

Thwarted Dreams, Sacrifice and Benevolence in Meghe Dhaka Tara and Boatman

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Abstract

Survival rests on the pyre of someone's sacrifice. India's independence too, came at the cost of disintegration of territories which went on to dismantle the innocent lives of multitudes who had no say in the matter. Partition of 1947, based on the "Two Nation Theory" became a tortuous memory for the victims, who struggled to find their way amidst displacement, trauma and torture. Partition had far reaching impacts which broke people inside out, disillusioning the present and the future. This paper intends to probe into the lives of two protagonists, who negotiate their ways, trying to keep their dreams alive amidst the socio-economic crisis imposed by a hastily drawn border (Radcliffe line). While the partition saw inhuman massacre, rape, destruction, what kept the fire of humanity alive are the people like Nita, Faizal who sacrificed their dreams at the altar of others' well-being. Stressing times do unite people, but such times are witness to the innate self-centeredness rooted in human beings too - people who prioritise their own dreams and lusty desires at the cost of others' destruction. Acts of altruism go unnoticed, or are soon forgotten; the suppressed sighs and unspoken tears wet or harden one's soul in one dark corner, and hardly get the recognition they deserve. It is in these attempts and moments of sudden epiphany that we get a glimpse of what it means to be humane. This paper is an attempt to throw light on such characters who go on about their service making the world a better place to live in for others. People like them go against the tide, without caring about themselves. Our hearts melt at their sacrifice and it is in these exceptional acts of benevolence that our heart finds solace.

Keywords: Partition, sacrifice, women's plight, dreams, hope

Introduction

India's independence on 15th August 1947, on one hand, freed India from the shackles of British oppression, but on the other hand, plunged millions of people into despair. Instead of being freed in the true sense, India fell prey to the machinations of the British influence which pulled it apart on the lines of religion. Alok Bhalla, in his introduction to "Stories about the partition of India" writes, "The Partition of Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history." Within a few months, about "twelve million people" moved between India and Pakistan (Butalia, 1998). It brought about unspeakable trauma, misery, violence which find reflection in written history and fiction. The partition bore witness to the darker side of humanity, where the majoritarian groups wreaked havoc on the helpless. Wild frenzy was unleashed as women were abducted, raped and murdered. From being a proud resident of "Amar Sonar Bangla", people became refugees overnight. The same Hindu-Muslim who were neighbours, started to look at each other in suspicion; the freedom which was supposed to empower Indians and lend them an identity, backfired and made people homeless.

As each catastrophe plunges humanity into despair, what is worth mentioning is our innate ability to weave dreams and hope that our actions will yield results, validating our hopes and dreams: "Hope is a good thing. Probably the best of things." (Darabont, 1994) At times, dreams get thwarted when we sacrifice our wishes at the altar of others' welfare, which keeps the cycle of life alive - for everyone who gets something, someone must give up on something. We get glimpses of horror in Krishan Chander's *Peshawar Express*, Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Shobha Rao's *The Lost Ribbon* to name a few, "but even in those dark days the human spirit of compassion remained resilient." (Maini et al., 2009)

Besides Hindus and Sikhs, Muslims also exhibit instances of sacrifice and fellow-feeling during and post the communal violence of 1947 in Indian partition

fiction (Chakraborti, 2009). Amidst violence and displacement people showed resilience and the will power to dream and make something of their life. Ashish Nandy, an eminent scholar, records in his interviews with survivors of partition that approximately 25% of Muslims saved non-Muslims and vice-versa (Maini et al., 2009). Sacrifice which is an intrinsic element of Indianness finds reflection in the various partition narratives. It is at the cost of individuals like Juggut Singh in *Train to Pakistan*, Jhogru dom in *The Saviour*, communities survive. The paper explores how individuals' dreams are thwarted in their efforts to reinvigorate others' lives with reference to Ritwik Ghatak's film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Prafulla Roy's short story *Boatman*.

Meghe Dhaka Tara

Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star) directed by Ritwik Ghatak, chronicles the fate of a Bengali refugee family who migrated from East Bengal after the Indian Independence of 1947 and how they negotiate their way through economic hardships in the Government Refugee colony in the suburb of Calcutta (Chakraborti, 2009). It is an adaptation of Shaktipada Rajguru's Bengali novel *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. Ritwik Ghatak's film realistically underscores the impact of economic adversity, forced migration during the post-partition period and how it evoke the self-seeking tendency and coldness one can exhibit even to one's own family. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* doesn't throw light on the Hindus-Muslim riots, instead, it focuses on the soul-sucking nature of humans at the cost of others' ruin. The movie opens with Nita walking down the road when her slippers tear off. She is reluctant to pay heed to her needs in order to fulfill the little luxuries of her siblings but we notice little or almost no gratitude from the latter who are too busy to look after their own interests and whims. The eldest daughter of the household Nita pursues her M.A. and tutors students to support her struggling father, Sanat Master, to fend for a family of six. She dreams of a life when her eldest brother Shankar would become a renowned singer; her love interest Sanat would complete his Ph.D. and they would initiate their conjugal life. Nita's mother's bitter comments about Nita's insensitivity towards the family stings her, her fault – fulfilling the whims of her siblings.

Nita banks on optimism and visualizes a future when all her struggles will bear fruit but her plans are dismantled as the family is plunged to poverty when Nita's father encounters an accident and Nita forgoes her Post Graduate Education to become the family's breadwinner. As the weight of responsibilities outweigh her own dreams, we see her build castles in the air, hoping that one day Shankar and Sanat, the two men most dear to her would make up, in the near future, for all the sufferings she has to endure at the present. She goes on with her struggle as she stays true to her "ideals". As Nita becomes pre-occupied in nurturing the family and stalls her marriage with Sanat, we see how Nita's sister makes good use of the growing distance between Sanat and Nita to build her own home, on the sighs and cries of her own sister. Idealism and ethics take a backseat as Sanat gives up on his dreams of a Ph.D. in order to take up a job and kick start his marital life. Nita had once stood by Sanat, emotionally and financially, when he struggled to stand on his own, but she never got her due. Violence is not physically explicit here but acts of deceit from one's own bloodline stings deeper and wreaks havoc psychologically. Ghatak exemplifies how individuals go on perpetrating injustice or stay in denial in order to secure a future for them. (*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), n.d.)

Nita's mother is well aware of the tactics of her youngest daughter, Gita, wooing Nita's fiancé, Sanat, but does little to interrupt the courtship as Nita's presence in the family is of immense significance for the sustenance of the family. It isn't so that she doesn't sympathize with Nita but she can't help the circumstances as her own thwarted dreams and poverty have made her indifferent towards Nita's future aspirations. The child-like Nita who knew to smile at the trifling thoughts, slowly withers away as she finds herself alone in her struggle to sustain the family when Nita's brother, Montu meets with an accident at the factory. Montu had left to live in an accommodation outside the refugee colony so that he could live a life of his own away from the growing miseries of the family. Nita's mother sympathises with Montu's wishes but hardly pays any heed to Nita's desires. Nita, when detected with tuberculosis, deals with it on her own as she has no one to confide in. She goes to work and returns home in a mechanical manner, as she lives now, only to sustain the dependents. When Sanat regrets his actions and shares his thoughts with Nita, Nita's

ultimate despondency finds way in the words: “Ki ar bolbo, akhon to sudhu kaj aar kaj” (There is nothing to say anymore; now there is only work).

When Shankar returns from Bombay, having secured fame, it is too late to revive a withered Nita as she is on the last vestiges. Shankar fulfills her long-cherished dream of visiting a hill - he sends her to the Reid Chest Hospital in Shillong for her treatment. Nita, whose life has been stripped off any hope of a happily married life, is seen to find solace in the amorous letters of Sanat which had once aroused within her the fire of hope and desire. Her heart-rending cry “I want to live!” is the ultimate resistance or protest against the perpetual mental and physical toil which she had to bear silently day after day. It is only when she is on the verge of death that she is relieved from all her struggles. The smile which she exudes at the beginning of the film, upon receiving Sanat’s letter, transitions to the climactic cry of regret and restlessness. Shankar comments in the film, “You are a fool, Nita. People who cry at others’ pain suffer lifelong.”

And it is on this premise of suffering, the survival of some depend. We are reminded of the uncountable people who stepped forward, thwarted their dreams and suffered silently in order to set flight to the dreams of others. “Je raat e mor duar guli bhanglo jhore...sob je hoye galo kalo, nibhe galo diper alo” (That night when the storm shattered my shutter...all turned dark and the lamps extinguished) sums up Nita’s life in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. (Choudhury, n.d.)

Boatman (Majhi)

The protagonist of Prafulla Roy’s *Boatman* is Fazal, who is saving bit by bit in order to meet the demands of Salima’s father. If he fails to pay the ‘mehr’ [groom’s dowry as per Islamic tradition] of one hundred and forty rupees, her beloved, Salima would be wed to another suitor: “In order to be able to buy the desires and dreams of his entire youth, he rowed incessantly.” (Basu, 2021) He couldn’t imagine a life without her, and to this end, he toiled with utmost dedication

The story is set-in present-day Bangladesh, at the Sirajdigha jetty, from where the Hindus are frantically fleeing for their life, and it is under this context Fazal gets closer to fructifying his dreams as he gets to earn more by ferrying Hindus across the river. Like Meghe Dhaka Tara's protagonist, Nita, Fazal too was a modest person. He didn't have elaborate plans about his future. Salima's presence in his life meant heavenly bliss for him. At the backdrop of chaos and massacre, which saw humanity's bestiality in the name of frenzied communalism, Fazal is seen inching closer to fulfilling his dream, as Yasin Shikdar and a woman clad in burqa boarded his boat. Yasin is willing to pay him as much as fifteen rupees as he is too eager to cross the river with his newly acquired possession. As he rows and proceeds towards Char Ismail, he dreams of how he would fling the one hundred forty rupees at Bajaan, and rescue the apple of his eyes. Time and again, his fantasies are disrupted by the brewing tensions on the boat. Yasin Shikdar tries to force himself on the widower - who has just lost his weaver husband at the hands of Shikdar. The woman's cries go unheard as he threatens her - 'I'm not going to let you die so easily. I'll murder you bit by bit.'

Shikdar has murdered her husband and has clad her in a burkha so that he can easily pass her on as his wife. The communal riots were witness to the sexual savagery inflicted on women and Shikdar too attempted to do the same. His animalistic instincts bare its fangs: "I had to bear three injuries from your husband in order to be able to grab you." Patriarchy has more than often deemed women's bodies as properties, and wars worsen women's perennial predicament of her body being torn apart. Women's bodies become easy targets of revenge as it serves as a way of humiliation and dismantling the moral and pride of the men of their community. Women, thus, became doubly marginalized, because of the partition and their gender.

It was a moment of ordeal, whether to listen to one's own desires or to cater to the pleas of the miserable; finally, Fazal gave into the calls of the woman's pleas and pierced Shikdar with his harpoon. He also parted with his hard-earned money in order to ensure that the woman reached Kolkata easily: "His heart trembled a little. And then forcing himself to turn his back on his own life, he dived into the sea of humanity to buy a ticket for Kolkata."

What prompted Fazal to help this stranger at the cost of a well-settled conjugal life is probably the guilt, the premise on which he would have set his rosy life: “How many times, in the scheming darkness of the nights, would people like Yasin appear on his boat, before he was able to build a home with Salima in a quiet corner under the shade of a tree on the banks of the Dhaleshwari?”

What is worth noting is how Nita and Salima are valued by their respective families for monetary benefits. Both of their much anticipated marriages are at stake, the former in her quotidian grind to make ends meet in her family, the latter is a bait for her Bajaan, who is willing to sell her to anyone, provided they pay him seven score rupees. Fazal sacrificed and thwarted not only his but also Salima’s dream of getting married to him, in an attempt to restore the life of the wronged widower. Fazal’s epiphany and his act of kindness is a testimony that acts of empathy are the sparks which redeem humanity and repose faith in us to trust humanity.

Conclusion:

Both evil and light co-exist in our hearts. We easily give in to our dark primal instincts, shrouding hope and survival. Whether it be religious texts like Gita, Bible, etc., or be it fairytales and moral stories, time and again, they remind us about alighting the latent good in humans in order to propel civilization ahead. Our hearts are broken as we witness Fazal’s and Nita’s dreams perish. They represent the voices of thousands of anonymous victims, whose contributions are never acknowledged. They are poor socio-economically, but not at heart; they silently bear the brunt of unforeseen circumstances, to lend wings to others.

Human civilization or life on earth is based on the concept of sacrifice. For one to live, the other must immolate oneself. Not all dreams see the day of life. Yet, it is the most natural thing to find solace in the hope of achieving our dreams. What rends our heart is not the dismantling of dreams but how others' selfish, materialistic acts dig the grave where carefully woven dreams of the humane reach their ultimate end. So that the many Nitas and Fazals don’t suffer, we must look beyond our egoistical self, contributing to the little joys which each person deserves to get. Why

should goodness be limited to the mere few? Let's join hands and repose the faith of humanity making the world a better place, as far as feasible.

At a time when communal riots are raging once more in our neighbouring country, it is time we look back at our blood laced history, and take measures to halt the human crisis instigated by religious differences. Historical narratives bear witness to human made horror, but time and again, our blind fanaticism has made us recreate the same gory mistake. Hatred spews more hate, tearing apart families, identities and human potential. It is only by arousing the humanitarian values of thoughtfulness, peace and harmony can we really term ourselves as truly "modern". It takes years to build and nurture a society; we must rise above our narrow intentions to build an India which stands strong with its diverse culture, religion, and values.

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