

Partitional Violence and Resilience in Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family*

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Abstract – Gurcharan Das (born 3 October 1943) is an Indian author, who wrote a trilogy based on the classical Indian goals of the ideal life. *India Unbound* was the first volume (2002), on artha, 'material well-being', which narrated the story of India's economic rise from Independence to the global information age. Published in many languages and filmed by BBC,[3] it was called "a quiet earthquake" by the Guardian. The second, *The Difficulty of Being Good*, is on dharma or 'moral well-being', and is "rich with learned musings on the epic, Mahabharata and its moral dilemmas" that speak to our day to day contemporary life. *Kama: The Riddle of Desire* is on the third goal of desire, and recounts a tale of "love and vulnerability, about self-doubt and betrayal, about wanting more of everything and being haunted by settling for less."

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The partition of India, the most cataclysmic event in the history of India, like French or Russian Revolution had been and still has far reaching political social, cultural, religious, economic and human impacts on the people of Indian subcontinent. It does not mean only the vivisection of a vast subcontinent but also catastrophe for millions of people. Majority of literary or creative writers have responded in more than one way regarding the tragic incidence of partition in 1947. While some depict the carnage during the refugee migration, others zero in on the aftermaths of the partition in terms of difficulties faced. It being a great event, the partition of India means different things to different people. It seems that history alone cannot apprehend fully this incidence of partition. As Dr. Assadudin says :

The partition of India, momentous event in Indian history, continues to tantalize and cast its shadow on our social and chronicle of our freedom struggle that liberation of the country from foreign yoke an experience of violence, slaughter and exile for many (Assadudin, 312-13).

With the popularity of the historical fiction, a copious writers have made a massive use of history by incorporating socio-cultural and political events of their interest into the fictional frame of history. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous novelist commenting on this trend writes :

Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pain and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers-such literature

loses the confidence of its own people (Solzhenitsyn, 5).

However through the efforts of rewriting of the history, which is usually based on memory, subjectivity and indigenous experience, some writers have succeeded in presenting a comprehensive, legitimate and authentic portrayal of partitional violence and the resilience thereafter shown by the displaced people. These new histories comprising Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) Bhisham Shahni's *Tamas* (1974), Saddath Hassan Manto's urdu poems *Subh-e-Azadi* (1947), Manohar Matgonkar *A Bend in the Ganges* (1988) *Children* (1988), Bapsi Sidhva's *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990) and many more, bring the simple and silent ordinary people to the forefront in comparison to the elite one in the conventional history. The writers of new histories depend on memory, myths and literature rather than archival documents. In this regard Dr. Rajender Chenni points out : "They are the authentic history of the partition. They have not tenacity to prove the truth, no craving or aim to say everything" (Chenni, 10). Gurcharan Das' single semi-autobiographical novel is a beautiful attempt to rewrite the history of partitional. Violence and that of the resilience shown by its victims. *A Fine Family* has not quite been accorded to deserve place as one of the leading partition novels. The reason behind this may be that the partition of India while supporting the whole set up and construction of the novel, never occupies the foreground. Here Das interweaves, in a terse and at times sardonic tone, little details, asides, hints, images relating to the

partition of India. But this novel deserves a right place in the oeuvre of novel, based on partition because it presents a detailed portrayal of resilience power of characters to cope with the trauma of violence. The beauty of the novel lies in this very fact that the novelist has successfully presented his vision of resilience. The novel can be viewed as the character's confrontation with their past oddities with resolute inner strength to re-emerge in the present with a renewed conscience. All the characters in the novel whether it is Bauji or Tara or Arjuna, all of them have been portrayed to carry this vision of resilience against life's hardships where the traumatic incidence of partition is coped with by means of brief but poignant references and skating reactions. Partition theme is not central in this novel of Gurcharan Das. Rather its main focus is on the recording of the growth and maturation of main characters of the novel as well as that of India. This novel is studied by many as the story of India's urban middle class from 1942 -83 of the struggle of a fine family and a great nation to restart or rebuild a new future in arduous circumstances. O.P. Mathur has a point in this regard : "A Fine Family traces an ordinary family faces the trauma of partition with composure and balance" (Mathur, 10).

A Fine Family stands out its effortless balancing of situation as well as for its upholding of human values amid communal carnage. Like most conventional novel written on the famous historical events, this novel also negotiates historical facts and fictional representation, Here Das merges history with memories and approaches to the incidence of Indian partition as an event of the horrors befalling convoys of refugees on either side of the border. For Gurcharan Das partition was definitely more than just a political divide, it was actually a division of cultures and hearts and relations bringing untold sufferings tragedy, trauma, pain and violence to communities living together with peace. Killings are done for frivolous reason's as shown in the Book I titled Lyallpur.

The works of Gurcharan Das as a whole critique the individual and the nation in tandem and offer a vital road map for the future, especially in these troubled times. His novel *A Fine Family* shows that independence proved as difficult and major characters of the novel are shown undergoing a transformation after facing the trauma of the partition of India and accompanying communal violence. He celebrates the values of tolerance and resilience against bigotry propagated by communal forces during partition. Bauji, as a pragmatic realist, presents a viable path between the abstract religious position presented by traditionalists such as Seva Ram and Guruji and the fanatics of both communities. His robust reliance on senses to present him an aim in life as well as his resilience power against hardships of life makes him a champion of liberal and humanistic values in life which are necessary to come out from traumatic experiences.

