

## **Contextualizing the Significance of Urdu Literature for the Historiography of Partition of India 1947**

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### **Abstract**

*History bears testimony to the fact that difficult and trying times have always afforded opportunity to the people to write wonderful pieces of literature to depict the nature and extent of social and political circumstances that they went through. The production of quality Urdu literature is such an example: the genre of novel, however, stands out in this corpus of literature. Unfortunately, the historiography of partition of India and its antecedents focused more on nationalistic concerns and priorities: thus, giving birth to a dominant tendency in both post-colonial states, India and Pakistan, of writing purely nationalistic narratives. These narratives were provided official patronage on both sides of the border and these nationalistic discourses of history were nurtured by the sentiments of hostility and animosity which further promoted the nationalistic perspective of history. While historiography in India was euphoric about the major achievement of achieving independence from the British Raj and critical about the politics of separatism pursued by All India Muslim League (AIML) and vivisection of unity of India, the historiography in Pakistan celebrated independence from the British Raj as well as from the impending dominance of Hindu majoritarian rule in India. Hence, historians in Pakistan hailed Muhammad Ali Jinnah as Quaid-i-Azam (great leader) and All India Muslim League as victorious and savior of Indian Muslims. Nationalist historiography, however, viewed historical process with top-down approach and it, largely, ignored the efforts and*

*sufferings of common people who were the genuine sufferers of partition of India. It has been argued in this paper that different genre of literature is an alternative source to understand partition of India of 1947.*

The nationalist discourse of history, on both sides of the great divide, celebrated the achievements of leaders of Indian National Congress (INC) and All India Muslim League. The freedom struggle was hailed as the unprecedented in Indian history and was termed as the victory of top leadership through constitutional and extra-constitutional means, justified because these means were part of overall Indian freedom struggle. The general public, nevertheless, remained by and large out of the radar of historians' gaze. Wherever were they mentioned, their suffering was either acknowledged or celebrated as the necessary price for the ultimate redemption in the form of independence. The Indian National Congress tried to label Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Muslim League as the movers and shapers of partition of India and, hence, responsible for the massive dislocation and massacre of people. The All India Muslim League was satisfied on its achievement of making a separate state for Indian Muslims. Therefore, they considered those who lost their lives as martyrs and the people who were dislocated and left everything in India and opted to leave for Pakistan were termed as fortunate people who had reached Pakistan i.e. the land of the pure. The Pakistani historians who are considered as champions of nationalist history, having produced a nuanced and sophisticated nationalist account, are Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, Shaikh Muhammad Ikram and Shibli Nomani who are considered as a leading historians of Muslim historiography in modern South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Shibli wrote to establish the glory of Islam in medieval period and viewed history-writing as a noble cause and, through his writings, tried to highlight the utility of history as an academic discipline. He, on the one hand, tried to rejuvenate historiographical tradition in Muslims of South Asia, while on the other hand, he tried to revive "the heritage, culture and traditions of the Muslims in pre-partition India."<sup>2</sup> I. H. Qureshi contributed writings in Muslim nationalist perspective of

historiography and hailed All India Muslim League's demand for a separate state for the Indian Muslims and he "emphatically stressed on the role of Islam or the ideological factor in the Freedom Movement."<sup>3</sup> He interpreted the emergence of a separate state of Pakistan as a historical consequence of the historical development of the Muslim community in Indian sub-continent. Both I. H. Qureshi and S. M. Ikram traced the roots of Hindu-Muslim separatism in India in the history of the sub-continent. They reconstructed "the history of the Muslims in India by assuming a neat demarcation between the Hindu and Muslim communities in political, religious, social and cultural terms."<sup>4</sup> Writing from the Muslim nationalist perspective, they argued that Pakistan had come into being the day when first Arab Muslim armies had landed in Sindh and victoriously captured many lands and later converted Hindus to Islam. In the words of S. M. Ikram, "the ground for Muslim separatism was prepared when Islam entered the subcontinent, and all efforts to provide a bridge between the Hindus and the Muslims failed."<sup>5</sup>

