

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES: REPRESENTING PARTITION IN BASTI AND SUNLIGHT ON A BROKEN COLUMN

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ABSTRACT

In postmodernism history is being re-written, challenged and renegotiated on account of its lop-sided aspect. Basically, history is written through the perspective of rulers leaving many significant things under the curtain. Taking into account the partition of India as a subject for study one can observe that it has been looked at through multiple perspectives. For instance, it has been observed through Hindu perspective, Muslim perspective, Sikh perspective and so on. Although writers tried their best to delineate this historical event with an artistic way, yet coherence between the story and the form is required to make it a grand work of art. Subsequently, a few writers tried to employ narrative techniques in their works to make their works more interesting and technical. Even many writers have proved themselves to be skilled in handling the story by employing different narrative techniques. But historical events like partition of India require many techniques to make it justified. So the present paper is an attempt to explore multiple narrative techniques used in *Basti* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. It will also focus on how these narrative techniques justify the works taken for the study.

The oldest word for 'narrative' in Sanskrit is '*akhyana*' meaning an act of making something well-known through oral transmission. The latter-day Sanskrit literary critics define two classes of narrative, one called *akhyayika* which is based on a plot well known from epics or historical records, and the other *Katha* which is based on a plot imagined by the writer.

Frankly speaking, most of us remember having listened to stories in one form or another right from early childhood. Many of us used to sit beside a priest, who would punctuate his verses with oft-repeated episodes from the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana* to illustrate the moral of his verses. Certainly, we would remember having eagerly awaited the arrival of the evening to listen to the grandmother's tales. As the time passes and we grow up, our interest in the forms of narrative persists. With the attainment of knowledge through schools, colleges and other institutions we wish to involve in a great variety of narratives. In his introductory article in a special number of *New Literary History* devoted to narratives and narratology, Roland Barthes captures not only the ubiquitousness but also the infinite variety of the narrative as crucial human activity. "There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulate language, and an ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics history, tragedy, suspense drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance, stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups have their stories, and very often these stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds: narrative remains largely unconnected with good or bad literature. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural" (Barthes 273).

Furthermore, narrative is a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected series of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee. A narrative will consist of a set of events



(the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse), in which the events are selected and arranged in a meticulous order (the plot). The category of narratives includes both the shortest accounts of events (e.g the cat sat on mat, or a brief news item) and the longest historical or biographical works, diaries etc., as well as novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms. Besides, Gerald Prince also defines narrative as, "The representation of one or more real or fictive events communicated by one, two or several narrator to one, two or several narratees" (Prince 58).

TIME AND SPACE IN NARRATIVE

Temporal and spatial relationships are quite essential to our understanding of narratives and go beyond the specification of a date and a location. Narratives unfold in time, and the past, present, and the future of a given event or action, while the characters who populate narrative texts move around, inhabit and experience different spaces and locations, allowing readers to construct complex worlds in their minds. Moreover, to read a narrative is to engage with an alternative world that has its own temporal and spatial structures (Ryne 175). Narratives can be divided into different temporal and spatial zones. There are chiefly two types of narratives - realist and non realist. In a realist narrative, for example, a narrator appears to be looking back on his/her past life and cannot step back in time to intervene in events, any more than a protagonist can know what the author does outside the pages of the text. In case, access from one world to another is blocked by their separation in time and space (in the latter case, access may also be prevented by the fictional status of the protagonist). In non-realist texts, of course, the traversing of spatio-temporal barriers is possible, and is indeed a feature of postmodern narratives where the reader's recognition of the transgression is part of the reading experience.

In fact, time and space are more than background elements in narrative; they are part of its fabric, affecting our basic understanding of a narrative text and of the protocols, of different narrative genres. They profoundly influence the way in which we build mental images of what we read. Time has always played an important role in theories of narrative, given that we tend to think of stories as sequences of events. "Space has often been set in opposition to time, associated with static description which slows up and intrudes into the narration of dynamic events. However, this opposition fails to recognize how far time and space are bound up with each other in narrative, as Bakhtin has shown" (Bakhtin 298).

In some narratives, events are told strictly in the order in which they occur. But they may also be told out of order, for example using flashback to fill in an important part of a character's past. Variations in duration can be used to show which scenes are most important, a scene which is narrated more than once may show a narrator's obsession or it may, in a detective story for example, reveal different views of some events by different characters.

Many narrative texts employ flashback as a matter of course, in order to fill in the past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts. Flashback can be more than textual housekeeping, though. More generally, the experience of reading calls for us to back and re-evaluate events in the light of current circumstances.

