pakistan in their literary works. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Zulfikar Ghose, Ahmed Faraaz, Fahmida Riaz, Shaukat Siddique, Abdullah Hussain, Kishwar Nahid and more recently, Danial Moinuddin and others have negotiated with the socio-political, economic and cultural dominance of an exploitative elite minority and the military rulers. The present study aims at exploring the Historical and Political milieu in the works of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie. Before giving the detailed description of work first I want to cast a glance on the historical and political events that contributed in shaping the literature of the postcolonial Pakistan.

The year 1947 became historically important when the British announced the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The decision marked the end of British rule in the subcontinent and led to the origin of India and Pakistan as separate independent nations.

The division was based on two -nation theory with the argument that the Hindus and the Muslims cannot live together as one nation since both have distinct social, cultural and religious identities. The Muslim majority regions of Punjab and Bengal were divided, with west Punjab and east Bengal forming west and East Pakistan, and India in the middle of the two.⁴

This resulted in massive and violent migration of the people across the divide. Muslims moved into Pakistan, and Sikhs and Hindus moved into India with the prospects of peaceful and better living, with their own religious as well as ethnic identities. Unfortunately this split resulted in massive and violent migration of people across the divide. This mass scale migration brought about crimes of violence, murders, rapes and aggression. Millions of people fled their homes and thousands of women were kidnapped, raped and mutilated. Thousands of houses and shops were set on fire. This event set many socio-political trends into motion that became part of the national psyche for the newly created state of Pakistan. There is no dearth of the creative responses towards this tragedy of epic proportions. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee and many other writers of various faiths and political affiliations have written in prose fiction as well as in other creative genres.

Owing to the vision of Founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, to create a separate homeland for the Muslims of subcontinent Pakistan came in to existence. But after Independence, Pakistan emerged as a physically splintered Country divided into two separate geographical units containing an ethnically diverse Population. The western portion contained four distinct ethnic groups: Punjabis, Sindhis, Pastuns and the Balichis. A fifth group comprised of Urdu speaking muhajirs (Refuges) who migrated to Pakistan after partition. East wing of Pakistan that comprised more than half of the total population of country contained Bengali Ethnic group. Even with respect to Islam there existed various sects and sub-sects with substantial differences in relation to traditions and faith. The heterogeneous religious and ethnic composition of Pakistani populace complicated the task of creating sense of Pakistani nationalism. Islam was deemed as a powerful force to tie and unify the Muslims of distant regions and of diverse cultures in to one nation.

In terms of social and economic development Pakistan inherited a backward economy as the regions that constituted Pakistan were underdeveloped parts of British India. The military establishment and bureaucracy that Pakistan inherited from colonial were the only organized state structures on which the edifice of the Pakistani state could rest. From the very beginning a strong executive diminished the role of prime Minister and elected legislatures. A weak political institutionalization facilitated the overbearing control of military-bureaucratic establishment over Pakistani State.

The equation between military and Islam in Pakistan became all the more pronounced in the wake of coming to power of General Zia-ul-Haq who used Islam as a vehicle of ruling force in Pakistan. This nexus "brought the relationship between Pakistani state and Islamic groups to a new level" and resulted in the creation of such an all-powerful force that civilian governments could hardly control. Military regime's security perception, anchored in a combination of anti- India and anti-Soviet mindset, encouraged it to support militant Islamic groups in Afghanistan from late 1970s. Without Pakistan there could have been no effective Afghan resistance movement and little prospect for its success against the Soviets. The sanctuary of Pakistan allowed the mujahidin to organize military operation, and Islamabad government became a conduit for multinational arms deliveries to those fighting in Afghanistan. Pakistan played a pivotal role in the withdrawal of Soviet Military forces from Afghanistan by not only supplying arms but providing

training to the Afghan mujahidins. Pakistan's open boarder enabled millions of Afghans to find refuge and relief aid in camps and unrestricted in their movements to participate in the economy of Pakistan's cities. All these events and activities can be witnessed on the pages of Kamila Shamsie's *The Burnt Shadows* in which Shamsie gives detailed insight into the role of Pakistan and US in supporting Afghan mujahidins and the political and social milieu of that period.