The importance of various genres of literature for partition historiography lies here because it makes the general people speak through the writings of literary persons. The unheard voices of people are heard through literary forms such as novel, drama, short stories and fiction. According to Ayesha Jalal, "whatever the specific calculations of the main political actors, the dislocations and disruptions of partition were ultimately borne by ordinary and mostly innocent men, women, and children."<sup>6</sup> She reiterates that "poets, creative writers, artists, and filmmakers have captured the pity of partition—quite as much as the pity of war—for defenseless people far more effectively than have academic historians bound by their disciplinary conventions."<sup>7</sup> The portrayal of human tragedy in events of Indian partition through innovative mediums of story writing, memories, and memoirs can effectively bridge-up the fictional and historical narratives. For example, the writings of Saadat Hasan Manto (b. 1912- d. 1955) are internationally recognized as best partition stories. In his famous story "Toba Tek Singh," he describes the feelings and acts of inmates of a mental hospital in Lahore who were anxiously waiting for their

relocation on the basis of their religious affiliation and identification.<sup>8</sup> Manto portrays lunatics as sounder than those who were disrupting the partition affectees and wreaking havoc on human life and properties.<sup>9</sup> Manto had himself witnessed and experienced partition losses so he expressed his experiences and feelings in different genres of literary expressions. For instance, recollecting the kind of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in Bombay during the partition days, Manto wrote that he and his friend would have two caps each, a Hindu cap and a Rumi cap, whenever going outside home. While passing through Muslim neighborhoods, they would wear Rumi cap and while going through Hindu dominant area, they would wear Hindu cap. He wrote that during the last days of partition, the additionally arranged Gandhi caps too, lest they would need it in any circumstance.<sup>10</sup>

Manto is a typical example of those who experienced partition with the nimble heart of a literary artist. He excelled with his characteristics of keenness of observation, grasp of storytelling, and mastery of his language. Quite unlike those who wrote about partition violence to condemn its dehumanizing and inundating consequences, he was characteristically uninterested about its outwards manifestations. Rather, he used his literary genius to reflect upon the effects of partition for common and ordinary people. He wrote “short stories that were not about violence as such but about people and their different faces.”<sup>11</sup> He considered partition neither beginning nor an end but part of a continuous drama having glimpses of the best and the worst in humankind with its political and psychological repercussions. He is of the opinion that the story of twentieth century is just like the story of nineteenth century and all the previous centuries.<sup>12</sup> He expresses that human blood has always been considered cheaper than anything, even “prophets, saints and rishis could not correct humans.”<sup>13</sup>

The partition of India in 1947 witnessed the handover of Muslim majority divisions of Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi to Muslim majority country of Pakistan and the Ambala and Jullundar division’s eastern districts of Punjab went over to India. The situation created an unparalleled uncertainty and

people were not happy with the prospects of their leaving the places where their forefathers have been living for centuries. Resultantly people were not happy over the state of affairs because Muslims had to leave their abodes in eastern districts of Punjab while Hindus and Sikhs had to leave their homes and surroundings in western districts. Consequently, partition rather than solving the communal tensions, proved to be prelude to “an orgy of killing which claimed perhaps as much as a million lives.”<sup>14</sup> Nearly twelve million people in Punjab moved in a mass migration and unexpected exodus of population across the newly drawn international border between two nation states of India and Pakistan. In other areas, the dislocation was at relatively lower and less chaotic scale; in all, estimated an overall thirteen million individuals were uprooted from their homes.<sup>15</sup> The partition related migrations, in this sense, represent the biggest migration of the twentieth century. Many individuals had to leave everything behind in a hurry of chaotic two-way flight. The Hindu and the Sikh “refugees for example vacated 9.6 million acres of land in Pakistan, and abandoned 1789 factories and around 400,000 houses,” while on the other hand, “Muslims left behind 5.5 million acres of land in India.”<sup>16</sup>

