

Family (Hi)story as a Secular and Communal Narrative: An Analysis of *Blood Brothers: A Family Saga*

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M. J. Akbar's *Blood Brothers: A Family Saga* narrativises the anti-colonial nationalism in India and the interference of communal politics in pre-and post-independent India through a massive narrative recreation of the intricate social patterns and political machinations of the period. The novel centres around the family of the narrator by recreating the story of three generations with occasional references to the history of the subcontinent. It deals with the (hi)story of the nation coming into being with a vast array of historical figures, events and episodes which shaped the destiny of modern India. The novel becomes a secular narrative of the nation, its multicultural fabric and the challenges posed by communalism and communal politics. Communal politics poses a serious threat to the secular nature of India, and M. J .Akbar, as a sensitive writer, attempts to reveal the various dimensions of communalism.

Mobasher Jawed Akbar, popularly known as M. J. Akbar set new standards as an editor, journalist and columnist in the media circle of India and abroad. He has many non-fictional works to his credit and it is these non-fictional literary works that have given him voice and stature among the readers in India and the world. He has entered into the world of fiction with his latest book *Blood Brothers: A Family Saga* (2006). It is an amazing family saga which tells the story of three generation of a Muslim family in Bengal. The narrative is based on the experiences of his own family. The autobiographical work is packed with information about events in the country and the world, and the main concern of the novel is the complex Hindu-Muslim relations in the subcontinent. The book is actually a blend of fact and fiction, history and family memoir.

Akbar has used a wide canvas to portray Telinipara, the village where he was born. *Blood Brothers* starts with the story of the narrator's grandfather, Prayaag, and Prayaag's change to Rahmatullah, and his gradual ascendancy from poverty to prosperity. The novel is a multi-dimensional work, because it runs across three planes with equal felicity. On the one hand, it is an account of the family that gave birth to the narrator; on the other hand, it is a telling and insightful story of India's multicultural fabric and finally, it is an account of India's history from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s with major historical events as the backdrop. History, past and present, has always been a recurring theme in Indian English fiction right from the origin of the genre. Like many other Indian English novelists, M. J. Akbar is also fascinated by the history, politics and culture of the subcontinent and the major historical events of pre- and post-independent India.

Like other post colonial literary works, especially novels, many Indian English novels belong to the category of national narratives. Many Indian English novels deal with the story of the nation coming into being and developing into a modern nation state. Critic Frederick Jameson holds the view that "all Third World texts are to be read as national allegories" (65). This is due to the fact that majority of the post colonial writers want to glorify their nation and promote in their readers a sense of nationalism. So the contours of the nation – geographical, economic, political and cultural - have been a continuing theme in post colonial writing. *Blood Brothers*, at macro level, deals with the story of India coming into being and its development into a modern secular nation state. It explores the diverse aspects of the subcontinent through the family story of the narrator and the village Telinipara.

The glue of imagination is one of the basic ingredients required for the setting up of a nation. The first inevitable linking of nation with imagination was

done by Benedict Anderson in his famous work *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. He defines nation as “as imagined political community,” and the so formed communities are to be distinguished by “the style in which they are imagined” (15). But imagination has limitations, and the nation so formed has its own restricted boundary. But a nation cannot be imagined without history and each nation has a distinct imaginative space because of its distinctive history. So, it can be said that imagination and history play a vital role in defining a nation and fiction, broadly literature, plays a vital role in the shaping of this imagination.

Ernest Renan, one of the prominent scholars on nations and nationalism, defines nation as:

... a soul or spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lives in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an individual form (19).

Seen from this angle, it can be said that India has one soul, but different spiritual forces, since it has been invaded by many warriors and rulers in the past; and the present day variegated cultures, languages and histories have siphoned their way through these subsequent layers of previous conquests deposited on India's soul.