Any creative writer who wants to explore history in his work often tends to juxtapose local history with world events or some two or more versions of the same events. They create such stories which challenge the given account of history. The works of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie represent the 'state of the nation' at some critical juncture of its historical existence, providing us with valuable insights from the imaginative writer's perspective. Works of Sidhwa and Shamsie are characterized by their fascination for history. Representing history through the altered spectrum of the postcolonial consciousness, they undertake the job of historian and try to unearth perspective hitherto ignored or hidden underneath layers of colonial consciousness. In an attempt to assert their ethnic identity they redefine the hybrid identity of the nation, the community and the self. In their own way, their works tell us something crucial about Pakistan, something which would not have come from other sources. Their works give voice to the experience of living inside and going through the various stages of the country's history and politics. Study of these works is an attempt to read Pakistan's reality in its fiction.

As Bapsi Sidhwa is often confronted with historicity of history and her own notion of historical events, she features all these historical events in her fiction. Almost all the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa except *An American Brat* are set on the turbulent events of partition and their impact on people. As Niaz Zaman pointed out Sidhwa's three novels -*The Crow Eaters*, *The Pakistani Bride* and *Ice Candy Man* are "firmly rooted in a historical-political consciousness and concern directly or indirectly, the partition of the Indian continent and the creation of newly independent states of India and Pakistan."⁵ Her novels provide a unique perspective on Pakistani history, politics, and culture. Her characters, often women, are caught up in the historical events surrounding the geographical and social division- or "Partition- of India and Pakistan in 19-17, and the subsequent development of Pakistan as an independent nation. With each novel theme of partition and its impact on lives of people especially the people of Parse community is build up skillfully and more distinctly.

In her *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa constantly chase the historical past of the time of partition. The coinciding of personal and historical events with a few liberties is skillfully maintained throughout the narration. As the title of Conrad's novella *The Shadow Line* portrays an image of the shadow line represents the moment of contusion and darkness leading to maturity. when "One goes on recognizing the landmarks or the predecessors, excited, amused, taking the hard luck and the good luck together ...and the time too goes on till one perceives ahead a shadow line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind-,"⁶ same is the case of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* which describes the psychological cracks a person gets in his or her mind due to social turmoil which leads to completely changed life. The novel draws attention to the presence of the narrative voice and establishes the close correspondence between the realms of memory and lived experience. The story is interwoven around actual historical occurrences but the text in itself is not historical. Set against the violent period at the time of partition of India, the fictionalized narrative is interwoven with history and actual experiences in the lives of the major characters. The events and incidents described in the novel reveal the impact of these socio-political forces on lives of common people.

As Sidhwa herself belongs to Pakistan, she has written the traumatic effects of partition from Muslims perspective. 'One of the finest responses to the horror of the division of the subcontinent,'⁷ *Ice-Candy-Man* presents an alternative perspective on the Partition.

Through *Ice-Candy—Man* Bapsi Sidhwa has skillfully narrated the documentary details of historical perspective of partition; she seeks to explore and unravel the breakdown of inter-communal networks and most importantly addresses a larger historical question —national leaders' failure to realize a united India. This fair and impartial historical perspective is indispensable because the novel has been cast against the backdrop. *Ice Candy Man* focuses on the disintegration of social mores with the advent of partition has been brought out, it also evinces (demonstrates) the beguiling impact of communal forces hell-bent on whipping up the frenzy, and a study of inferiority complex. Laurel Graeber in his New York Times review of the book wrote, 'Bapsi Sidhwa has attempted to give a Pakistani perspective to the Partition of India.'⁸

The novel portrays the causes and impacts of partition from Pakistan point of view and hence justifying Jinnah who was held primarily responsible for the partition of the country. A number of writers from Indian counterpart have presented Gandhi in a dignified manner while discussing the leaders responsible for partition and blamed Jinnah for it because of his fundamental optimism. Bapsi Sidhwa feels that injustice has been done while depicting Jinnah in the literature written by her Indian counterparts. She has herself said:

*The main motivation grew out of my reading of a good deal of literature on the partition of India and Pakistan. what has been written by the British and Indians. Naturally they reflect their bias. And they have, I felt after I'd researched the book been unfair to the Pakistanis. As a writer, as a human being, one just does not tolerate injustice; I felt whatever little I could do to correct an injustice I would like to do. I have just let facts speak for themselves, and through my research I found out what the facts were.'*⁹