Ian Talbot and Ishtiaq Ahmed<sup>17</sup> put the locality in limelight like Ilyas Chatha<sup>18</sup> in a bid to present the ‘new history’ of partition of India which has shifted its prism from ‘high politics’ to an understanding of the lives of people from human dimension. Talbot’s case study of Amritsar, the city of Saadat Hasan Manto, from social and economic perspective during these fateful years of dislocation, migration and resettlement is important in this regards.<sup>19</sup> He has emphasized the aspect of human suffering from its social, economic, psychological and cultural dimensions. Manto’s production of literature and Talbot’s academic historical research find cross-section in this manner to provide deeper understanding of partition to the readers. Ishtiaq Ahmed, in a bid to explore history from below, recorded first-hand accounts of individuals by conducting in detail interviews with them to make their experiences part of historical discourse. People explained their life stories of individuals with that of higher politics in which

legal and constitutional battles were being fought but people were fighting against people and circumstances directly. Thus, real understanding could only be reached by dissecting both these perspectives rather than one. Like Talbot's study of Amritsar, Chatha's analysis is about two important industrial cities of Gujranwala and Sialkot. These industrial cities were inundated in time of partition because capital and expertise both fled to India and cities were deserted. It took them much time to revive their vitality and recognition as industrial centers of Punjab. Chatha has in this way contributed in this genre of 'history from below'.

Ishtiaq Ahmed's study is a detailed and holistic as well as comprehensive analysis of the partition of Punjab. Since his study is based on eye-witness accounts, therefore, it can be categorized as a history 'from below'. He has cross checked various eye-witness accounts from both sides of the border and based his argument on the premises that "the partition of India was a necessary but not sufficient basis for the partition of the Punjab."<sup>20</sup> By contextualizing the partition of Punjab against the backdrop of partition of India, Ahmed has primarily identified "conflicts and contradictions emanating among the leaders of, on the one hand, Hindus and Sikhs and on the other, Muslims."<sup>21</sup> It also sheds light on the "merits of the allegations that both Muslims and Sikhs had a grand plan to remove Hindus and Sikhs from their territory" and it is fact that "the Muslim League [had] plan to remove Hindus and Sikhs from a united or divided Punjab and the Sikhs, Muslims from East Punjab."<sup>22</sup>

Throughout their history as post-colonial states, the debate of partition has remained a lively and continued phenomenon on both sides of the border. Many theories have been propounded to explain why the British Raj, while leaving India for good, partitioned it on ostensibly religious basis. The nationalist perspective popular in Pakistan has in the main "subscribed to the two-nation theory, according to which Indian Muslims were always a distinctive and separate community that had resisted assimilation into their Indian environment."<sup>23</sup> The divide and rule theory "has been to blame imperialism for tearing asunder two communities joined by history and

tradition.”<sup>24</sup> Both these theories have been popularized by the post-colonial states of Pakistan and India. Bose and Jalal argue that both of these theories “raise more questions than they answer” and that overwhelming evidence now suggest that “regardless of whether Muslims were in fact a ‘nation,’ let alone one created by British policies of divide and rule, it was the contradictions and structural peculiarities of Indian society and politics in late colonial India which eventually led to the creation of Pakistan.”<sup>25</sup> It were these contradictions and structural peculiarities that actually not only became the major cause of partition of India but also was the major cause of the human loss and suffering that took place on the eve of this partition of subcontinent in an unusual haste termed by Wolpert as ‘shameful flight’ of the British Raj.<sup>26</sup>

The interpretation of revisionist school of modern South Asian historiography is particularly important here because it lays bare the main reason behind the accentuation of religious identities. It suggests that “Indian social tradition, as we know it today, was largely a nineteenth century British colonial invention.”<sup>27</sup> According to this perspective, “British social enumerators of the later nineteenth century invested the great religions of the subcontinent, Hinduism and Islam, with a degree of supra-local significance and cohesion never achieved before.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, these religious identities “were redefined not simply as a function of skillful social engineering by the colonial masters but also as a part of a process of multifaceted resistance against colonial rule.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, here lies answer to both the questions of ‘divide and rule’ and the turning on of religious communities on others in a kind of vengeance unprecedented in India and abroad.

