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Communal Riots and Our Literature*

The communal riots of 1947 constitute an enormous national tragedy for Muslims. It has touched every one of us, some more some less, but no life has escaped its effect. Perhaps such an event is unprecedented in world history. Because of the proximity of the incident, many authors wrote about the riots as a duty, others as a harrowing personal experience. In any case, in the space of the past ten or eleven months a goodly number of short stories and poems have appeared on the subject. Some readers find them satisfactory, others complain that our writers have ignored the Muslim point of view, and still others feel that it is best that writers steer clear of adopting an unambiguous point of view and just concentrate on the hope for a glorious future for mankind.

Well, there are opinions and opinions—always. However, the questions that needed to be asked have not been asked: can such events, in and of themselves and purely as events, ever be the subject of literature, quite apart from their importance in the history of mankind or of a nation; what effect might they have in shaping life several centuries hence; what stimulation might they provide for someone to reflect on human nature or other major questions; and how might they help a philosopher in reaching a theoretical conclusion?

Even though it may be hard, we must put our personal and collective afflictions aside when looking for answers to such questions. After all, writers are a hard-hearted lot. Human history goes back a few million years. God knows what all has happened and what may yet come to pass. If literature should show deference, how many individuals or groups should it show deference to—is there no end? If we want to find a truly satisfactory answer to the question, we need to put aside our sense of victimhood, at least for a while.

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*"Fasādāt aur Hamārā Adab," from Muḥammad Ḥasan ʿAskarī, *Insān aur Ādmī* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1976), 139–49.

Dates of authors added by the translator.

We can make our exploration somewhat easier by picking a similar cataclysmic event and looking at the literary responses to it. World War I produced a lot of literature. How much of it is alive today? W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), with the ruthlessness and granite objectivity of a true writer in regard to WWI, unequivocally stated that he had not included a single poem about the War in his new collection because passive sympathy is not a subject of literature. It is worth remembering here that another poet who wrote about the War stated in no uncertain terms that the balance of his poetry sprang from its pain.

The point is this: literature articulates emotional experiences and passivity is not an experience, though it may be called a "feeling." If riots mean murder and mayhem and carnage, physical pain and misery, the inescapable conclusion is that they cannot be viable subjects of literature, regardless of all the anguish we may feel on account of our emotional attachment. The most significant literature about national catastrophes and the physical suffering of an entire group is found in some parts of the Old Testament. But what makes them literature is not their account of the slaughter and plunder of countless Jews, the rape of their women, or the banishment of a whole nation. What makes them literature is something quite different. Jews believed that they were God's chosen ones and the object of His love and favor, and yet they had to endure all this. The telling contradiction between belief and reality caused immense spiritual torment for the Jews and their inner selves were ravaged by the conflict between doubt and certainty, hope and hopelessness, fear and boldness, rebellion and loyalty. It was this complex spiritual experience of the Jewish people that conferred upon the lament of their Hebrew prophets the status of the loftiest literature. Hence, the subject of these sections of the Old Testament is not the trials and tribulations of a group but its collective experience.

Of course this does not mean that writers shouldn't write about such events even though they fall outside the thematic parameters of literature. Writers are not producing literature all the time. They have two kinds of responsibilities: as writers and as members of a group. No doubt the first of these is a writer's primary responsibility. However, there are times when a writer is obliged to attend to his second responsibility, which does not go against the primary at all.

To understand this better let's consider the attitude of writers of different nationalities during World War II. In Russia, writers took to their secondary responsibility with such gusto and verve that they quite forgot their primary responsibility; indeed they started calling the product of their secondary responsibility pure literature. During the War years the

duty of a Russian writer was defined as praising the nation, the armies, the character of their soldiers and presenting the Germans in a negative light in all respects. Now, it is true that the Russian nation faced a massive catastrophe and whatever help its writers offered was perfectly understandable, but it is unbecoming of a writer to ignore his primary allegiance and become a slave to a secondary purpose, regardless of how noble that purpose might be. Even if we want Pakistani literature to reflect the highest ideals of Islam, this Russian attitude is hardly the one to light the way. Muslims are exhorted not to hesitate to testify against themselves if a situation calls for it, so even from an Islamic point of view, literature that praises Muslims cannot be acceptable. The Russian paradigm is not just bankrupt as a model, it is downright misleading.

