

Glimpses of Bengal Partition in Atin Bandyopadhyay's 'Infidel' (Kafir) and its relevance to History

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ABSTRACT

The partition of India in 1947 has its strong reaction in the literature of the vernacular. Atin Bandyopadhyay is one of the few Bengali writers to portray the pangs of Partition. In his story 'Infidel' (Kafir) he presents the plight of Paran and Hashim. Paran is trying to flee from a Muslim dominated place with the help of his friend Hashim. The effort, though proves to be futile at the end, presents the agony of partition in its varied forms – rootlessness, faith, identity, friendship, human values among other aspects.


Keywords: Faith, identity, partition, rootlessness, religion.

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Literature being a mirror to social reality, it has established itself as an alternate archive of time. The partition of Bengal and of India, the grand historical narrative of which has often been regarded as the sole one, has articulated the other little, unofficial ones culled from humane expressions of people directly or indirectly affected by the pangs of partition. The curving out of a state breaking the age-old bonding of heart, the displacement of roots, riots, violence, killings, rape among other unpleasant things had ensued a strange emotion of disbelief and mistrust reflected more in the informal and the alternate methods, namely literature, memories, letters, diaries, than in the so called 'history' of partition.

The partition of India as experienced in the Eastern front of the nation is different from that of the Western front. Unlike the depiction of the reality of partition in the Western front, the Bengal partition (1905, 1947, and 1971) almost maintained a silence in exposing the violence faced by people fleeing across the Bengal border. Much has been explored on the historical and social background of partition, but the real experience of the people can only be gathered from oral histories or interviews, or gleaned from the fiction that retells the violence, the trauma, the small act of humanity with the people among other display of pure humane elements.

Apart from many other things the question of religion and identity come hand in hand almost becoming synonymous in the larger scale. The rift in the age-old unity of Hindus and Muslims brings to the fore many questions, both social and personal. Whereas the political questions have essentially been analyzed and interpreted through history and political standpoints, the personal ones get caught in the web of informal stories never getting the desired air to breathe in.

Short stories of the period give us glimpses of the loss of a homeland, the new life of a refugee and the fragility of borders in the construction of identities.

Born in 1934 in Dhaka Atin Bandopadhyaya is one of those writers who witnessed the gory partition in his adolescence. He has penned many works since then, but his masterpiece is a trilogy on partition : *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje*, *Aloukik Jalajan* and *Ishwarer Bagan*. *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje* earned him a lot of fame. Famous writer of Bengal, Syed Mustafa Siraj has compared *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje* with Greek tragedies and also found it tuned with the core spirit of Bengali literature like Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyaya's *Pather Panchali*ⁱ. Even in shortstories he has excelled in his representation of the pangs of partition.

The story, which is our point of discussion, was originally written as '*Kafir*' in Bengali which has recently been translated by Rani Ray as '*Infidel*'. Through the questioning of religious identity and faith in one's God the short story brings to the fore the basic questions of faith and faithlessness scoffing at the politicized concepts of religion that always result in rift, rancor and revenge. The story involving a few village folks and their unsuccessful struggle to survive and protect one another presents before us a bigger and more universal aspect of human antagonism that the world has been witnessing since time immemorial.

The story encapsulates the essence of partition highlighting the agony of detachment from the soil, the known people, place and atmosphere. Set in times of the brutal inhuman killings of Noakhali in East Bengal the story delves deep into the psyche of the readers through a very realistic presentation of disorientation and displacement in the plea of religion and national identity.

Historically the Noakhali riot was a series of massacres, rapes, abductions and forced conversions of Hindus and looting of properties. It affected areas under the Ramganj, Begumganj, Raipur, Lakshmpur, Chhagalnaiya, Sandip Police Stations in Tipperah district, a total area of more than 2000 square miles.ⁱⁱ

Noakhali carnage happened due to several reasons. One of them was the need of Muslim vengeance to defeat in the Great Calcutta Killing. On October 10, 1946, the pogrom started with the rabble rousing speech of Gulam Sarwar, an ex M.L.A of Muslim League at Begumganj Bazar. It was a dreadful anti-Hindu speech in which he quoted several verses of The Holy Quran to incite Muslims to kill the '*Kafirs*' and idolaters. This was followed by violent assaults of Muslim mobs on Hindus.ⁱⁱⁱ

The story questions the definition of '*Kafir*' and the need to have a religious identity amidst this turmoil. It shows how a syncretic society of interdependence is getting apart. Through suspicion, fear and intimidation of common people the writer brings to the fore the ground reality of simple people affected by the pangs of partition. The story deals with the universal theme of love, brotherhood, loss, separation and identity.

It showcases the story of Paran, a Hindu middle aged man, trying to save himself taking the help of his friend Hashim to come to safety. Paran was in search of his wife Kironi. Everybody was clearing out, holding on to dear life. It was almost an obligation. The plight and helplessness of Paran becomes an irony of the situation. Paran says – "*Save my life Hashim, or kill me if that's what you want. I can't put up with this anymore.*"^{iv} The question of tolerating the agony has been raised most blatantly, not by any political orator, but by a simple character like Paran who represents humanity at large. People like Paran are never aware of political developments, their world being confined to mere domestic settings with little needs and duties. They are always on the receiving end whenever the world witnesses any great social, political or religious upheavals.

This story of Paran is synonymous to the human tragedy of communities that experienced rootlessness. Millions of refugees of the world of the past and the present reiterate with Paran the same story of the pain of being rootless. Paran in the story is thus representative of all the homeless people in Northern Ireland, Israel, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Myanmar and many other places.

The help of Hashim and his wife Jubeida at the risk of their own lives reaffirms the glowing human values. However the ironic observation of the writer in describing the death of Ismat Ali is poignant. Ismat Ali was killed in trying to save many Hindu people by keeping them hidden in a school room. The writer says – "*Ali was lying on his back on the grounds, with his face up, counting the numerous stars and planets in the sky, perhaps!*"^v

Paran's endeavour to escape by keeping himself immersed under water is symbolic of suffocation and futility of existence. The analogy of Paran to a deep-water fish that spreads its fins to come up to the surface somewhat equates human beings to fishes. It is unnatural but befitting to the conditions of the time. The description of the riot-torn village is really poignant - "*the horsein*

the landlord's stable had lapsed into silence. They were dead. But the hoarse cries, full of coarse and vicious words, filled the air. Innocent men and women were being burnt alive – the smell of damp, scorched flesh hovered above the ground, above the cowshed. Flocks of pigeons flew above the minarets of darkness: they were winging their way to extended grassland that lay beyond the river."^{vi} The description has a picaresque quality that brings in a strange contrast of the natural with the unnatural.

The "Inshallah" (If Allah wills it) of Hashim at the beginning of the journey to save Paran affirms their faith in the essential goodness of religion. The irony of the situation cannot be overlooked as the journey will be unfruitful. The futility of human identity is also shown when Paran tries to memorize his Muslim names of Mohammad Idris or Mohammad Immanullah to save himself. The writer has observed that "*It was a dark time for humanity. Religion had no meaning for anyone: no one was inclined to follow its tenets. Intense hatred overran the entire area, consumed it like a poisonous serpent.*"^{vii} However, the question of religiosity comes to the fore when Hashim considers the venture of saving Paran's life to the most sacred pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. "*He was really on a pilgrimage now, travelling to Mecca and Medina, places of love where there was no difference between human beings. Everybody was Allah's creature and deserved human compassion. It would have been a sin to prevent anybody from staying alive. Hashim had begun his journey to Mecca and Medina – below him was the winter cold water with only a vessel floating on its surface.*"^{viii}

The reference of Mecca and Medina brings a new dimension to the story, the place being the most sacred to the Muslims. The visit to these places is one of the five tenets of Islam. The equation of the venture of saving the life of Paran and the visiting of Mecca and Medina echoes averse of The Holy Quran (Chapter 5, Verse 32) that says that saving one innocent life is equal to saving the whole humanity. The irony lies in the fact that it is the same Quran that was used by Gulam Sarwar to instigate people to kill Hindus. In this way the writer is perhaps trying to shift focus from religion to the true Faith.

However, at the end, the exposure of their plan resulting in the death of Paran shows the futility of the efforts of Hashim. The writer did not overdo it in depicting reality. The death was obvious. The death was not of Paran, but of humanity. However, the effort of Hashim to save himself from the murderers of Paran to do away with the stigma of a 'Kafir' is the most thought-provoking action that questions our conscience on the validity of the human dimension of the term 'Kafir'. We could have easily remained kafirs for our brothers and sisters, for our country, for humanity, for love.

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