Few Indian writers have also traced the animosity between religious communities of Hindus and Muslims backwards reaching out to the medieval period and they argue that the massacre and bloodshed in 1947 had deeper roots which can be traced back to the interaction among these communities right in the medieval Indian history. This analysis “concerns principally the social processes—drawing from the medieval period memories of symbols and happenings, and of forms of collective action—gained scale as well as ideological

and institutional triggers during the nineteenth century.”<sup>30</sup> Throughout this period “society in India was reconfigured in ways that accented the difference, and eroded the commonalities, between the various religious groups markedly.”<sup>31</sup> He asserts that “this reconfiguring became more contentious with passing decades, the religious identities became increasingly adversarial—and the growing stock of antagonisms facilitated the passage towards partition.”<sup>32</sup> This interpretation, in fact, stresses upon the role played by long-term differences and antagonisms in playing out in the form of unaccounted for massacre, bloodshed and dislocation at the time of partition. However, the overstretching of this argument to medieval period may seem overdoing because religious communities had been living peaceful life and there is no evidence regarding widespread communal riots in this period in India. Moreover, the definition and understanding of community became transformed during the colonial rule.

The drama of partition and independence as it unfolded in the last days of the Raj has also gained much scholarly attention. The formative phase in the history of India was “undoubtedly the pinnacle of the nationalist struggle, the end of colonial rule and the formation of the states of India and Pakistan.”<sup>33</sup> However, before this moment reached “the struggle went through some very critical moments, one of them being the making of 3 June Plan.”<sup>34</sup> The formation and acceptance of this plan by the parties and how its contours evolved and crystallized offers interesting interpretations and explanations. Actually “if Attlee’s announcement was the first realistic step towards independence, the 3 June Plan was the initial round of practical politics aimed at partition, a date and a landmark event from which also began the hectic preparations for the division of India.”<sup>35</sup> It was out of this plan that many questions were raised throughout last many decades, but no answers could be reached which could be agreed upon.

For some, the 3 June Plan has been alleged as a “Mountbatten-Nehru deal” about which Muhammad Ali Jinnah or any of the leaders of All India Muslim League were not informed. Therefore, it was only after positive signal from Nehru that Mountbatten made it public and tabled it for debate



and discussion with leaders of other parties. More importantly, the absence of safeguards for Sikhs and the princely states in this Plan led to an incessant conflict in South Asian region that not only mired partition but also the prospects of peace for many decades to come. On the face of it “the 3 June Plan gives the impression of being a very simplistic attempt to find a way out of the political impasse and the constitutional deadlock that for a decade had baffled the most learned and experienced British minds.”<sup>36</sup> However, “none of its features seem to address or tackle the core issue of administrative organization or security structure, which were the crux of planning for Partition or handling its aftermath.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, a law and order situation was bound to occur “in the intensely sensitive and volatile communal climate, to which the level of preparedness did not match.”<sup>38</sup> Such an unpreparedness wreaked havoc on both sides of the border and there was no plan ready with the administrative machinery to check such a situation from worsening and safety and protection of the population on either side.

David Gilmartin writes that “the successful demand for Pakistan destroyed the old Punjab.”<sup>39</sup> Resultantly, the partition of India “split the province along a line passing between Lahore and Amritsar.”<sup>40</sup> However, the Punjabis were themselves not responsible for this partition and other related happenings. The political pressures and happenings that ultimately produced Pakistan were played out, not in Punjab, but outside this province. The events which unfolded in Punjab owed much to the “broader currents that brought the decline of the British Empire, the rise of the Congress, and the growth of Muslim separatism in other parts of India.”<sup>41</sup> Actually Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s rise as a supreme leader of All India Muslim League and his centralization of powers in his hands to fully and effectively control this party in the center ultimately shaped the events. The Muslims of Punjab even after the fateful elections of 1946 tried their level best to decide their future regarding installation of government in Punjab but now the situation was reasonably clear that “the creation of Pakistan could not be denied.”<sup>42</sup> The Pakistan movement had destroyed the structure of relationship of Punjabi collaborators with that of the Raj and

the cities in Punjab were now simmering with communal rhetoric and the burgeoning press was playing very important role in disseminating the communal feeling all across the province. Hence, the politics was increasingly communalized henceforth which ultimately produced communal riots and bloodshed all across Punjab and beyond.

