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**BLENDING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL: A RE-VISIONING
OF THE ETHNIC AND SECULAR IN *HUSBAND OF A FANATIC***

Abstract

Amitava Kumar, through his travelogue writing, *Husband of a Fanatic*, tried to find out the real barrier that inhibits the communities of people from having a harmonious and peaceful coexistence. Amitava Kumar had to face many predicaments on marrying a Pakistani Muslim woman. After these experiences, he travelled through different parts of India and Pakistan, to get a close look at the conditions of the minority and the majority segments in society. Besides gaining an understanding of the condition, the aim of the travel project was to establish a space for himself and his family. The book, *Husband of a Fanatic* can be considered not merely as a journey but as his way of self-discovery.

Key Words: Religion and Society, India and Pakistan, Geographical Border, Marriage, Love and Hatred

Travel Writing is an entirely different literary genre. It gained popularity in the first century AD in China. Fan Chengda (1126-1193), a Chinese poet and traveler, started to include geographical and topographical details to his literary works and this was considered as a unique

style in travel writings. *Husband of a Fanatic*, purely a travel writing, is a non-fictional work written by Amitava Kumar, based on his visits to India and Pakistan after his marriage to a Pakistani Muslim woman. The book chronicles his personal experiences that he encountered subsequent to marrying a Muslim woman. Learning from these experiences, he set out to visit different places in both India and Pakistan, in search of the factual reason that instigates the detestation between the two nations, and to find a way to establish a space for himself and his family in both the societies. He visited places like Lahore, Islamabad, Wagah, Kashmir, Ahmedabad etc., and interacted with several people who were affected by the deep-rooted discord between the two nations and understand the attitude of people towards each other.

The summer of 1999 witnessed a crucial war between India and Pakistan, in Kashmir. Concurrently, when tensions were at its heights, Amitava Kumar, a Hindu Indian and author of the book *Husband of a Fanatic*, married Mona, a Pakistani Muslim woman. Inter-religious marriages, as always, were considered a taboo by most societies. Consequently, the right wing extreme nationalists considered Amitava Kumar as a traitor of India. He has become a representative of many men and women who have become traitors on grounds of the inter-religious marriage status. Communities have their own social space where the members are accepted and which provides them with an assurance of security and a sense of belonging. Apart from these communities, the inter-religious married couples are trying to establish a societal distinction. But, such a space is often denied by other communities.

Amitava Kumar took his expedition to India and Pakistan with multiple objectives. In his travel writings, we come across the idea of marriage through many incidents. More than purely idealizing marriage, he is in reality trying to portray marriage as an effort to see each other as fully fleshed human beings beyond the barriers of community and established rules. But unfortunately, his journey revealed many families living in insecure conditions precipitated by communities at war.

Neighborhoods have their own established rules and beliefs. It is customary that the people who go against the norms of a community are usually ostracized and are banned from any future cooperation or community support.

A woman marrying a person from another community is often seen as betraying her community. In many situations, such women have had to confront severe consequences. Some had to flee their native soil and others had to live the rest of their lives as widows. On the contrary, when the same act is done by a man, he is appreciated for adding one more person to his

community. However, in both cases, such couples are facing numerous challenges in their pursuit of a place in society. They will be in continuous struggle to establish an identity and a space for themselves. Several such incidents have been mentioned in *Husband of a Fanatic*.

25 March 2002, was a black day in India's history. Geetaben, a woman from Gujarat was brutally raped and killed by a mob of her own community, accusing her of committing the serious sin of loving a person from another community. This incident alone is adequate to analyse the loss of basic human values and people's metamorphosis into extremists who resort to fanatical violence when their feelings are offended.

Amitava Kumar tried to locate couples married from different communities, in order to appraise their communal and personal quandaries. With the help of a friend, he managed to gain some contacts. The first man Kumar contacted was Mr. Asiz, who married a woman from a different community. What Kumar could sense from his conversations with Asiz was panic and trepidation. The first response from Asiz was "Who told you about me?"(21) People like Asiz risk their lives under threats of attack from their own communities. Hence, it is essential for them to keep a low profile and never disclose their identities. Kumar replied to Asiz that it was a friend of his who had revealed this to him. To that Asiz responded, "If you see the man again, please tell him that if he is really a friend of mine, he will not tell anyone else what he told you."(22) Asiz's words evidently reveal his anxiety and concern in protecting his family from any communal attack.

