

**XENOPHOBIA, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES, NATIONALISM AND
IDENTITY:
A CRITICAL ANALYSES OF QUDRATULLA SAHAB’S SHORT STORY
“YA KHUDA”**

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to critically evaluate Qudratulla Shahab’s short story, ‘Ya Khuda’. The partition of India and the associated bloody riots inspired many creative minds in India and Pakistan to create literary/cinematic depictions of this event. While some creations depicted the massacres during the refugee migration, others concentrated on the aftermath of the partition in terms of difficulties faced by the refugees in both sides of the border (Artistic). In fact, millions died during partition violence. The Muslims died chanting the slogans- “Pakistan Zindabad” and the Hindus and Sikhs died chanting the voice of their liberation and demanding separate state on the basis of their religious principles (Panthi 700). In such critical condition, this story by Qudratulla Shahab depicts and explores the journey and identity of the character Dilshad . “Ya Khuda” deals with the theme of migration during the time of partition. This is the story of a girl named, Dilshad who, is the daughter of Mullah Ali Bakhsh and lives with her father in a cell inside the mosque at Chamkor village in east Punjab. Dilshad and her father become prey to communalism during the time of partition and her father is killed by the Sikhs of Chamkor village out of communal hatred. This story deals with her life after her father’s death and her journey as a refugee from east Punjab to Lahore.

Ya khuda is a catchy story and depicts the individual’s identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. It was the major event that gave new shape to the history of the subcontinent. Qudratulla shahab, being an eyewitness of the cataclysmic event, has depicted the impact of it with utmost intensity. In ya khuda through the character of Dilshad, he has

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tried to show how a catastrophic event like partition traumatized people by putting them nowhere. Qudratulla Shahab criticises the barrier between lands that separates man from man, body from body and soul from soul. As if he wants to propagate the message of peace and prosperity to the people of both countries by showing them the way that leads them to a land, where there is no division in the name of religion, where liberty, equality and fraternity predominates and where wind blows only to disperse the fragrance of Shantih, Shantih and Shantih (Thakur 221).

KEY WORDS: *Xenophobia, Communalism, Imagined communities, Identity, nationalism.*

Qudratullah Shahab was an eminent urdu writer and civil servant from Pakistan. His most famous works are, “*Shahnama*”, “*Ya Khuda*”, “*Surkh Feeta*”, “*Nafsaney*” and “*Maaji*.” He is known for his spirituality and mysticism which is best reflected in his autobiography “*Shahnama*.” Qudratullah shahab was born in Gilgit. He was selected for Indian Civil Service in 1940 and later volunteered to serve in Bengal during the famine of 1943, where he served as magistrate at Nandigram. He came under heavy fire from the authorities when he distributed part of the strategic rice reserves to the starving local community. He also served as Director of Industries of Punjab and dealt mostly with settlement issues concerning migration (Qudratullah).

The forced human migration that followed partition was one of the biggest tragedies in history. As it turned out, on "the sub-continent as a whole, some 14 million people left their homes and set out by every means possible — by air, train, and road, in cars and lorries, in buses and bullock carts, but most of all on foot -- to seek refuge with their own kind." Many of them were slaughtered by an opposing side, some starved or died of exhaustion, while others were afflicted with "cholera, dysentery, and all those other diseases that afflict undernourished refugees everywhere". Estimates of the number of people who died range between 200,000 (official British estimate at the time) and two million, with the consensus

being around one million dead. "Ten million of them were in the central Punjab. In an area measuring about 200 miles (320 km) by 150 miles (240 km), roughly the size of Scotland, with some 17,000 towns and villages, five million Muslims were trekking from east to west, and five million Hindus and Sikhs trekking in the opposite direction. Many of them never made it to their destinations"^(Walia 253).