Some important writings have come up which have focused cities in a bid to write history from 'bottom-up' approach. Recent scholarship has also focused on exploring the causes of the violence which wracked the city of Lahore in 1947. It is explained "in the context of a 'transitional' state that enabled desires for revenge, looting and the settling of old scores to coexist with political contests to demarcate territory."<sup>43</sup> There have also been research uncovering individual stories who suffered in this shaky moment.<sup>44</sup> Besides such kind of oral histories covering stories of individual sufferers, a number of memoirs have also been published which have depicted the suffering of partition.<sup>45</sup> In fact in some Indian accounts and Punjabi accounts "Lahore stands as the iconic embodiment of the 'tragedy' and 'loss; of Partition' of India."<sup>46</sup> They generally ignore in such accounts the inter-war communal riots and tensions in the city of Lahore and its surroundings and they, in their nostalgic memories and what transpired in Lahore at the time of partition, also ignore the resentment that Muslims felt against Hindus' domination of the Lahore's social and economic landscape.<sup>47</sup>

Once the Bengali radical Manabendra Nath Roy enunciated that "let it not be forgotten that the Punjab is the center of the Hindu-Moslem conflicts that radiate from there to all other parts of India."<sup>48</sup> According to Jalal, the second half of 1920s saw the "social and political currents in the Punjab receding from the ideal of an inclusionary nationalism towards an apparently unbending kind of exclusionary communitarianism."<sup>49</sup> Thus, Punjab had been drifted into abyss of religious strife and communal carnage unprecedented in its history because Punjab had throughout the British period been presenting a model of inter-communal cooperation and a symbol of peaceful co-existence. The Punjab "was culturally an unorthodox region where both strict and rigid Hinduism and

Islam could not hold sway for long and the Sufi-Yogi-Bhakti-Guru tradition represented the popular wisdom of ‘live and let live’<sup>50</sup>. Thus, “despite an inclusive, pluralist and secular ethos,” this hallmark of Punjab was about to disappear forever and Punjab’s peculiar identification of shared cultural heritage was to be cast into oblivion once and for all.<sup>51</sup>

The grim reality of partition was rendered more stirring by the events and violence that took place and engulfed especially those areas which had to be partitioned, Punjab and Bengal. These developments were initially taken in historiography of both the new born nation states as ‘self-justifying project’ and the political dimension of this upheaval was over-emphasized at the expense of the other aspects. Naturally, there was abundance of literature produced by those who either felt or experienced the atrocious acts committed on both sides of the newly drawn borders. These writers had a point that whether the partition was right or wrong, the human sufferings related with it can never be atoned for or justified. It mapped the negative emotions of human beings and the way these emotions were captured and channeled in wrong way by the leaders of the communities, thus writing the history of emotions of the partition times.

This literature after a long-sleep has turned up as an important source of information and a fresh perspective through which we can see the partition story in a different angle which is more humane and result-oriented. The cinema took it at a very critical juncture and some very important movies like *Pinjar* were made on partition related themes and novels. The role of cinema in transmitting images and molding public opinion cannot be ignored. The modern and technological age has reduced the leisure-time and book-reading habits of people. In such a situation cinema has got a very important dimension in its role and objectives: this is the didactic purpose of cinema, not only sensitizing people about issues but educating them and turning the aberrant perspectives of people right.

The cinema should also play a proactive role in bridging the gulfs between establishments and governments of these two countries. Policies can only be rectified by looking forward and

nurturing an idea of progressing together. People on both sides of the India-Pakistan border have suffered a lot, whether it was during colonial or post-colonial period. Now the time has come when peace, stability and socio-economic progress is a desired goal of the people of this region; the governments should facilitate it. The role of cinema in translating the literature on partition in 'images' is acutely needed; cinema can work as a major stake-holder in fostering harmonious people-to-people links.

*Aag Ka Darya* (River of Fire) written by Quaratul Ain Hyder focused on Indian history starting from ancient period and lasted till the partition of India 1947.<sup>52</sup> She discussed social and psychological issues related with identities of *Ashraf* (the high born) and *Ajlaf* (the low born) having transformed during the partition experience. She explained how were the elite living and their lifestyle before and after the partition of India. She also dilated upon the way families who migrated from India to Pakistan were facing cultural, social and linguistic crises and problems related with their rehabilitation in Pakistan.