In Patna, Amitava Kumar visited a shelter run by Mother Teresa's nuns, where he met a girl named Nazrana. She had married a youth from another community and now she belongs to her husband's faith; red sindoor at the parting of her hair explains it. But her parents claimed that she was not sixteen at the time of her marriage. On their petition, Ram Karan Das, Nazrana's husband was jailed on charges of abduction and rape. The story of Nazrana corroborates how difficult it is for men and women to marry outside their own communities. The primary struggle is from the parents; who never want their children to reside along with another faith. Even if their children elope with someone, parents file fake petitions in attempts to have their kids brought home. Alas, when the case reaches the court, generally the verdict would be in the girl's favor.

One of the reasons why girls of a community run away with that of another is not just love, but the belief that the other community will be more flexible and socially amenable. Conversely in most cases, after marriage all these fascinations disappear and girls feel entrapped. Having no other option, they are compelled and doomed to live the rest of the life in repentance. At the core of such societal conflicts exists a demarcation between 'human being' and 'being human.' To

consider human beings as humans is the foremost prerequisite for the harmonious subsistence of a society.

Conversion to communities is one of the major barriers to achieving a society built on love and harmony. Forceful conversion of communities and conversion through marriages are common in Indian society. Notwithstanding this, there are people who can see others purely as normal human beings. For them, untainted love is important; to see Truth among the practices of diverse beliefs, which enables mutual respect of each other's beliefs.

“I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being--neither white, black, brown, nor red; and when you are dealing with humanity as a family there's no question of integration or intermarriage. It's just one human being marrying another human being or one human being living around and with another human being.”

Malcolm X

In Kumar's attempt to locate inter-faith married couples in Gujarat; he met Sagar Rao, who married from outside his community. Rao was more open to Kumar. A person with liberal thoughts, Rao said:

“I myself am married to a Muslim. It is not an issue between us. I am Hindu, I worship my gods. She is Muslim; her Allah is dear to her. But in a disturbed time, things can go wrong.”(25)

Rao is basically happy with his family, albeit fearful of the threat from outside the family. Both Rao's and his wife's communities were opposed to them for living with two beliefs.

To an extent, Amitava Kumar can also be considered as a victim of conversion. During Kumar's Pakistan visit, right after his marriage, he had to undergo numerous rituals pertaining to his wife's community. He was asked to repeat lines from Islam's Holy Scripture, Quran and asked to select a Muslim name. Reluctantly he settled for the name 'Safdar'. He was acquiring a new identity and space in the new community and society. Even though he resented all these, new label was being imposed upon him. After all these, he considered himself as Half Hindu and Half Muslim. He always wanted to be a secularist.

The book *Husband of a fanatic* is not just a travel writing, it is also the author's journey of self-discovery. Throughout his journey, Amitava Kumar tried to dig out the reasons for abhorrence between India and Pakistan; all the more, his intent was to carve out a significant space his family and an identity for himself. Thus, His journey becomes a journey of self-discovery and

self-realization. All the way through his trips, he analyses many instances, facts, and real life stories.

The midnight of August 15, 1947, was marked as a crucial day in the history of South Asia. The giant British Indian Territory was divided into two, India and Pakistan. The idea of a separate Muslim nation free from Indian Territory was first put forward by the poet Muhammad Iqbal in 1930. The British administration set up a Boundary Commission headed by Cyril Radcliffe to separate the Muslim majority areas from Hindu Majority ones. Radcliffe had never seen India before and knew nothing about Indian geography. It was with the help of unreliable maps and outdated census that he made up his plan for partition. Even Radcliffe himself was well aware that the plan he made was going to be the worst decision ever.

‘Nobody in India will love me for the award about the Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me. I have worked and traveled and sweated – oh I sweated all the time.’ -Cyril Radcliffe (59)

The months after the partition were the darkest days in the history of India. The world saw the largest exodus; about 14.5 million people cross the border. The partition not only created a geographical split among Indians, but a religious and psychological split also. Muslims were haunted in the days after partition. Their men were caught and killed, and Muslim women were kidnapped and brutally raped. Meanwhile, Hindus in Pakistan territory had to face the same atrocities. It is believed that over one million civilians died in the riots that followed the partition. On witnessing these atrocities and violence, Indian film writer and journalist Khwaja Ahmad Abbas responded;

‘Did the English Whisper in your ears that you may chop off the head of whichever Hindu you find, or that you must plunge a knife in the stomach of whichever Muslim you find? Did the English also educate us on the art of committing atrocities with women of other religion right in the marketplace? Did they teach us to tattoo Pakistan and Jai Hind on the breasts and secret organs of women?’(60)

The partition of India sowed seeds of hatred towards each community in both India and Pakistan. The majority gained strength over the minority which in many cases led to the violation of human rights and peaceful life. Such a situation always leads to a tension in the respective societies. When community became a reason for the partition of India, there arose

belief that both countries belong to two communities. The hatred which was induced by the partition gained new margins in international levels. A tension still exists in the borders as well as the minds of Indian and Pakistani citizens. Both Indian and Pakistani citizens watch each other with suspicion.