Through this novel Sidhwa has tried to justify the otherwise infected image of Jinnah at the time of partition. For this she has portrayed Jinnah on a positive note. We find many instances in the novel where Jinnah is presented in a dignified manner. Thus as a Pakistani novelist she has made an effort to elevate Jinnah's figure. He is presented as, "brilliant, elegantly handsome."¹⁰ An ordinary Sepoy describes his faith in Jinnah's political optimism as, "Don't underestimate Jinnah',... he will stick with him his rights, no matter whom Nehru feeds! He is first-rate lawyer and he knows to attack the British with their own laws!"¹¹ His intelligence and calmness is skillfully described in the novel. Even the death of his wife could not perturb his political aptitude. At this moment Sidhwa explains her fist over those who call him a beast.

*But didn't Jinnah too die of a broken heart? And today forty-five years later, in the films of Gandhi's and Mountbatten's lives, in books by British and Indian scholars, Jinnah who for a decade was known as 'Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity,' is characterized, as portrayed as a monster.'*¹²

Sidhwa successfully makes Jinnah's personality as a great human being and an intelligent politician. She further makes an effort to recreate Jinnah's positive image by showing Sarojini Naidu's infatuation of Jinnah:

*The calm hauteur of his accustomed reserve masks, for those who know him, a naïve and eager humanity, an intuition quick and leader as a woman's a human gay and winning as a child's pre-eminently rati on and practical, discreet and dispassionate in his estimate and accepted life, the obvious sanity and serenity of his worldly wisdom effectually disguise a shy and splendid idealism which is of the very essence of the man.'*¹³

In justifying the individuality of Jinnah Sidhwa has consciously minimized the stature of Gandhi and Nehru. Her historical awareness compels her to present them in low rank just to highlight Jinnah. She presents

Gandhi as,

*knitting, sitting cross-legged on the marble floor of a political veranda, he is surrounded by women. He is small, dark, shrilled, old. He looks just like Han, ourgardener, except he has a disgruntled, disgusted and irritable look, and one I dare pull off his dhoti! He wears only the loin-dhoti and his black and thin torso is naked.*¹⁴

This mocking picture of Gandhi is intentionally portrayed. Even Nehru is also exposed as shrewd politician without any honesty, "Right law, wrong law, Nehru will Walk off with the lions share."¹⁵ His character is also questioned when he is shown as, "he bandies words with lady Mounbatten and is presumed to be her lover."¹⁶ Hence by belittling the glorified image of Gandhi and Nehru, Sidhwa has dared to re-write historical facts and re-evaluated the socio-political conditions during the time of partition. This is the reason why 'Cracking India' is unique in its theme and style. It would perhaps not be wrong to say that Sidhwa succeeds in "providing an alternate version of history."¹⁷ The novel show Sidhwa's biased attitude towards these contemporary political leaders of the subcontinent and impact of partition violence with her sensitivity on Muslim side. Some scholars have criticized *Ice-Candy-Man* for oversimplifying the history and politics of the Partition, and faulted Sidhwa's portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi, asserting that her view of the religious and political leader is unrealistic and unbalanced. Tariq Rahman has disputed this assertion, arguing that *Ice-Candy-Man*, "shows the human personality under stress as a result of that cataclysmic event and depicts a society responding to it in the way societies do react: through sheer indifference, gossip, trivial and malicious activities, making love, and also killing, raping, and going insane."

CONCLUSION

Beginning from the pre partition era their works chronicles all the major historical and political events that shaped the destiny of Pakistan. The events that form the framework of most of their works include partition trauma, post partition political upheavals and rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Universal in its appeal, Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* covers the historical events not only of Pakistan but the whole world beginning with the devastation of Nagasaki in World War II through the conflicts-ridden formation of Pakistan in the late 1940s to post-9/11 Manhattan and war-torn Afghanistan. In *Ice Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa has given a detailed account of the frenzy of partition riots. In *Burnt Shadows* and *Ice Candy Man* historical events form the foremost content and are discussed in detail where as in some other works like *An American Brat* and *Salt and Saffron*, historical issues are in the background though they influence the life and actions of major characters. The works of Sidhwa and Shamsie give the glimpses of real Pakistani life. Their themes are the product of objective situations based on experience and observation.

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