Besides, the idea of perspective, or point of view, in narratology includes indications in the text of both physical angles of view and the subjective attitudes and emotions of individuals; further, the former can often signal the latter. The physical and psychological points of view of different protagonists can be an important structuring device.

In other words, narrative technique, which is also referred to as literary technique, is the way a writer uses tools and techniques in his literary works to develop the story. Generally, it consists of plot, character, figure of speech and point of view collectively bringing forth a new shape to a literary work. Among the methods of narrating a story in



a novel there are chiefly three ways which are most common, and most familiar to novel readers. One way is for the author himself to tell the story. The author, being omniscient, can narrate the story about his characters in a clearly intelligible manner. Some authors, who adopt this method, also offer their own observations and comments on the characters and events, thus intruding into the story. Another method is to make the chief character or the hero tell the story, using the first person 'I' while interpreting the whole story. The third method is for an author to introduce an observer who becomes the narrator of the story. Analyzing first person narrative, M.H. Abrams observes that "in a first-person narrative, the narrator speaks as 'I', and is to a great or lesser degree a participant in the story, or else is the protagonist of the story" (Abrams 233).

Besides, one can have modern methods through which story can be best narrated. These methods include stream of consciousness, use of diary, letter, and memory and so on. All these contemporary methods of narrating story became vogue of the day. Consequently, most of the writers tried to adopt them as a form of narrative in their works. In the context of partition, the narratives of the partition literature offer insights into the nature of individual experience, and break the silence in the collective sphere. Trends in present Partition research represent a shift away from the parleys and betrayals in the domain of High Politics, towards an emphasis on the subalterns as both victims and perpetrators of violence, the instigation behind the widespread rioting, the resulting psychological trauma, and most importantly, the feminist concern with recovering lost stories of sexually violated and abducted women during the partition. Even Naunidhi Kaur endorsed that the early works on partition concentrate on high politics, with most of the writers emphasizing the roles and politics tactics of the state actors that is the British and the Congress and Muslim League leaderships. This approach changed in the 1990s, with emphasis being shifted to oral histories, letters, interviews, diaries of the survivors in understanding partition (Kaur 31). Thus this chapter aims at focusing on the technique used by the four Muslim writers in their respective works. It is an attempt to explore the ways they narrated the story and probe their measurement which provided to their works an artistic shape. The present paper also focuses on differences in the narrative strategies of the select writers while depicting theme of partition.

One such novel of Intizar Husain that has also been taken for the present study is *Basti* which attracted the attention of the world eagerly. It originally published in Urdu in 1979, is one of the powerful novels about Partition and its aftermath. It is only its English translation by Frances Pritchett published by Oxford University Press, Delhi in 2007, it acquired wider acclaim and bouquets from the reading public both in our country and abroad. Considered a simply structured, multilayered narrative, the novel about the post independence Partition of India and Pakistan and is the emergence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. Partition is the traumatic experience of all. Those living in the North and West Bengal are the worst hit. *Basti* is set in a number of places real and imaginary; Lahore and Delhi, Rupnagar and Vyaspur. Son of the Maulana Abba Jan of Rupnagar, Zakir is the chief protagonist. The Maulana is deeply religious, a Shia, who stoutly opposed all innovations. Khvajah who has two sons Salamat and Karamatis Abba Jan's close friend who reveres him most. Bi Amma is Zakir's paternal grandmother. Ammi Jan's sister Khalah Jan has two daughters Tahnima, and Sabirah all of whom come to Rupnagar. Zakir has five close friends, Afzal, Surrender, Ajmal, Irfan and Salamat with whom he shares many problems and have discussions. The whole story is depicted through the protagonist, Zakir who migrated to Lahore in Pakistan during 1947 and later to Bangladesh. But migration taught him a lot of things. At this Husain observes "In those story days of 1947, it was not simply a question of migrating from old to a new country." (Aziz,2)⁵⁴ Elaborating more, the story starts from a small town of Utter Pradesh (India) when Zakir, a typical *Shiite* along with his parents, moves to Pakistan in 1947, leaving behind not just an idyllic childhood, but also this childhood sweetheart Sabirah, a cousin of his. Sabirah never comes to Pakistan, even when Muslim life is threatened in India and her own immediate relatives emigrate to what was then East Pakistan. She never marries, nor does Zakir. He is in love with Sabirah, but lacks the will



to either call or fetch her from India. There are references to Muslim South Asian history throughout the novel: the 1857 war of independence from British Raj, the creation of Pakistan in 1947 the 1965 war between India and Pakistan: and finally the 1971 political disintegration of Pakistan with the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. The novel ends with this last event. Husain considers all these happenings to be the results of partition of India during 1947. The political disturbances are the backdrop for the tribulations of the characters in the novel where folk stories, epic and political turmoil people suffered in the past are dealt with in detail. In short, the novelist tries to highlight the terror of war, communal harmony before partition.

Intizar Husain in the novel tried to employ multiple techniques depicting the characters and situations in a vivid manner. First and foremost, he seems to apply stream of consciousness in delineating some of the aspects of the novel. Before going forward, it is necessary to know the proper explanation of this literary term. Explicating stream of consciousness, Chris Baldick points out that the "stream of consciousness is the continuous flow of sense perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories in the human mind; or a literary method of representing such a blending of mental processes in fictional characters" (Baldick 318). This 20th century modern technique has tried to transform the art of narrative almost in every respect. In the novel, Zakir, the protagonist constantly mediates and modifies his past in accordance with the significance and nature of his present. Zakir teaches history and is professionally dealing and actually grappling with the linearity of time flowing uninterruptedly. On the other hand, psychologically he confronts the discontinuities and ruptures juxtaposed with the images and experiences of the past flashing on the screen of his mind. His sense of personal history calls for a fundamental rethinking about historiography. Problematizing his experiences of history, he thinks,

How boring it is teaching history to boys. Other people's history can be read comfortably, the way a novel can be read. But my own history? I am on the run from my own history and catching my breath in the present Escapist. But the merciless present pushes us back again toward our history. The mind keeps taking. (qtd. in Arora, 224)

The stream of consciousness oscillates between the so-called past and his present, blurring all divisions of time.

The inevitable question then is how he is going to come out of the hypnotic nostalgia of the past which presents itself to him repeatedly in the form of Rupnagar, literally meaning, the city of beauty. The author could have after all accorded it the actual name of a city in India. But then, he needed to emphasize the happy memory of the social and natural harmony of that pre-partition town through the name Rupnagar. Partition has disrupted this harmony and ironically, it is the memory of this disruption that brings him back to his now, connecting him with his present, twenty five years later. This use of memory became the right tool in delineating partition artistically. What is memory? How it functions should be clear before proceeding further. Memory is the power of retention. It is the storehouse of imagination collecting material during past and present in a leisurely moment. It includes events and remembrances observed with the fancy. As fancy is a mode of memory "emancipated from the order of time and space which received all its materials made from law of association" (Cudden 306). Therefore this use of memory became one of the most effective tools of the novelist to present the inner and the surface of the novel. Likewise, the title of the novel is Basti which justifies its existence. Generally speaking, Basti refers to the temporary residence which changes from time to time. Mega Dictionary observes that "Basti is an inhabited place; colony; a dwelling population" (Rizvi 568). Husain chose to call his famous novel Basti, a word that can refer to any place where groups of people live, from a neighborhood to a city. It is the author who had to spend his days in camps, a new place in Vyaspur and earlier in Rupnagar. All the events of partition take place in Zakir's memory and imagination alone, as he moves among the times and places of his personal and cultural history.



Another form of narration in the novel is Diary which became the true source of events that occurred during 1971 war. The diary as a narrative device is very significant. It is the fact that peeping into someone else's pain (in the form of diary) imparts the narrative with a sense of torturous immediacy. Diary indicates that the partition trauma not only survived but also was deliberately kept as a closely guarded emotive testimony long after the event was over. Besides, Diary constitutes only an extra authorial point of view. This way he or she is able to distance him from its melodramatic outbursts, yet at the same time incorporates these in the narrative. In the novel, diary is applied as a technique to explore the events of the past in order to give a realistic shape or ring to the events. The diary form in *Basti* is used to convey two things: the horror of the war suffered by the people; and Zakir's nature, his dreams, visions, and his remembrances of the epics, history, folktales. The roads, the vehicles, the railway platforms, the Shiraz-all portray shock and pain; Zakir wonders where people are going. He has his own thoughts of the jataka tales and Buddha's subtle teachings. Zakir, the protagonist feels while witnessing the events of 1971 war:

The primary point of writing this diary is that during the long wartime nights it will help me discipline my distracted mind, which suffers from insomnia and wanders restlessly all over; it will help me put my mind on a single track and protect myself from confusion of thought. But now I see another advantage of it as well I shall be writing my wartime autobiography.... I ought to preserve the record of my lies and my cowardice. (*Basti* 125)

Besides, like the diary the novelist also employs the letter as a technique to explain the emotions and happenings in the novel. It is Zakir who receives a letter from his friend Surender who lived at Rupnagar in India. It is interesting to note that the novelist makes the letter as a part of the novel by placing it among the pages of the novel to impart authenticity to the narrative. For instance, the letter appears in the novel in this manner:

Yar Zakir!
I first send you the usual
Salutation! I am fine, and
I hope everything is well with
you too....
Surender. (74)

Though the novel seems to cover a span of only a few months in the life of Zakir, in effect it brings into itself the cultural backdrop of centuries of Muslim history dating from 1857 and move on to 1947, and then to 1965 and finally to the 1971 disintegration of Pakistan. Gradually Rupnagar becomes a vague and distant reality with the new slogan "Crush India" coming in "like a whirlwind." India emerged as the other, getting defined through hatred, going translation. While Rupnagar which also identifies with Zakir's beloved, Sabirah, who did not come away to Pakistan, the political entity called 'India' became a distant and something to be reckoned with. But then, for Rupnagar, Zakir at least has a prayer: "If something happened to his city how could I bear it?" (167). All the happenings come to surface through flashback which is one of the modern techniques used by the 20th century novelists like Husain.

There is a great difference between the Hindus and Muslims in tradition, in history and in their attitude towards life political, social and economic. The Muslims derive their inspiration from the *Quran* and the Hindus from the *Vedas*. The Muslims have got their traditions from the Prophet, the Caliph and Imams, while the Hindus have inherited them from the Ramayana and the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita*. Similarly, the author tries to employ the stories of Hindus, Muslims and Budhas religions in delineating his story. He never hesitates to employ even Hindu stories in employing as technique to tell the story of the novel. Husain observes that "my interest in exploring the relationship of Islam to India's past led me to read the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Vedas*, and the entire tradition of story telling in India. I read the *Panchtantra*, *Katha Sarit Sagar*, *Raital Pachisse*. I read these not only as a writer of fiction but as a person interested in the Hind-Islamic culture" (Husain 245). The novelist's use of Arabian Nights and Katha-sarit-



sagara as a technique makes him stand outside the crowd of twentieth century writers. Intizar Husain observes while conversing with Asif Farruki that in *Basti* "Then comes the other reference, to the Jataka tales of Mahatma Budha that are like a circular novel. He is telling stories, but he goes on telling stories- Mahatma Budha does not tell a long *dastan*, but he goes on telling stories, all in the exact same style. One story, another story, and in exactly the same manner they are all joined together to become a circular novel, in my opinion. It is a world that has its own magic" (qtd. in Bhalla 100) about the ill-effects of conflicts and disintegration. It is the writer's attempt to make the novel readable by employing this technique in the novel to make it interesting. Owing to these multiple tales and fables he tried to convince the masses by making use of multiple textualities. Thus, Husain tried to create a new method of delineating the story of his novel.

Basti has been used as a metaphor bringing forth a state of mind of the novelist which wanders from one place to another. It was partition which broke the hearts of many, Husain was also among them. Since that time for Muslims there was no permanent home where they could live peacefully. In the novel Zakir is shown as a wanderer who geographically wanders from Rupnagar to Vyaspur and psychologically, from Karbala to Ayodhya on the other hand.

In addition to all that in the novel, the novelist employed first person narrative to explain the happenings of the past. Zakir, who is the prime character, finds expression through the first person 'I'. Here, he seems to be an omniscient narrator keeping himself away from the action. In the very beginning of the novel, he is revealed as a story teller and as the story moves forwards he becomes the part of the story. The novelist gave Zakir many roles to accomplish his ability. Zakir plays all roles i.e. a narrator, a protagonist, a historian and a mouthpiece of the novelist in a very vivid manner. His main objective behind it was to divulge the real happenings of the partition which have been painful to the whole humanity, especially Muslims like him.

Sunlight on a Broken Column is one of the few partition novels which present a reasonable account of how this disastrous event divides blood relations and composite families, wrecks loving beings and tears asunder intimate relationships. The partition results in both physical and psychological suffering unsurpassed in the history of the subcontinent. The beautiful home, '*Ashiana*', surveys the deserted nest, remembers her days spent there-feels the tremendous change, recall the scene which has ultimately caused the parting of ways of the members of the house, and meditates on its impact. Laila has been presented in such a way as to recall her previous days through the use of memory. Here the story is narrated through flashback. She begins to tell the story thus: "The day my aunt Abida moved from the Zenana into the quest-room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within call of her father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live (4). The novel so poignantly and powerfully written, directs the readers too to meditate meaningfully on the impact of such irrational thought and action in the name of religion.

As partition novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is rich in terms of narrative technique. The denouement of the novel is quite unique. She stresses on "vulnerability of human understanding and life, caused by the throes of partition which relentlessly divided friends, families, lovers and neighbours." (Bhalla, 100)¹⁴ In its narrative technique of first person narration and chronicling the female development against the background of political upheaval.

Partition in Hosain's novel is a peripheral theme. The novel too is a female bildungsroman in as much as it depicts the youth and maturity of a sensitive protagonist who is attempting to learn about the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern and in doing so acquires a philosophy of life. Furthermore, M.H. Abram observes that "bildungsroman is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences and often through a spiritual crisis-into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the



world."(Kapadia, 75) Similarly, the story of the *Sunlight on a Broken column* is of course one that quite obviously conforms to the bildungsroman pattern. The story begins with the childhood of the narrator-protagonist and ends in his attaining adulthood and maturity. When she revisits India as a mature woman, having known past life, she is prepared to face the world and the future.

The partition and other political happenings are viewed through its narrator's consciousness. The narrator in the novel gives an eyewitness account of the partition. She is both an outsider and insider. This is reflected through these lines: "I felt I lived in two worlds; an observer in an outside world, and solitary in my own (124). Through Laila, an objectivity has been achieved by the author in a very realistic way. It is the narrative of Attia Hosain which makes the work commendable in its depiction and portrayal of the character as an individual like Laila and as collectively for instance, Saleem, Asad and Kemal so on.

Animal imagery has been used in the novel to bring out the dehumanization of human beings and human relationships, particularly man-woman relationship. Choosing a boy for a girl is like choosing a new horse for the carriage, except that horses are chosen with more care than husbands these days. Laila from the beginning is different. She says to Zahra,

I won't be paired off like an animal. How could you sit there listening to them talking as if you were a bit of furniture to be sold to the highest bidder (29-30).

Through the use of imagery the author has employed narrative technique with certain concrete and abstract elements to accomplish her work in a very vivid manner. Thus, the novelist has successfully made a comparison between a human being and an animal. This instance of animal imagery is indicative of the situation during the partition in which people were dehumanized and their plight was just like animals. Therefore, the writer tries to depict the plight of Indian Muslims who have been suffering from Muslim set rules in one hand and partition brought with it excruciating pain to them in other hand. Thus Attia Hosain has depicted the situation by explicating the things with certain tools and techniques.

Structurally, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is a blending of imagination and reality, inner and outer, and traditional and modern. Laila, the protagonist sees herself as inhabiting two worlds at once- the traditional and the modern, the inner and the outer, the world of imagination and the real world. One of the ways of looking at the structure of the novel can be in terms of how she gradually reconciles the two. In contrast to the ideal world of imagination, she counterposes a real world based on power relations and domination. She says,

I used to forget that the world was in reality very different...always I lived in two worlds, and I grew to resent the 'real' world (128).

And in part 11 of the novel, says:

I felt I lived in two worlds, an observer in an outside world, and solitary in my own. (124)

But in the third part of the novel, she feels that she was drawn out, made to join in, and not stand aside as a spectator, she finally overcomes the utter confusion in her mind when in the end she makes the conscious decision of going with Asad. Earlier at the time of Baba Jan's impending death, Laila bemoans her uncertainty:

What was wrong with me inside? what was 'wrong' in itself, and what was right? who was to tell me?" (31)

Initially this ethical confusion troubles Laila a great deal and she exclaims,

Why did you send me among those other girls who are not torn apart? (38)



But by the end of the novel, she understands that confusion is a part of growing up, a spur to the discovery of the self. Thus it may be observed that the structure of the novel is a mixture of abstract and concrete followed by psychological upheaval.

To conclude, Partition theme got narrated through many paradigms aiming at modern techniques and tools used by the reputed writer. Intizar Husain must have been influenced by the 20th century writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf who stressed on memory and stream of consciousness. And his use of diary for narrating the traumatic experiences of the migrants like him lends an aura of historical authenticity to the incidents is unique. He also adopted first person narration and flashback in his narrative. On the other hand the use of imagery, metaphor and plot is worth mentioning in the narratives of Attia Hosain. Thus both the writers explored the theme of partition by employing different techniques and tools artistically. Last but not least historical event like partition of India was depicted by the novelists in such a way as to make it look a work of art.

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