British writers provide our second example. Since military duty had become incumbent during the War, writers were also conscripted. One had to fly bombers, the other had to join the fire brigade. It is entirely possible that they acquitted themselves willingly and with an unflinching sense of duty, but, as far as I am aware, none of them, at least no sensible writer among them, tried to serve their nation through their pen. One might say that this was perhaps due to the fact that the Germans were unable to set foot in England and the population were spared the humiliation which became the lot of some Russian regions and France. Had this been England's lot too, they would likely have written something in defense of their country. At any rate, the War affected their lives by filling it with a sense of vacuity and desolation. The birds, the flowers were all gone; dear ones were lost and scattered; and incredible restrictions were placed on personal freedom. The loss of mental and personal comforts tormented them, such that they began to moan in memory of the old life that was so exuberant and full of gaiety. In short, the attitude of British writers was quite passive. Such passivity cannot create a vibrant literature. Mere feelings of annoyance, dissatisfaction, and malaise cannot serve literature for long. Even crazy, intense hatred can be more productive than such passivity. So while one can praise British writers for keeping their true writerly status intact even as they actively served the nation, one must also admit that the kind of intellectual and emotional experience they went through was not terribly worthwhile from a strictly literary point of view. Even as they helped the nation, their minds were never free from the fear of further restrictions that the country might impose on their freedom in the days to come. This attitude betrays a lack of confidence in their status as writers. The thought of what kind of treatment the country might subject them to in the future should not have bothered them while they were serving it. They should have resolved instead that if, after the

war, the nation did impose restrictions on its writers, they would fight *against* the nation just as energetically and relentlessly. At least British writers should have considered literature important enough to defend it without any fear of the consequences, but they admitted defeat without putting up a fight. They just assumed that if the nation treated them severely, they would find themselves entirely defenseless.

By contrast, French writers adopted a very balanced and dignified attitude. They did not sacrifice either of their responsibilities. This is because they never confounded the two responsibilities and never lost sight of the difference between them. Now, it is true that, just as the War started, one or two major writers left France thinking they had no country, they were neither for France nor for Germany. But serious writers did not call their intentions into question, nor think of them as cowards or traitors. On the contrary, they continued to respect them. Apart from this smattering, the rest of the writers opposed the Germans in every way they possibly could. They even incited people to rebellion. In short, they did not flinch from rendering whatever assistance they could in their nation's hour of need. At least the major writers, in spite of their passion for their country, did not allow themselves to betray for a moment the ideals and values they had professed all along, or consider themselves free from their obligation to literature after they had served the nation, or regard as literature something they had only written to arouse a feeling of freedom among the people. The following minor incident is revealing of the mental equilibrium of the French writers. To resist the Germans and to continue their literary activity during this cataclysmic period, some writers started producing a series of underground books with the title *Les Éditions de Minuit*. When France became free, these writers were given a major literary award but they declined to accept it saying that everything they had written was simply to serve the nation. It was not literature, nor had they written it as literature, so how could they accept a literary award? During the War even French writers who were far removed from politics and considered devotees of "pure literature" wrote propaganda. André Gide (1869–1951), who never shied away from speaking the truth, not even when it would have been prudent and expedient to do so, and who always preferred a reclusive life over fanfare and hullabaloo, was so overcome by freedom that he burst forth from his quiet corner, though he still kept praising the Germans. French writers participated wholeheartedly in their country's fight for freedom, but dissociated themselves from politics and returned to their writing as soon as the War ended. While the country was struggling to stay alive, they did not allow literature to get in the way of their national duty, but when that deathly moment had passed they did

not allow any kind of politics to strangle literature. Today, when writers everywhere are wondering what to write and what not to write—and who knows whether an atomic bomb might just do away with the world tomorrow—French writers continue their creative work with supreme indifference, as though they are immortal.

Studying these three attitudes vis-à-vis death and destruction closely, I seem to like that of the French writers best. And really, what other attitude could there be for a true writer in the face of national catastrophes. When the country's life is threatened, a writer reacts no differently than a cabbie. The country can enlist both, and neither should hesitate to render assistance. But once that perilous moment has passed, it is time for a writer to become indifferent to the country. In ordinary circumstances, a writer belongs only to his literary vocation. Even the mightiest power cannot demand his loyalty. In short, a writer must know precisely how to act at a given time—as a citizen or as a writer.

Unfortunately this difference is not clearly understood in Urdu. Our criticism keeps confusing the two roles of the writer. When it is demanded of the writer to write about the riots, it is never made clear in which of his two capacities he should approach the subject—as an ordinary citizen or as a writer. As a writer he cannot write about the riots, simply because riots are not a viable literary subject, but as an ordinary citizen he can, though in that case he will be writing from a particular point of view, which will be entirely unliterary. He will be adopting some political or social point of view and promoting it in his writing. This is not such a bad thing. I have already accepted that there are times when a writer should not shy away from offering non-literary assistance. The trouble arises when our writers who have produced fiction about the riots insist on holding to a literary point of view. If some noble sentiment has compelled them to adopt a particular position, they should not be ashamed of owning up to that position.

Let's now look at Urdu short stories that deal with the riots to see what kind of political or social outlook they espouse. Our evaluative standard will be to explore whether a writer has distorted reality in adopting his specific point of view. Does he believe what he says? For even when someone writes for a non-literary purpose, he cannot be absolved of the responsibility to speak the truth. A writer does not serve the nation by supporting it with lies; rather he serves it through writing that creates certainty and confidence in the populace when the nation is facing a critical moment and he believes his nation is in the right. Regardless of which point of view is adopted, a writer has to speak the truth in all circumstances. We shall employ this touchstone in our analysis of Urdu short

stories on the riots.