History does provide a sense of belonging to the denizens of a nation, and history is inevitable in the imagination of a nation because to imagine a nation without history would be to imagine history without wars. Modern India is the result of variegated historical incidents and movements, and the narration of

history is central to the narration of a nation like India. M. J. Akbar's family saga explores these variegated factors which shaped the consciousness of Indian nationals. While fictionalizing his own family history, Akbar flavours the work with many historical and political events of the last one and half century that shaped the destiny of modern India. It takes the readers to the famine of 1870s, spreading of epidemics, Jalianwala Bagh Massacre, Khilafat Movement, Quit India Movement, the role of leaders like Gandhi and Nehru in the freedom struggle, partition of the subcontinent, subsequent communal riots and India's war with China and Pakistan. The narration of these events make *Blood Brothers* the narrative of the country called India.

In writing the history of his family and India, Akbar resorts to fiction, and he belongs to those writers who believe that fiction helps convey the truth with more clarity and effect. He says: "anyone who writes knows the truth is untidy" and fiction, in providing a clearer narration of events, "becomes a more important form of truth" (Rajan 9). The beginning of the text sets the dramatic texture of the novel as the narrator says, "My grandfather died while I was playing on his chest. That was my first stroke of luck" (1), and the narrator is about a year old at the time of his grandfather's death. Then, the narrator recounts the life of his grandfather and talks about the famine in Bihar in the 1870s, which emptied the village in five years. Prayaag, the narrator's grandfather, born in a Kshatriya family, somehow survives the blight of the famine which took the lives of his parents. He escapes from the jaws of death because of his determination to live. Fate takes him to Telinipara, a village near Calcutta, because he had heard about a bunch of Jute mills in and around Telinipara owned by the British. In the early hours of the morning, the famished boy collapses near a tea shop owned by Wali Mohammed. Wali Mohammed and his wife were childless; they adopt him as their son, and give

him shelter and food. Cholera takes Wali Mohammed's life and Prayaag takes charge of the business, converts to Islam, and receives the name Rahmatullah. *Blood Brothers* is divided into nineteen chapters, and the first chapter itself shows the novel's pre-occupation with history. Along with the story of the famine of 1870 in Bihar, the novelist sheds light on the growing predominance of East India Company and the declining Muslim dynasties.

The colonial rule in India gradually led to the evolution of national consciousness among the people of the subcontinent, and the anti-colonial movement gradually reached the various corners of India. The author does say that "the British were individually more honest than the Mughals, but collectively more greedy" (3). Along with showing the reverberations of growing nationalism in his native village, Telinipara, the author recounts the socio-political and cultural aspects of the people of Telinipara and the surrounding areas. Telinipara becomes the microcosm of the macrocosm, i.e., India. The narrator's family becomes the centre of his narrative. The role of public events in controlling and shaping individual lives are shown through the family and neighbourhood. M. J. Akbar briefly alludes to the First World War and the war between England and Germany which favoured Bengal and the jute mills.

The rise of political and national consciousness in India took many years and many movements to turn into a nation based movement. The repressive policies of the colonial Raj gave way to many regenerative processes aimed at overthrowing the British from the Indian subcontinent. It was only after the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi into the political arena that it became a mass movement with reverberations all over the subcontinent. The novelist delineates the reverberation of the growing national consciousness in Telinipara and the surrounding areas.

The religious sentiments of the people in the subcontinent often transcended the political consciousness, and revivalist movement like AryaSamaj and Tablighi Jamaat prepared the ground for that. Telinipara was known for its religious fraternity and brotherhood, but communalization of the society by irrational leaders and revivalist movements becomes an impending danger for the peaceful existence of the village. The history of Indian nationalism is also the history of the slow but steady communalization of Indian society due to the inclusion of religious nationalism into the main stream politics. The theories of nation and nationalism fail in the Indian subcontinent because of the multiplicity of languages, religions and cultures. There were many movements in the subcontinent parallel to main stream nationalism and these movements were always in conflict with the main stream independence movement. Two Nation Theory was one among them and this later led to the division of the subcontinent. These movements and developments find expression in the novel. The novelist hints at the movement led by Periyar. E. V. Ramaswami Naicker and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. The narrator's father and his friends are shown enjoying the war of words between the leaders of the Muslim League and the Congress. People like Syed Shah Bukhari and Govardhan Ahir believe in the necessity of two separate nations for Muslims and Hindus. Thakur Bhagwan Singh says: "...the crafty Govardhan Ahir has been arguing at the tea shop that the age of Hindus has finally dawned, that India will become an Akhand Bharat once the British go... some of the Mullahs wandering around are frightening Muslims with the same thought. They are saying Islam is in danger! Do you think there is a conspiracy between the two?" (206). Sensible people like Syed Ashfaque show the meaninglessness of Pakistan from the Quranic and Islamic point of view. He reflects; "Muslims are a Brotherhood, not a nation. I wish someone would persuade Jinnah Sahib to read the Quran" (208). The pamphlet of the Muslim League seeking the support of the Muslims for the Direct

Action Day reached Telinipara and Syed Ashfaque responded with farsightedness: “Allah pronounces doom and no one can reverse it” (209). Calcutta burned with communal riots on that day, and thousands of people from both communities were killed. But in Telinipara, the Britishers, Hindus and Muslims together ensured peace and harmony. At last the inevitable came, the British decided to divide the subcontinent into a Hindu Majority India and Muslim majority Pakistan with the agreement of both the Muslim League and the Congress. When it was formally announced that India would be partitioned to create a divided Pakistan (West Pakistan and East Pakistan), grandfather Sheik Rahmatullah questioned the logic of a separate country for Muslims: “Pakistan has been formed for the Punjabi Muslims in the West and the Bengali Muslims in the East. No Pakistan has been offered to Bihari Muslims” (211). The independence of the two nations was marred by communal riots on both sides of the border and constant flow of people between the borders. People of Telinipara clustered around the radio to hear the speech of Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, and while listening to Nehru’s speech Girija Maharaj asks; “why isn’t Gandhi talking to us?” The novelist gives the answer: “Gandhi was not in Delhi. His struggle for freedom had killed the India he knew. While Nehru celebrated freedom in Delhi on 15 August, Gandhi was protecting life in Calcutta” (212).

The main difference between history and fiction is that history talks about what has happened where as fiction recounts the effects of what happened to the lives of people. *Blood Brothers* delineates the impact of the partition and the subsequent communal riots on individual lives by focusing on the family of the narrator and the village Telinipara. During that turbulent period, people were forced to leave their native places for new areas causing displacement and rootlessness. The assassination of Gandhiji on January 30, 1948, clearly proved the

extent to which the people of India were communalized. People like Akbar Ali became numb on hearing the news, but persons like Ram Chatterjee rejoiced over the tragic death, and he asked himself: “who will save these Muslim bastards now” (217). The peaceful atmosphere of Telinipara was soon disturbed by the well planned communal riots led by Ram Chatterjee and Pulluck Sanyal. Ram Chatterjee and Pulluck Sanyal convened together, and decided to create problems during the holy procession. The communal riot in Telinipara started with the killing of the poet-teacher Syed Ashfaque, and Rahmatullah’s family reached Calcutta safely only because of the timely intervention of Simon, the British Sahib. After Independence, the loyalty of Muslims towards India was increasingly questioned by communalist forces and this tendency of treating the minorities as anti-nationals finds expression in the novel. Altaf Gauhar was arrested, and Akbar Ali was imprisoned in preventive detention because Ram Chatterjee implicated him in the letter he wrote to the Home Minister. The letter says that Akbar Ali was in constant contact with the enemy through his Pakistani wife and was passing highly dangerous secret information to a member of the Pakistan army. The irony of this detention is that Akbar Ali was the person who replied “there were too many Muslims in Pakistan” (235), when his son, the narrator asked why he returned to India in 1948. Meanwhile, a Calcutta business family purchased the Victoria Jute Mill and the new owners started using religious sentiments of the workers to check the trade union activities in the Mill. The activities were led by the young communist, Mohammed Ismail, who later succumbed to religious sentiments at the time of communal tension.

The novel brings out boldly and objectively the innate strength of the subcontinent’s common heritage. The novel does not talk about one culture, one language and one religion but it projects an India with myriad cultures and

languages. Telinipara was known for its Hindu-Muslim unity for about one and half century because of the open mindedness of both Hindus and Muslims and the place becomes a telling example for the multicultural fabric of Indian society. The novel looks at how Hindu and Muslim identities in India weave into each other because they are essentially part of the same stock. In crisis, the people of Telinipara help each other without considering their religious differences. The novelist's Telinipara represents the dream of an integrated India where Hindus and Muslims live in harmony. But this community is, also repeatedly wounded by the outbursts of communal violence, though people try to check the infiltration of communal forces with all their might. Rahmatullah, the author's grandfather, not only seamlessly integrates himself into the new religion helped by the poet-teacher, Syed Ashfaque and the smiling Sufi, Burha Deewana; he also nurtures a community to life around the jute mill that holds the promise of a secular India. The novelist shows the sense of accommodation and value of understanding religion in the right sense through a series of incidents that take place in Telinipara.

The novelist tries to show that lack of proper understanding of religions is the main reason for communal violence. He quotes constantly from religious scriptures to show the similarities between Hinduism and Islam. Akbar draws the attention of the readers to the ways in which mutual understanding can be fostered in a place like India. The narrator's grandfather converted to Islam not because of compulsion but out of love towards the family who provided shelter and compassion, when he was in trouble. He becomes the quintessential Indian who combines the best teaching of Islam and Hinduism. Girija Maharaj, though an ardent Brahmin, has no problem becoming the friend of Rahmatullah. Burha Deewana, the smiling mendicant, and his teachings to the people of Telinipara show the role of Sufism in maintaining harmony in India. Burha Deweena, the sufi,

becomes the mouth piece of the author and he warns the people of Telinipara to be cautious of the religious fanatics: “There is no evil more malignant than a poisoned hear t... God does not divide man. Men divide God. God is one: alone, eternal, indivisible. The Jews call Allah Elohim, the Hindus know him as Brahma. Let men kill each other over wealth, women, property, prejudice and power, but ... never God” (62).

There are certain religious leaders in both communities who become very sensitive to certain issues, and trifle with the religious emotions of the people. They are not the real models of Islam and Hinduism and to poke fun at them, Burha Deweena says: “a donkey with a load of holy books is still a donkey” (65). Burha Deewena’s presence in Telinipara becomes a sort of consolation for the people of that area. Both Hindus and Muslims seek his advice at the time of tension between the two communities.

Burha Deweena attracts a large number of women in Telinipara and they become his ardent devotees. He plays a major role in cementing the friendship of Hindus and Muslims in Telinipara, and he advises Rahmatullah and Girija Maharaj: “Do not provoke the enmity of one honest man for the support of a thousand. Honesty is always evident: the trees will tell you if it rained last night. Remain friends and there will be harmony in Telinipara” (125). According to the advice of the Sufi, Hindus and Muslims together started commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. The narrator’s grandfather and Girija Maharaj took equal ownership of the Muharram procession and the custom continued for many years till both communities stand poles apart because of suspicion and hatred.

The novelist reiterates the spirit of friendship and brotherhood in maintaining religious tolerance in a country like India. Akbar does not harangue or

lecture to drive home the point about the accommodation required to maintain communal harmony. Rahmatullah and his Mai set an example for accommodation through the party organized in connection with his marriage: “Dinner was placed before the guests: biriyani for Muslims, and dishfuls of savouries for the Hindus purchased from a Hindu sweetmeat shop. It was the best available” (33). The hold of religion on almost all characters is strong. But their religious feelings do not overpower their friendship and brotherhood. In fact, they resist the attempt of outsiders to poison the atmosphere of the town. Akbar shows the supreme value of dialogue and understanding of another religion in maintaining social harmony. He does show that there are differences between Hinduism and Islam but still harmonious existence is possible and India’s culture is the sum total of many cultures. Their bonding helps Telinipara to remain calm for many years even when the neighbouring areas burn. Together, they thwarted the attempts of communal forces and their plans to disintegrate the community.

Outside forces try to disrupt the tranquility and peace of Telinipara and they get supporters at times. Govardhan Ahir, who hails from Patna, is an emissary of communalism, and he tries to incite the flames of religious fanaticism. As a Hindu youth, he was very much attracted to the revivalist movement of Arya Samaj, and he believed in the holy war against Muslims. He carries a distorted concept of religion, and wants to make the impotent Hindus potent and courageous by creating stereotypes of Muslims. When the people of Telinipara come to know about his arrival, Rahmatullah and Girija Maharaj summon him to Rahmatullah’s house to get an idea about his plans. His interaction with them becomes a stark revelation to Rahmatullah and his friends, and it proves how venomous Govardhan Ahir is. He believes that Muslims are just the opposite of Hindus, and that their extermination will purify India: “Do you know that for Muslims the day begins at

night... What else can you expect of a people who are the opposite of all that is right? We face the east in prayer; they face the west. We begin our day by worshipping the rising sun; they begin their day by sighting the moon” (117). He is highly critical of Mahatma Gandhi who preached Hindu-Muslim unity during the independence movement and he believes that Hindu-Muslim unity during the Khilafat movement was just an illusion. M. J. Akbar explores the role of revivalist movements in Hinduism and Islam in the gradual communalization of the society. Both Arya Samaj and Tablighi Jamaat, aimed at the purification of Hinduism and Islam and to bring back the pristine glory of the respective religions. Maulana Jauhar Kanpuri comes to Telinipara as a missionary of Tablighi Jamaat and he forms a committee in Telinipara to reform the “imperfect Muslims of Telinipara” (131). They draft a reform pamphlet and common minimum programme for the Muslims of Telinipara to bring them into the religious fold. The irony of the pamphlet is that they printed the pamphlet “before any one realized that the target audience could not read” (132). Both groups began to convene secret meetings for an impending clash, and a distorted version of religion is taught in the meetings. Communal ideologues and leaders in India usually resort to history and religion to incite communal violence and animosity between Hindus and Muslims; and to that purpose, they make use of distorted versions of history and religion to attract the innocent believers into their fold. Govardhan Ahir in the meeting convinces his friends that Muslims go to the mosque for military training and not for prayer: “Have you seen how they pray? They stand in straight lines, like soldiers. They do not allow any gaps. They bend and kneel and touch the floor with their heads; these are military exercises” (133). Another popular stratagem of the communalists is the exploitation of population ratio and creation of the paranoia that one community is going to outnumber the other one: “There used to be 600 million Hindus before the Muslims came. Today we are only 200 million! And I don’t

have to tell you how many Muslims there are today! There are more Muslims than Hindus in Bengal!” (134).

The last chapter of the novel ends with the sacrifice of Kamala, the narrator's friend. He was killed with a knife meant for the narrator, and the tragic death of Kamala shows that communal riot has no religion. The communal riot was planned and executed by the new owner of Victoria Jute Mill, Ram Chatterjee and Kanhaiyalal, the RSS Pracharak, in Telinipara. The immediate reason was posters pasted by the communalists of Telinipara to hurt the sentiments of Muslims. There was a protest march in Telinipara against the posters which insulted the Prophet, and it was attended by both Hindus and Muslims. But it failed to alleviate the communal tension because of the rumours which had spread all over the town. People were reluctant to carry out Muharram procession as usual but Mohammed Ismail, the Marxist trade union leader in Telinipara, became the leader of Muslims, and he took the initiative to carry out the procession. There were no Hindus at the shrine of Burha Deewana from where the Muharram procession starts, and a sense of real combat fill the air instead of mock combat. The Muharram procession was attacked, and people began to kill each other disturbing the tranquility of the place. The novelist says: “Anonymous Hindus were searching for Muslim blood; anonymous Muslims were thirsty for Hindu blood” (342). And this thirst for blood ended in the tragic death of Kamala. Kamala and the narrator are the “blood brothers” of the title. Every generation of the narrator's family enjoyed such brotherhood. Kamala's funeral was attended by both Hindus and Muslims. Maulvi Ejaz was the only Muslim in Telinipara who refused to attend the funeral and he was thrashed by Muslims, and asked to get out of Telinipara. As in other Indian English novels, memory becomes an effective tool in the hands of the writer while he presents the amazing (hi)story of his family and India.

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