

**Transcending Communal Kerfuffle: A Study of Chughtai's "Roots"**

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This paper titled "Transcending Communal Kerfuffle: A Study of Chughtai's "Roots"" takes a look at the problem of partition that portrays in Ismat Chughtai's "Roots". The politico-historical term 'partition' refers to the historical and political events that led to the division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. It was an event of great magnitude and significance that had ample political, social, cultural, religious, economic and human impacts on the Indian subcontinent. The historians belonging to the main current of Indian nationalism opine that "the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the logical conclusion of the 'divide and rule' policy of the British by which they had insidiously played off the Hindus against the Muslims in India" (Roy 14).

Nicholas Mansergh, a British historian, has a completely different take on the whole issue of the Partition.

The more important of those [political] relations were without exception triangular. There were the three principal communities, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs, in descending order of magnitude; there were the three political groups, the princes, the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress in ascending order of importance; and there were the three arbiters of national destiny, the British, the Congress and the League. In each triangle there was the predisposition – it is almost a law of politics – of the lesser to combine against the greatest. (qtd in Roy 15-16)

Mansergh makes it clear that the partition was not because of the complexity of the communal situation in India but it is because of the nature of the political relations then existent in India that caused the catastrophe of 1947.

The birth of the Independent nation India was accompanied by storms of communal violence. It has witnessed periodic eruptions of this kind of riots during the decades of self rule. The historical process of partition and its total destruction had a powerful impact on contemporary culture, literature and history. This is the most calamitous episode in the history of twentieth century India. The impression left on the minds of those who lived

through those distressing times continues to this day. The separation between India and Pakistan has only served to intensify each other's antagonism and unfriendliness instead of bringing peace in the region. Massive population exchanges took place between India and Pakistan in the months immediately following Partition. Women were kidnapped, raped, molested, paraded naked in the streets, forced for prostitution, and they forced to change identity. The implausible torment and bewilderment of the people of the subcontinent has been a favourite theme with the Indian and Pakistani writers.

Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), one of Urdu's most accomplished fiction writers, was a daring and controversial woman writer of the 20th century. In her youth she surprised the conservatives of her community by taking two Bachelor's Degrees at a time when Muslim women seldom went for higher education. Her feminist radicalism shocked the conservative society of the times and some of her books were banned in South Asia. Her publications include *The Heart Breaks Free/The Wild One* (1993), *Terhi Lakheer(The Crooked Line)* (1995), *Quilt and Other Stories* (1996), *Lifting the Veil* (2001), *A Chughtai Collection* (2005). In 1975 she was awarded the Padmasree for her contribution to Urdu literature. Her "Roots" deals with the harrowing experiences of two families in the midst of the communal frenzy that swept the nation in the wake of the partition.

The story begins with a striking exposé of the repercussion of Partition:

The wretched urchins did not realize that the English had left and, while leaving, had inflicted such a deadly wound that it would fester years to come. India was operated upon by such clumsy hands and blunt knives that thousands of arteries were left open. Rivers of blood flowed, and no one had the strength left to stitch the wounds. (117-118)

The atmosphere was foul and "the Muslims of the city were virtually living under siege" (118). People were in fear of communal hatred. "The houses were padlocked, and the police patrolled outside" (118). The religious fanaticism was spreading.

The story centres round two families, one Hindu and the other Muslim, who have been close neighbours for three generations. "The two families were so close to each other over three generations that no one had the slightest suspicion that the country's partition would rupture their relationship" (119). Their political and religious differences had not affected their neighbourly regard for each other.

There were, of course, members of the Muslim League, the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha in both families, who held fierce debates on religious and political matters...If Abba was a Congresswala, Doctor Saheb and Barre Bhai were supporters of the League. Gyan Chand was a Mahasabhai while Manjhle Bhai was a communist and Gulab Chand a socialist. Women and children supported the party patronized by their husband or father. (119-120)

Although they belong to different political parties, their friendship and rapport continue through the riot-ridden days of the partition. But with independence, things begin to change.

Roopchandji was the head of the Hindu family. He was a doctor. Doctor Saheb was the friendliest of all when he came into the Muslim family. He would eat their food, crack jokes with them and scold them.

When Abba was paralysed, Roopchandji had retired and his medical practice was restricted to his own house and ours. Abba was being treated by some other doctors, but Roopchandji would keep constant vigil along with Amma and the nurses...after Abba's passing away, he felt a new sense of responsibility besides the affection he had towards the members of our family. (122)

He was consulted on everything. "He would go to the children's school to get the fees waived" (122), settled the quarrel between Farida and her husband and it is he who decided that Fajjan should opt for Science in FA.

The partition began to shake the foundations of communal accord in Marwar. Even the families of Roopchandji and narrator's are moved up and down by the waves of riots. Generations of unquestioned intimacy struggles in the climate of suspicion and fear. Even the minds of children are poisoned by the communal hatred, animosity and acrimony. Sardar Ali, leader of the National Guards, urged them to get ready to leave to Pakistan. Eventually, the Muslim family decides to move Pakistan. But Amma refused to accompany them. She said:

What's this strange bird called 'our land'? Tell me where's that land? This is the place where one was born in, one grew up in body and mind. If this cannot be one's own land, then how can the place where one simply goes and settles down for a couple of days be one's own? And who knows whether one won't be driven out from there as well and be told 'Go and inhabit a new land'? I am like a lamp in its last gasp. A mild gust of wind and all this fuss about choosing a land will be over. After all, this game of one's land vanishing, and inhabiting a new land, is not very interesting. There was a time when the Mughals left their country to inhabit a new country. And today you want to establish a new one. As though the land is no better than a pair of shoes-if it gets a little tight, throw it away and get a new one. (124)

She did not want to be uprooted from the place where she gave birth to her children and where her husband was buried. "...Amma stayed steadfast in here position like a banyan tree that stands upright through storms and blizzards" (124). She was skeptical. Everything that can be taken and removed from the house is stuffed into bags, boxes, and bundles. "Utensils ere stuffed into gunny bags, beds dismantled and their legs tied together with rope. Right before our eyes the well-equipped house slowly turned into misshapen bundles and boxes" (124). All left home except Amma.

Amma, desperate and lonely, stood in the desolate courtyard. "Her heart sank, and she got scared like a small child, as though ghosts would pounce on her from all sides" (125). She

thought about her children's and grandchildren's fate in a foreign land. They had been exiled from their own land. She doubted their future. She feared. She could not sleep peacefully. It was Roopchandji's wife brought food for her at night. "The two old women sat across each other silently. They were mute, but the eyes communicated everything. The food trays remained untouched" (126).

Amma was oppressed by painful thoughts. "She kept on muttering to herself for hours, clutching the walls and parapets of the house... There was no question of sleep amidst the nightmare in which she saw the mutilated corpse of her youthful daughter, her young daughter-in-law being paraded naked and the grandchildren being cut to pieces" (127). At that juncture, she heard a knock on the door. She shuddered. When she opened the door, she could not believe her eyes. Her children, their wives and the grandchildren were standing outside. She could see Roopchandji with them. He chased them and persuaded the refugees to return to their motherland. The family ties between two families were also restored. Roopchandji became their patriarch once again.

Chugtai's "Roots" is a story about the tumultuous partition days which raises issues about nationality, unity and communal feeling which are relevant in contemporary times. It also highlights the triumph of love in the face of communal hatred and shows that there are people who can rise above communal passions.

#### **Works Cited:**

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