So far, the bulk of such stories support a few specific ideas more or less. The basic theme is that the barbarity witnessed during the riots was terribly heinous. The purport of such stories is to create aversion toward that barbarity and, along with it, explore its cause. Generally such barbarism is not found among humans; it was a product of the political conditions and the hatred for which the British were responsible. They had created it to promote their own political interests. The partition of India was one of their machinations. Had there been no partition, there would have been no rioting. Hindus and Muslims would have lived together as brothers. It is hoped that this hatred will soon evaporate and brothers will again embrace each other. Actually, some writers believe that India and Pakistan will again become one country. In such stories the writer bends over backwards not to assign blame to either of the two protagonists and pegs it, instead, on the English. The result is that atrocities are shown in equal measure on both sides, without the least regard for what transpired in East Punjab—one would search a dictionary in vain to find the right words to describe it.

Well then, this is more or less the intellectual background of these short stories. Their conceptual webbing is so weak that the writer himself would hardly believe it. Only a sly or artless person could believe that the hatred was merely an offshoot of British politics. Even if we suppose the writer's intention is pure, the fact that he himself does not believe what he is recording, and that he knows he is deluding himself, let alone others, still remains. This kind of writing, all of it, lacks honesty. It is lifeless and hollow, devoid even of a modicum of rhetorical eloquence because the entire conceptual framework is a fabrication. These stories are not only false, they have a dangerous aspect to them. They are bubbling with vitriolic propaganda against Muslims and Pakistan. It is possible all of this is unintentional and quite innocent, but the cumulative effect goes against Muslims. For one thing, Muslims are blamed disproportionately for causing the riots; for another, Partition is identified as the root cause of unrest and anomie, while the fact is that Partition, that is, the establishment of Pakistan, has been the most cherished political ideal of Muslims. These stories attempt to create skepticism among Muslims with regard to the basic principles behind the creation of Pakistan.

Our writers (that is, those who support Pakistan) have made no reasonable attempt to counter this "literary" onslaught. After all, we might also try, at least now and then, to serve the nation a bit, but this does not mean that we should malign India and spread intolerance toward it. Let others indulge in name-calling. We should mind our own business. All we

want from our writers is for them to tell us what we have been through and why. We do not need elegies and laments about hundreds of thousands of Muslims who were massacred. In and of itself, even the death of a million people does not mean much. Indeed, if five million of our men die as self-respecting human beings battling tyrants, this is something to celebrate. But it would be a tragedy if even five of our men fled the battlefield to save themselves. We only want our writers to subject our characters to a relentless scrutiny and tell us what our tragedy has been. Tell us, does our character measure up to our traditions? We do expect at least this bit of national service from our writers. Not a critique of others but of our own nation.

Alas, thus far our writers have not acquitted themselves of this responsibility. Just one little book, recently published, is all there is to show, Qudratu'l-Lāh Shahāb's (1917–1986) *Yā Khudā!* (Oh, God!). This is an invaluable short fiction work, and I am inclined to go so far as to recommend it to every single literate Pakistani as *must reading*. It begins with a preface by Mumtāz Shīrīn (1924–1973) in which she has analyzed literature focusing on the riots. She has demonstrated how writers, swept away by the wrong kind of humanity and justice, have tended to lie even to themselves and have deliberately avoided presenting the reality they experienced and observed, thus harming both literature and Pakistan, because some people are spreading propaganda against Pakistan in the guise of literature. Shīrīn Ṣāḥiba must be complimented for her frankness and intellectual honesty. Shahāb Ṣāḥib does not depict an act of human compassion in his story. He has not called the atrocities and cruelty committed by others to account as much as he has the perverseness of Pakistanis themselves. If his book is against anyone, it is the Pakistanis. The tragic story of its female protagonist Dilshād is not drawn from the barbarity of the Sikhs alone, her real tragedy lies in finding Pakistanis so terribly different from what she had imagined them to be. Shahāb Ṣāḥib has portrayed this tragic aspect of her life with rare artistic finesse. Whatever vitriol he could pack into his irony is expended on himself, not on others. The book is not devoid of a certain measure of "sentimentality," but since we are examining it from the perspective of "goal-oriented literature," such an objection would be out of place here. Shahāb Ṣāḥib has been both daring and honest in his criticism of the moral character of Pakistanis. If Pakistani writers continue with the same fearlessness and honesty with which Pakistani literature is beginning, I see a great future for literature in Pakistan.

A second sign for Pakistan's possibly great literary future comes from the short stories of Saʿādat Ḥasan Manṭō (1912–1955) that are written against

the backdrop of the communal riots. In truth, they are not about the riots at all; if anything, they are about "man." Their subject is man in particular circumstances. I feel a sense of pride in discovering that it is a Pakistani writer who has risen above the others in treating the experiences of the riots in a befitting literary manner, diverting his mind from creating sensationalism to produce a true literary work. Rising above all manner of interests, Manṭō has only sought human meaning and truth—which is precisely what literature is all about. ❑

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon