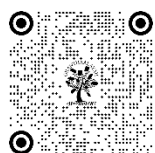


UNITY TO RUPTURE: FRAGMENTATION OF FRATERNITY AND HISTORY IN SHIV K. KUMAR'S A RIVER WITH THREE BANKS

Dr. Sooraj Kumar ¹, Dr. Seema Rajan S. ²

¹ Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, St. John's College, Anchal, Kollam, Kerala-691306

² Assistant Professor of English, N. S. S. College, Nilamel, Kollam, Kerala-691535



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ABSTRACT

A River with Three Banks (1998) by Shiv K. Kumar explores the intricacies of human identity and morality amidst the chaotic and tumultuous backdrop of India's Partition. Its central characters each reflect fractured psyches and diverse ideological stances. The novel weaves a narrative that interrogates the historical, social, and personal cataclysms of the dreadful partition of 1947. Kumar employs the metaphor of the river, a recurring symbol of continuity, division and renewal, to represent the multifaceted impact of partition on individual and collective consciousness. This article examines the novel's thematic concerns, including the conciliation of identity and individuality in divided societies, the role of memory in shaping postcolonial narratives and the ethical dimensions of coexistence in a world marked by historical ruptures to understand the enduring legacy of one of the most significant and indelible events in Indian history.

Keywords: Fragmentation, Identity, Symbolism, Historical Realism, Feminism, Trauma and Psychoanalysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1947, India gained independence but at the cost of a traumatic event that still haunts millions living across the Radcliff line. It led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people and as a historical and cultural rupture, continues to resonate through the collective consciousness of the region, inspiring a rich corpus of literature grappling with its convolutions. Shiv K. Kumar's *A River with Three Banks* weaves together themes of identity, displacement, and moral ambiguity. This novel uses of the river as both a literal and symbolic motif, summarizing the fluidity and fragmentation of lives disrupted by partition. Through its evocative narrative, Kumar not only portrays the physical and emotional displacement of his characters but also interrogates larger questions of national identity, communal violence, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals caught in the tides of history. The river, with its 'three banks,' becomes a powerful metaphor for the coexistence of multiple truths, histories, and identities in a world divided by borders yet united by shared human experiences.

2. FRAGMENTATION OF FRATERNITY AND HISTORY

Indian English literature is reflective of the residual traditions known for its splendour and majesty, honour and glory. There lies below the surface of Indian English structure, a dormant rich tradition known for adaptability and acculturation. As Hari Jaishankar observes: "A rich tradition can well be an integral part of modernity. Both can co-exist and supplement each other. It is a matter of adjustment. Modernization can be adopted to an extent desirable, depending on the need and receptivity of a society" (33). Thus, every piece of Indian English literature by inference is reflective of a life contextualized by history and an in-depth personality.

The Indian novelists maintain that the history of twentieth century has been written by shop makers. According to them, the Indian history has been ruthlessly sawed by the British Imperialist rulers and their henchmen in India. They seek to provide a correct view of history through the subversive reality. In their endeavour, they are aided by the combinative modes of parodic and fantastic even in explosive combative moods. They link the biographical account of the individual with the social collectiveness of India in the form of its contemporary history through the apt use of myth and history combined together on postmodern open-ended lines.

Shiv K. Kumar is a novelist with a different perception of the real. *A River with Three Banks* (1999) is conscientious revisualizations of the India of the 1940's, of human brutality and romance and the human agony and ecstasy. The novel begins with the ominous word: "It was the quietest day of the week- comparatively speaking, of course" (1). For in the previous weeks, the belligerent three communities- the Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims, unleashed brutal cruelties on one another. Their holy men and holy text have no sway over them. They have lost their balance and give vent to their spirit of vengeance and realization. Though Gandhi visits the affected places as an apostle of peace, it does not have much effect and violence continues unabated. Talking about the plight of the affected Hindu Women, Gandhi writes: "Hindu women were without the auspicious vermilion mark on their heads and foreheads and without their couch shell bangles" (438). Torching and large-scale destruction of property and pathetic cries to come out of the fiery hell and wild howls for revenge are day to day occurrences even in the nation's capital, Delhi. Shiv K. Kumar describes one such incident in the novel:

The fire had now engulfed four stories building looming above one of the timber shops, and frantic screams were coming from the top floor. By now a large crowd had gathered yelling for revenge. Instead of making way for the fire engines, groups of people stood excitedly around, blocking the road and shouting, 'Har Har Mahadev'. (29)

The bigoted police put the onus on the Muslim arsonists. The crowd goes on a rampage with knives and explosives. The Police Commissioner's strict warning has an immediate impact. The crowd disappears murmuring, "These hybrid Englishmen were always for the Muslims" (30-31). The violent Hindu mob feels that Nehru and Mountbatten are taking sides with the Muslims. So, they refer to them as Stupid Nehu and Pandit Mountbatten.