Another novel written by Quratul Ain was *Akhri Shab kay Hamsafar* (The Co-traveler of Last Night) focused upon Bengal. She explains the way conscious people of Bengal who had tilt towards socialism and ideological politics had to adapt themselves to the mundane realities faced after partition and they reoriented their life towards capitalistic and opportunistic pursuits. She explains nostalgic experience of the uprooted people of Lucknow who later got settled in Pakistan. She mentions Thawborn's Girls College Lucknow and Gumti river and the memories of people related with the flora and fauna and geography of that area.

A novel *Alipur Ka Aili* (Ilyas of Alipur) written by Mumtaz Mufti gives true story of East Punjab where Sikhs and Hindus were wreaking havoc against the Muslims being uprooted from that area.<sup>53</sup> The settlement of immigrants became a real issue after partition. He writes extensively about the manner lands were grabbed by influential people and corruption got involved in the settlement processes of people who had migrated from one part of India to another.

*Udaas Naslain*, a novel written by Abdullah Hussain traced Indian history starting from War of Independence 1857 to the partition times.<sup>54</sup> He has touched the themes of all political and revolutionary movements including Bhagatpur Tehreek, Kakuri Movement, constitutional steps taken by the British government including Simon Commission, Jallianwala Bagh incident, and the Khilafat movement. He has also discussed revolts of Indian navy in Bombay and Calcutta. He has analyzed the society of Delhi and the factors of massacre which was carried out in Punjab at the time of partition of 1947.

Another novel titled *Raakh* by Mustansir Hussain Tarar has painted a picture of partition with particular reference to the city of Lahore and the way partition unfolded in this cultural and educational center of North India. He traces his analysis from the great fire of Shah Almi market of Lahore where hundreds of shops were gutted in a few days. The city of Lahore bore a heavy brunt of partition and the Hindus and Sikhs who were organic part of educational, economic, intellectual and literary landscape of Lahore were pushed out of this city. Tarar also explains the change in Lahore having gone through partition tragedies.

Tarar has produced another marvelous novel on partition of Punjab titled as *Khas-o-Khashak Zamany Key*. It explains the manner partition events were unfolded in Western Punjab areas of Alipur Chatha, Mandi Bahauddin, Hafizabad and particularly Head Works Qadirabad. He opines that the culture of these areas was totally transformed in partition times and many of the uprooted families had to go abroad and settle there. They developed an identity crisis of colossal proportion while living abroad while at the same time their generations long relationship with their land and language got disrupted. These areas also lost religious diversity because the Hindus and Sikhs who had been living for centuries in these areas and were part of local communities went to newly created nation state of India.

*Khaak-o-Khoon*, a novel, written by Fazal Kareem Fazli paints a vivid picture of partition in a masterly manner. The

writer has focused on Punjab and he explains the changes while also focusing on continuities in society and culture of Punjab after partition. Fazli points out towards cultural disruptions experienced by the Punjab province resulting from millions of immigrants coming and settling into various rural and urban areas. Likewise, Khadeeja Mastoor has written *Aangani* in which she has written extensively on the themes like life in Delhi, rootlessness, Central Indian families and many other related themes.

### **Conclusion**

The historiography on both sides of the border, that was drawn at the time of partition of India 1947, has remained wedded to nationalist discourse. In their pursuit of nationalist narrative, the historians have generally focused on typically selective themes. The dislocation, migration and human loss coupled with loot and plunder and violence that mired the proceedings of partition of India and independence from the British rule have although been discussed yet this whole loss has always been relegated to the background as collateral damage. On the fore front is national heroic struggle and the heroes were different on both sides of the border of the successor states of the British Raj. More often, heroes of one side are portrayed as villains by the other and vice versa. Hence, the agony of the sufferers has only been recognized and acknowledged properly by literature and cinema. Various genres of literature written in languages such as Urdu, Hindi, English, Punjabi and Bengali was produced at the time of partition of India and the writers wrote about their personal experiences as well as what they observed. Resultantly, this literature can be used as an alternative treasure trove of primary and secondary source of history to fulfil the gaps of elitist perspectives of history i.e. perspectives of colonial history and of nationalist historiography. Moreover, among various genre of literature, Urdu literature in general and Urdu novel in particular written on Pakistani side, has surpassed other genre of literature in highlighting human aspects of the partition of India 1947.

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