Xenophobia is the fear of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. Xenophobia can manifest itself in many ways involving the relations and perceptions of an in-group towards an out-group, including a fear of losing identity, suspicion of its activities, aggression, and desire to eliminate its presence to secure a presumed purity. Xenophobia can also be exhibited in the form of an "uncritical exaltation of another culture" in which a culture is ascribed "an unreal, stereotyped and exotic quality." The terms xenophobia and racism are sometimes confused and used interchangeably because people who share a national origin may belong to the same race ^(xenophobia). During Partition a person belonging to one community was afraid of another community's people. Hindus and Muslims and other communities were at daggers drawn with one another. Partition short stories like *The Avenger* by S.H. Watsyayan Ajneya, *Addab* by Samaresh basu, *A Debt to Pay* by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas etc have given adequate expression to such feeling of xenophobia prevalent in each community towards the other. Each community was regarding the people of other communities as "The other", Who were bent on killing and looting their community and so were their enemies. Mere thinking of other communities could cause a sensation in their bodies or traumatized them. In "*Ya Khuda,*" Qudratullah Shahab has depicted how in Chamkor village people were afraid owing to this feeling of xenophobia. "From midnight to noon, for the entire twelve hours, every young and old man in the village was tense like a taut bow. As though he has been touched by a live wire and electrified"^(p.269).

The event of Partition of Indian sub-continent can be undoubtedly termed as a holocaust, an event of unprecedented magnitude and horror. History has not known a fratricidal war of such dimensions in which human hatred and bestial passions were degraded to the levels witnessed during the dark epoch when religious frenzy, taking the shape of a hideous monster, stalked through cities, towns and countryside, taking a toll of half a million innocent lives. Collins and Lapierre quote a testimony of Captain Atkins of the British army in

Freedom at Midnight (1976), “every yard of the way there was a body, some butchered, some dead of cholera” (p.444). Decrepit old men, defenseless women, helpless young children, infants in arms, by the thousands, were brutally done to death by religious fanatics of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities. To be a Hindu, Sikh, or a Muslim became a crime punishable with death. Madness swept over the entire land, in an ever increasing crescendo,

till reason and sanity left the minds of rational men and women, and sorrow, misery, hatred; despair took possession of their souls. The communal nature of violence has made people of religious groups in India suspicious of each other that from time to time flare up in many communal riots. One may say that the legacy of partition still continues as a residual factor of history as reflected in these communal riots. Partition was not about the division of a geographical territory, it was also Partition of hearts that did not heal as yet (Sarvani 74-75). In “Ya Khuda” Amrik Singh’s family was afraid of Mullah Ali Bakhsh’s call for prayer, who lived in a cell inside the mosque. Mullah Ali Bakhsh called people to prayer five times a day, but the Sikh believed that this prayer was a trick of making their women infertile. This superstitious believe was prevalent among the Sikhs that this call for prayer would make their women infertile because there was a black magic in that call and their dynasty would be ended by merely listening to this call for prayer. So there was a tradition going on for decades in Amrik Singh’s house, whose house was just behind the mosque that: “As soon as the call to prayer came wafting on the air, the women in the house started banging spoons on metal bowls, hitting the griddle with tongs, plugging their ears with fingers, or running into the back rooms to hide. That was how this brave family had protected its women from black magic and kept them fruitful” (p.270). One day when Mullah Ali Bakhsh was making ablutions, the Sikhs of the village killed him and threw his body into the well. During partition communalism transformed human beings into beasts and lowered their conscience to such a level that such heinous acts as murder of innocents and rape of an innocent helpless girl meant for them revenge upon the ‘other’ community and exhibition of their valor and power.

The feeling of imagined communities was prevalent in each community, during the time of partition. People of each community were imagining the people of their own community as their brothers and had a strong feeling of comradeship towards them. In “Ya Khuda” when