When Amitava Kumar applied for visa, he got a separate form which had a printed note that:

‘YOU MUST REPORT FOR POLICE REGISTRATION WITHIN 24 HRS OF ENTRY IN PAKISTAN AND PRIOR TO DEPARTURE/ARRIVAL AT EACH SUBSEQUENT PLACE OF VISIT IN PAKISTAN’. (53)

In another part of the visa application, he had to mark whether,

‘I belonged/do not belong have previously belonged/have not previously belonged to a MILITARY/SEMI-MILITARY/POLICE ORGANIZATION.’(54)

In Pakistan, the government of Parvez Musharraf decided to allow tourists from all over the world without prior clearance from the Pakistani Consulates abroad. But for Indians and non-resident Indians, they had to go through the VISA application process.

At the same time, Shabnam, a Pakistani friend of Kumar, who went to apply for an Indian visa was asked to fill a different form. She was asked to provide not only the name of places she would visit but also details like the districts, the name of two referees in India etc. Both the nations continue to be suspicious of each other’s citizens. The visa requirements are to verify that both nations have taken pre-cautions for its national security.

The hatred between the two nations also leads to competition in many areas like sports, science and technology, missile technology, arms race etc. India and Pakistan are the most important rivals in all sports. Wherever such a rivalry comes, it will be welcomed by the world with great eagerness. In cricket, India and Pakistan’s rivalry started in the year 1948, when the Pakistan team first toured to India. The result of each match was considered as a prestige issue by the people of both nations. The cricket and hockey tournaments after the 1999 war have helped to improve the tension between the two, to a large extent.

The arms race of the two nations always poses a threat of destruction in South Asia. India became a nuclear power on May 18, 1974, with its peaceful nuclear test at Pokhran. In 1998, as a response to India’s second nuclear test, Pakistan tested their nuclear power on May 28, 1998. Along with it India and Pakistan started to import huge amount of weapons to counter threats from

each other. As an example, during the Kargil war, India spend an amount 13.6 billion dollars as defense expense. In the later years, after Kargil war and increasing terrorism along the border, India emerged as the world's biggest arms importer.

Kumar during his visit to Pakistan was able to visit a school, where he interacted with the students and asked them to write letters to the children in India. One of the letters wrote by a girl were like this:

“Hi, how are you? The thought that comes to my mind by hearing the name of India is ruthless killing and hatred in Kashmir. Frankly, I don't really like Indian People. Why can't leave the poor Kashmir's alone and let them decide about their future?” (91)

The people on both sides of the border are not really interested in violence or war. They are well aware of the atrocities that can be caused by a war or a riot. Normally they consider each other as human. But, at times extreme nationalism and politics pave way for frequent violence over the border. In many of the letters wrote by the Pakistani school children contains this hatred towards India and its people, along with it political and extreme nationalists always try to pollute the minds of people, having their own profit in doing so. They even make use of children to promote their ideologies.

Apart from geographical boundaries between India and Pakistan being a reason for the existing hatred, religion is in fact the biggest barrier in making a friendly relation between the two. Throughout his journeys Amitava Kumar had tried to idealize this barrier. More than geographical boundaries it is interior boundaries like religion which make people stand in two identities. For Amitava Kumar, it is the struggle to establish a space for his family in the society. For that, he had to overcome the religious and geographical boundaries. In his journey, he was able to find out that it is hard to change the deep rooted beliefs and faith in religion. The only way to overcome this condition is to accept both religions and to consider everyone as human beings. Amitava Kumar respects the religious attitude of everyone, especially of his wife and her family. His journeys to India and Pakistan are to find the reasons that led to violence and hatred. Along with it, he also tries to find out people similar to him in both countries.

Geographically both the countries are identical in its culture, language, and lifestyle. The only difference we could find out is that of religion. Pakistan is addressed as a Muslim nation, while India is usually called a Hindu nation even though it's a secular Republic. Religions teach

the society the values like love, compassion and peace. But the wrong interpretation of religious thoughts gives birth to extremism. The communal violence and extremism will only result in the degradation of social values. In order to bring peace and harmony in society, there is no other way than considering one another as a human being and to replace hatred with love.

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