In the vestry of St Jon's Church when Gautam Mehta, the novel's protagonist tries to convince the Bishop of his intention to become a Christian. At that moment an unchristian event takes place outside the gate. Abdul Rahim an elderly muslim man is stabbed gruesomely to death by a violent mob. Gautam witnesses the horrors of communal hatred. The Bishop crosses his chest and exclaims, "Is it another crucifixion?" (9). A letter by Abdul to his wife Sultana Begum in Allahabad reveals the harrowing experiences of the abducted school and college girls in Delhi. Ironically, the letter says that, "in that nefarious business, both Hindus and Muslims are operating as close accomplices" (10). In the Mahavir Street in Delhi, a large mob of Muslims vows to avenge the death of Abdul Rahim. The outrageous menacing slogans echo in the nook and corner of the street. As stated in the novel, "Khoon- ka- badla- khoon, Blood for Blood! Allah-ho-Akbar", were the slogans which attract the youngsters immensely as they join the chorus by chanting, "Kill the bloody kafirs! Castrate them! ... Ya Ali, Ya Mohammad" (54). As N. Kavidha and Sakthivel V. comment:

The Indian mind has been shaped by a remarkably diverse forces such as, the ancient Hindu tradition, make, scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and two centuries of British Colonial rule. The result is unique. Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of India. With diversity emerging from the geography of India and inscribed in the history of India, India is made for pluralism. (45)

Gentlemen like Gopinath Trivedi, an avowed Hindu always put up a large green flag with a crescent, whenever a Muslim mob passes by the house. He is a man with a practical mind. He feels that when the two belligerent communities have sworn to eternal enmity and are determined to destroy the other, it is sheer foolishness to announce one's real identity. Even innocent animals bore the brunt of hatred between the two communities. A cow is torn apart by irate Muslim mob labelling it as the Kafir cow. The ghastly sight nauseates Gautam so much that he blunts out with a deep

revulsion: "What Satanic Butchery!" (58). Partition leaves no city untouched. Allahabad, which means the City of God, means an arena of violence. In spite of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad and Jawaharlal Nehru's repeated pleas to both the communities to come out and mix freely, they refuse to come out of their hovels. The minority Muslims who have decided to stay back instead of going to Pakistan are found gearing themselves up to encounter any possible attack on them.

Gautam feels that the subcontinent has become a savage battlefield. People seem to have lost their sanity. Nobody has foreseen the gruesome results of the partition. Even Gandhi has never imagined that such would be the magnitude of the bloodshed and animosity. Going by the happenings, Gautam feels that Allahabad has become the city of the dead. The police officers in the cities and towns have a hell of a time containing the mob fury. It is distressingly nerve-racking and nightmarish to be on run all the time. The truth behind the cyclone of events was awfully intriguing and a rotten affair because the police have the secret and reliable information that: "It is always a Hindu who throws cow's carcass into a temple, and a Muslim who dumps a pig's head into a mosque...Diabolic ingenuity...The idea is to keep the battle raging". (146)

Recent studies have begun to uncover an aspect that historians have hitherto paid very little attention to the partition trauma, its gendered nature, especially the experiences of women of all age groups. Women in these infernal days are treated as a commodity to be bartered and disposed of. As always, they are the worst sufferers. Many women who survived the ordeal are heartlessly ostracized by their own kith and kin. All these atrocities are committed in the name of God and religion as if God has sanctioned such nefarious deeds. In the novel, Shiv K. Kumar weaves the story of an abducted Muslim girl being taken straight to a brothel in Delhi. She is the daughter of Abdul who was murdered at the gate of St. John's Church. The more Gautam looks at the dead man Rahim, the more he resembles his father. He feels that it is not the India of Mahatma Gandhi's dreams. He wonders, "When will the Hindus realize that this country is not theirs alone?" (37). He conjures up the plight of Haseena, most probably in a brothel, held under duress. He thanks God for not giving a sister. Soon after getting the desired release from his unfaithful wife Sarita, Gautam feels relieved. Still, he looks downcast. In order to boost up sagged spirits, Berry takes him to Bridge hotel at Neel Kamal. Berry knows that it is a notorious brothel centre. Here Gautam meets Haseena and informs her of her father's death. Haseena- abused and humiliated is living, "in a sort of a concentration camp" (80). She prays to Gautam to rescue her from her captors and take her back to Allahabad. As N. Kavidha and Sakthivel V. state:

Different ideological dispositions put up new different histories in accordance with race, gender and class... Each contradictory identity has been constructed with an "imagining of history"... Riots proved that cultural collisions can be severe manifestations of danger and destruction that a new history eats up the history already created so far. (45)

Risking his life, amidst widespread riot, arson and all sorts of violence, Gautam manages to rescue Haseena. At the railway station they witness a train from Pakistan full of Hindu and Sikh refugees. The social stigma with which these refugees have to live through is much more painful and heart breaking than the physical pain. The mass exodus has widespread implications. Trains overflow with fleeing people. Existence for these transient people is literally a hell. They witness gruesome murders and forcible abductions and conversions every day. Sometimes well before the caravan reaches the border, there occurs several deaths due to hunger, exhaustion and all sorts of ailments. There is a terrible apprehension in the air that anytime the rioters will arrive and destroy life and property.

Gautam helps Haseena's mother and sister Salma to escape to Pakistan for she sees, "no future in India" (193). On board the train they travel with fear replete in their minds. The train bound to Pakistan in which they are travelling is ambushed and the raiders like gladiators search with Kirpans, knives and sticks for preys. Gautam too is humiliated, when he is told to undress to verify his Hindu identity. Limping back to the compartment Gautam feels relieved that the women he has escorted are safe. An eerie silence descends upon the place. There is an unending line of migrants at the Amritsar migration check post. Shiv K. Kumar writes:

Some of them were carrying only, a handbag or a small suitcase, their sole movable property to be carried across the border. Famished and wrinkled faces stared blankly into space. Occasionally, a child whimpered for food or drink; only to be shouted down by his or her parents. As the line moved forward, at a snail's pace, some started up a conversation with the others, sharing memories of what they were leaving behind-their ancestral the new country. It was a journey into the unknown. (213)

Haseena's mother and sister migrate to Pakistan, the newly formed nation with hope. Haseena is left behind as her past will hinder her to pursue a future in the new country. The images of horror that they have undergone on their route to the freedom are etched permanently in the albums of their mind. How so hard ever they try, these images refuse to

leave and come out occasionally as an outburst from the formidable forts of their resolute bosoms. Also, there is a hidden element of exasperation, a sense of helplessness in the victims even after many years of partaking of the volcanic eruption. They are naturally at a loss to understand the meaning of existence.

In spite of such madness spreading fast like a wild fire all over India, there are some good Samaritans like Gautam Mehta who risk their very life to rescue others. They thus put into practice the Gandhian demand to seek love in hatred, peace in the midst of turmoil, light in darkness and hope in despair. Gautam Mehta's daring and sensational act to rescue Haseena from the predator pimp Pannalal is a testimony of being human. And his wedding with her to start a new race-- sans caste, sans religion--is a genuine attempt to eliminate hatred from the minds of the other and to re-establish love and companionship in those disquieting times.

Shiv K. Kumar delves deep into the psyche of characters and unfolds the psychological trauma of modern man caught in the web of materialism and moral depravity. The story however, is not lost in projecting the labyrinth of consciousness and fragmentation of life experience. Kumar's fictional mode appears to be psychological with due emphasis on plot and story. Thus, he seems to strike a balance between the conventional narrative mode and the modern psychological method in his novels. The manipulation of the point of view assumes importance in this regard. Kumar opines that Indians are intensely emotional. He regards highly the joint family system, arranged marriages, the filial piety in the Indian family set-up and their almost archetypal pre-occupation with religion. He is sensitively alive to the hold of religion and the religious concepts of Karma, immortality of the soul and the chain of lives on the Indian psyche. At the same time, he is also aware of the influence of the Western materialism shaking the compact value system of the East.

As a person exposed to the Eastern and Western cultures, he is conscious of the inevitable conflict of cultures leading to the impasse. Kumar does not take sides though he is favourably inclined to the Eastern value system, and moral vision. He indicts the evils of both the Eastern and Western traditions and for him writing is not committed to any ideology. This, however, does not weaken his commitment to the broad humanist values. He takes a cosmopolitan approach to life rising above narrow parochialism. It is this interaction that enlivens the worn-out theme of the East-West encounter in the hands of Kumar. He exploits the psychological import of the East-West encounter in shaping characters of his novels. Kumar's distrust of empirical reasoning, regimentation and his debunking of industrial civilization in addition to his urge for prelapsarian simplicity and innocence point out his cultural primitivism, and underlines the author's deep concern for the predicament of contemporary man deeply rooted in his own country's and personal history.

3. CONCLUSION

Shiv K. Kumar in *A River with Three Banks* adeptly captures the trauma of partition, not only in the physical dislocation of its characters but also in the moral and psychological dilemmas that they were forced to endure. His characters reflect the fissured realities of a nation grappling with communal violence, political betrayal, and the enduring scars of historical rupture. The novel transcends a simplistic historical recounting, offering instead a profound exploration of memory as a battleground for trauma and reconciliation. Kumar's subtle portrayal of his characters reveals the moral ambiguities of survival and the enduring scars of displacement, challenging traditional binaries of victim and perpetrator. His vivid prose and lyrical interludes elevate the narrative into a meditation on the human condition, where political events are inseparably entwined with personal transformations. Through the broader context of partition, Kumar's literary skill examines its thematic richness through various critical lenses. The novel's treatment of trauma with its philosophical reflections on identity and morality merge historical realism with lyrical symbolism.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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