the refugee women of Ambala Camp were returning to the west Punjab, they felt as if they were going to have a new life amidst their brothers, in their own land. New hopes and aspirations emerged in their hearts. “Ludhiana, Phillaur, Jullandhar...Amritsar, at every step the women felt a little strained, a little more animated, hidden melodies in their beings became alive; they began humming, smiling, rubbing, their eyes end looking at each other, as if deliberately trying to forget a horrible nightmare”(p.276). When Dilshad reached Lahore, she was very glad and felt, as if she had got a new life and It was her rebirth in her brother’s land. She regarded this land as her home and everyone as her own brothers, sisters and relatives. “Anwar, Rashid. The Names were like music to Dilshad’s ears. She had been thirsting to hear such names... So she imagined these two handsome boys to be the brothers, whose filial love had kept the women in the Ambala Camp, waiting and hoping...Dilshad regarded all the land in the west as her home and every young man in the west her brother...”(p.279,280). But these people were not really her brothers. They did not consider her as a sister. No one helped her and showed any mercy towards her. As the writer has very aptly mentioned; “In her imagination all the world in the west was her destination. She had come over to join a vast brotherhood of those who were like her, but everything and everybody here was intent on asking her, who she was, why she was there, whether she had any money in her pocket, whether her body could still give pleasure...”(p.283). The writer has passed satire on the inhumanity of people who, brewed of all human feelings and values degraded into beastly creatures. When Dilshad was lying helplessly with her newborn child on the Railway station

platform, an English little boy saw her and taking her baby as a toy, he insisted her parents to give her some money. On his insistent his parents gave her five rupees. Two elderly men, who were observing it all, got annoyed at this. This incident aroused their nationalism and they scolded Dilshad for taking alms from the English people, who were their enemies. Through their words Qudratulla Shahab has very aptly presented the feeling of nationalism during the time of partition. “God heavens!” one of them said. These bastards still think we live off their scraps... How disgusting! We got freedom but never gave up our taste for servitude... It is better for a bird to die than to submit to commands which retard its flight,”(p.282) It was unbearable for these people to see an orient accepting alms or bending head before those

people who had treated their nation and people as slaves for decades. They considered it as a blot on their honor and danger to their freedom and liberty. It hurt their feelings of nationalism.

The violence that was unleashed during partition and migration of communities was massive and the worst sufferers were the women and children especially women of all communities were at the receiving end. Women suffered violence in its most brutal forms- abduction, rape, kidnap, forced marriage, honour killing etc. The male of both the communities took revenge by committing most barbarous crimes on the womenfolk of the opposite community. Litterateurs of both the nations captured this tumultuous event in all genres of Literature which led to emergence of a new genre in Literature known as the Partition Literature. Many works, especially short stories accurately narrated the agony of women who underwent heart wrenching physical, psychological and emotional suffering in the hands of men of other religions. Prominent short stories depicting the anguish of women are Lajwanti by Rajendra Singh Bedi, Pakistan Zindabad by Kartar Singh Duggal, Exile by Jamila Hashmi, Revenge by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Cold Meat by Saadat Hasan Manto, Kulsum by Kartar Singh Duggal etc. These stories depicted the physical, psychological and emotional trauma faced by women in the hands of men of other religion which was the most accepted and discussed fact during the Partition. The story Lajwanti, depicts the emotional suffering of Lajo, who return to her husband Sunderlal in the process of government's recovery and rehabilitation of the Lost women. She desperately struggled to tell her side of story to Sunderlal but Sunderlal always shrank from her and she longed for an ear who could listen to her story. The story ends with a sad end where a man fails to understand the point of view of woman sufferings. Kartar Singh Duggal's short story Kulsum depicts the story of a young girl who is confined by an old Sikh man to offer her as a gift to the young school master. The schoolmaster felt that the gift was fit to be swallowed. When she poses resistance, she is first raped by the old man and then handed over to the school master. Revenge by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas narrates about an irrational desire of revenge by a father, Hari Das, who pledged to stab a Muslim girl in her breasts to avenge the brutal killing of her daughter Sita. Thus almost all the narrative in the genre of Partition Literature depicted the trauma of women unleashed by the men of 'other religion' throwing the blame on the religious affiliation of the Women. The unspoken truth of the atrocities committed on women which

was unexplored by most of the literary and historical writings is the crime of rapes done on them by the men of their own religion and community. The men who were overpowered by lust and desire used religion as an “ethical pretext” to fulfill their desires and this physical lust knew no boundaries and distinction of religion, region and even relationships (Sarvani 75-76). The dominant theme of *Ya Khuda* is the question of a refugee woman’s identity. After her father’s death Dilshad became a prey to communalism. She was the daughter of a Muslim, so she was raped daily by the Sikhs and her body became an object on which these Sikhs were writing vendettas. “When the brave Khalsas sat under the arch of the mosque, opened their quarts of home brews and lustily feasted on the pleasures offered by Dilshad’s youthful body, they felt proud of themselves for having taken the revenge for the thirteen hundred years of prayers and calls to prayers in their village”(p.273). The communalized outburst of violence indicated the need to question such beliefs and faith in religion that could provoke barbarism: “The young women were taken to Gurdwaras and temples and there the worshippers were dishonored in front of their gods’ idols. The mothers were molested before the eyes of the daughters and daughters were dishonoured before the eyes of the mothers” (Duggal 369-70). After her father’s death innocent and helpless, Dilshad became a prey to communalism and “In the last few months her life had unfolded in such a way that she had become like a balm-a universal panacea for everybody’s aching limbs, to be applied wherever and whenever anyone needed her”(p.274). Bapsi Sidhwa has rightly observed that “women were the living objects on whose soft bodies victors and losers alike vent their wrath and enact fantastic vendettas, and celebrate victories”(Sidhwa 218). After being raped so many times, Dilshad became pregnant and was sent to the police station, where Inspector Labbu Ram used her for satisfying his lust and then handled her over to Head Constable for sending her to Ambala Camp. “Fifteen days later, when the pain in Labbu Ram’s knees thighs and hip subsided, she is sent to Ambala Camp with Head Constable Daryodhan Singh. Along the way Daryodhan Singh also suffered many bouts of pain in his knees, thighs and back, but Dilshad went on alleviating the pain efficiently. In this manner they were able to safely cover a journey of ten hours in twelve days”(p.275). Thus women became like a toy or puppet in men’s hands during the time of partition and everyone was willing to play with her body or everyone wanted to get pleasure as the writer has mentioned ‘A Universal Panacea’ to reduce or to get rid of their body pain which was the pain of unsatisfied sexual desires. Anthropologist Veena Das writes that

‘woman’s body became as a sign through which men communicated with each other and the political programme of creating two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women’ (Kudaisya)

The women were helpless. The untold brutalities were committed on women ‘Hindustan’ and Pakistan was inscribed on their thighs and breasts. Hindu-Sikh women on that side and Muslim women on this side of the border were hapless. Young and beautiful women were in more trouble. They had to satisfy the lust of the whole country. Sixty and seventy years old men fulfilled their lust with young women - no one was considered as daughter or sister. Sometimes it was a routine that first the woman was molested, raped and then killed. The blood soaked body of the woman would be lying on the ground... This happened in the country of Guru and Kabir. Who did this? Their own followers.

Mohammad Sahib said that it was wrong to raise a hand on the women and children. But his own followers killed the woman and children with glory and raised the slogans. Where is Mohammad Sahib? His followers have overrun him.

Not only Mohammad Sahib, there are so many great men. But who cares for their words?

Jesus, Mahatma Budha, Guru Nanak, Hazrat Mohammad all of them said that all human beings are one. Women are great. All should bow their heads before them. But nobody follows their sermons only they are worshipped”.(Dhir 52-53).

People of Dilshad’s own community too looked at her as a sexual object which could give them some pleasure. When Dilshad reached Lahore, she expected that people of her own community would help her, but they too were like those Sikhs, who raped her. She was only an object for those people too and not a human being, and when they noticed that there was a child with this woman, this object became useless for them and they walked away in search of some other beautiful object. “There were so many Butterflies in the park, each better than the other: how many were they going to run after”(p.281). In Ambala Camp, everyday many girls and women were brought from various places and were raped by Major Preetam Singh and his jawaans. This camp was a rescue place but in reality became a house of prostitution where

women were treated as a courtesan. These refugee women lived a life which was worse than death. They were like dead bodies without any hope and aspiration. “There were many girls in Ambala Camp, many women as well, young and beautiful but subdued, like faded stars, that had lost their glow, as if someone had rubbed dirt over their radiance”^(p.275). The question of the identity of a refugee women with a child has been reflected, when Dilshad reached the Muhajir Camp. She was asked by the camp caretaker, if she was married and when she answered in negative, he put his pen down and asked about the father of the child,

“Married”?

“No, Sir.”

The caretaker stopped writing, put the pen down, and glared at her: “Then whose child is that?”

“Oh, she is mine,” Dilshad stammered.

“I forgot. I’m sorry. I’m married.”

His pen once again turned to the ink-pot”^(p.283).

During partition Muhajir camps were the only shelters for refugees. In “Ya Khuda” Dilshad reached Lahore after facing many hardships and being raped many times. Here some people asked her about her identity and in place of helping her, they scolded her for taking alms from the English people. When they came to know that she was a refugee, they asked her to go to the Muhajir Camp. “You are a Muhajir-Refugee,... You should go to the Muhajir Camp”^(p.283). They behaved with her as if a refugee was someone, who was ‘the other’ and his place was only in a Muhajir Camp. She went to the Muhajir Camp and

It was a yard surrounded by barbed wire all around under an open sky...A sense of gloom hung in the air and one could feel a very light almost indistinct tremor, as if thousands of innocent trembling hearts and shattered hopes and dreams were suspended in the air...Some of the refugees had erected little huts for themselves by tying sheets on bamboo sticks, just as the well to do often build roofs to cover graves.^(P.285, 286).

Muhajir Camp was like a graveyard to those helpless refugees because they were living there without any soul, hope or aspiration and their bodies were like dead bodies with no hope, aspiration and identity. There was not a single ray of hope in their life. They were all dead people and the bamboos in that Muhajir Camp were like their grave covers. When Dilshad reached the refugee camp, it was night. She pleaded the store clerk to give her a quilt or blanket because it was unbearable cold outside. But the clerk in place of showing mercy towards her scolded her and asked her to come the next day. The night was very cold and Dilshad saw that a women took off her clothes and wrapped her sick girl in them as the writer has mentioned, “The bare body of that women was the worst insult to all that had been achieved by mankind”(P.289). Somehow Dilshad saved herself from cold and remained alive, but many refugees died due to unbearable cold and in the morning they were looking like frozen statues in the yard of the Muhajir Camp. “They were like masterpieces carved from stone by a skilful sculpture”(P.289). The sweepers came and wrapped the dead bodies in the blankets. It was a great irony that when these dead people were in need of blankets, they were scolded and after their death, their bodies were wrapped in the same blankets. In that refugee camp many people came everyday and they took away girls and women with them as their mistresses. After few days they brought them back and took away some another one. In this way the refugee camp became a brothel and those helpless refugee women prostitutes. As the writer has very aptly passed satire on the situation; “Lahore was not Lahore but Madina; its inhabitants not its usual citizens, but the warm-hearted, hospitable residents- the ansaar of Medina. In this city a new Raheem Khan came into being for Dilshad every day,... There were new fathers here for daughters, new brothers for sisters, bodies meeting bodies, blood mingling with blood...”(P.293).

Ya khuda is a catchy story that depicts the individual's identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. It was the major event that gave new shape to the history of the subcontinent. Qudratulla shahab, being an eyewitness of the cataclysmic event, and Being a writer of that decade, not only witnessed the horridness of partition but also realized how that separation of 1947 traumatized people by making them homeless and identity less and has depicted the impact of it with utmost intensity. In *Ya khuda* through the character of Dilshad, he has tried to show how a catastrophic event like partition traumatized people by putting them nowhere (Thakur 221).

CONCLUSION

The incredible suffering that partition caused in some areas through exchanges of population has become a favorite topic for Indian, Pakistani, and Sikh writers. Dealing in various ways with the human tragedy endured by people on both sides of this newly created border, these writers, argues Alok Bhalla (editor of one major collection of these stories), share a theme. "There is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment"^(Partition.1). One of those partition stories, "*Ya Khuda*", clearly reveals this sense of bewilderment and presents a real picture of partition times. Quadratulla Shahab worked as a civil servant and tackled with the problem of migration, perhaps this is the reason that he has given us a painful but honest perspective of what the politics of borders can do to human lives and civilization. Quadratulla shahab wants to propagate the message of peace and prosperity to the people, by showing them the way that leads them to a land, where there is no division in the name of religion, where liberty, equality and fraternity predominates and where wind blows only to disperse the fragrance of *Shantih, Shantih and Shantih*^(Thakur 221).

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