In *A Fine Family* there are many such characters like Bauji, Tara, Seva Ram and Arjun who do not give in against the negative forces of life. The novel is a rich of passion and incidents of a Punjabi family. Bauji and his family are forced to flee to India by violence and instability unleashed by partition. But the main focus of the novel has never been to concentrate on partition violence and instability unleashed by partition violence rather it teaches us a great lesson of standing still against the traumatic experiences of partition days. The novel is viewed as a saga of a family striving for building a new future in difficult circumstances. In its search for a new life, the different characters find answers to their problems in a vision of life, and that is never giving in. The narrative explores the impact of bigotry and fanaticism in the context of individual as well as country wherein false religiosity of Hindus and Muslims creates havoc in the lives of innumerable people. The novel reveals its suspicion of religious wherein the religious impulses lead to narrow mindedness but at the same time through the characters of Seva Ram and Guruji it also tries to emphasis on the role of religious and meditation and simple life in giving the inner strength of resilience.

The monster of violence and communalism wounds every heart and Bauji's secular mind is deeply shaken. "When was the lunacy going to stop ? Why didn't the British take firmer position in one India?" (Das 20).

First part of the novel, titled Lyallpur, shows that independence comes as a fatal blow to Bauji family. Bone chilling and heart rending scenes follow in the massacre of millions of Hindus and Muslims within hours on either side of the border driving a rickety tonga through a burning town filled with murderous mob to take his family to safety. Their long journey from Lyallpur to the Wagha border along with thousands of fleeing Hindus is a hell in nightmare.

The summer of 1947 was one of the hottest in people's memories the standing crops of maize were parched, the cattle bellowed from hunger. On the roads millions were marching, there was no relief... But often what greeted them in the village was a faint not smoke that bore the smell of bodies. They had to choose whether to die to thirst or from the Muslim sword (109, 110)

The same fate befalls on Muslims fleeing India at the hands of fanatic Sikhs Bauji is shot and his youngest daughter is killed. Bauji ironically calls the partition an essential sacrificial purgation and squarely blames victory Mountabaten's haste.

Like Bauji all other characters in the novel are inevitably drawn into the national vortex. Bauji's favorite daughter Tara symbolize the power of women resilience in spite of life's odds. She

relocates with her husband and son to Shimla. Her life in new India is both an escape and a struggle.

If the first part of the novel is about partition violence as well the birth of a new democracy, Part-2 (Shimla) which depicts the second generation of Bauji family, delineates the rise of the citizen after destiny has snatched away almost everything except indomitable spirit of resilience. Despite hardships public life, Tara dares to dream of a great nation where her son would grow to be a worthy citizen. Seva Ram her husband, becomes a hero for Tara because of his steely resilience and equanimity, he displays to guide his family during those turbulent days. At this juncture only Arjun is the last hope for Bauji's family who can bring back the lost fortune of the family.

If Bauji dominates the first part of the novel, the second and the third part belong to Tara and Arjun respectively. But all these main characters of the novel share a common trait of resilience or fighting spirit. All of them faces the bitter circumstances boldly and at last emerge as winners. A vision in his portraying these three characters and providing them dominate role in different parts of the novel. And that vision is upholding the humanity against the evil powers of communalism and violence. In the last part of the novel, drawing upon his own experiences, Das presents the spirit of new India through the symbol of Bombay. Here Arjun represents the struggle of the entrepreneur who built up Indian economy. Bombay stands for the determination of Indians to succeed despite all odds. Arjun, the eponymous hero of the novel, is seen as representative to resilient and liberal values whose rise in life has been possible only due to his cultivation of resilient spirit and decisive approach towards life. "An Bombay ! It is truly a free city. It is truly a free city. Arjun built with patience and hard work by men of trade (Das, 249)

To sum up *A Fine Family* is one of those selected novels that brings positivity to those people who are victims of communal forces. All the three parts of the novel i.e. *Lyalpur, Shimla and Bombay* uphold the fighting spirit of the characters against all the odds and evils. It can be read as a tribute to the resilient power of those people who entered India with empty hands but through their indomitable spirit of never giving up they build their life as well as India anew. *A Fine Family* as, thus, an important novel which deals with various aspects of the traumatic experience of partition. Gurcharan Das shows his remarkable powers of observation of the human nature and political behavior of Hindus and Muslims in particular. Though the first and second part of the novel are tragic in tone but the spirit of resilience moves simultaneously. According to Mathur the entire novel is about gently accepting the bitter sweet realities of existence : "Against the exciting, dramatic and tragic backdrop of national events from 1947 to 1975 the novel sensitively explores the greatest Kurukshetra of all the human mind" (Mathur, 119).

Partition theme is not central in this novel rather it records the growth and rather maturation of Bauji as well as that of the country. It does not choose to emphasize violence as such. In this novel Gurcharan Das merely touching upon violence moves to story towards building up a new future for the characters as well as for India. He study of the novel conveys that history has a moral. One of the major refrains in the novel is that in spite of horrors and violence and dark forces all around, power of resilience and looking towards the brighter side of life can help us to move in future. An optimistic note of prevalence of healthy human relations is sounded through episodes of love, compassion and friendship despite the chaotic conditions of violence, bloodshed and deterioration of human values. By writings this beautiful novel Gurcharan Das has reaffirmed his faith in humanistic values and deplore the communal and divisive politics. Here his main focus has been on the utility of communal harmony, common cultural heritage, peace and prosperity.

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