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## Irony of Human Relationship: An Interpretation of Urvashi Butalia's the Other Side of Silence in the Perspective of the Indian Concept of Humanism

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**Abstract:**

*This paper aims to explore the depth of human relationship even when human fell into the entanglement of the forceful geopolitical border lines in India. Indian partition in 1947 separated many families for many years. Keeping the memory of the nearest and dearest one inside their heart, many people were compelled to live separately year after year waiting for a second meeting. Thus, an eternal bond of human relationship has a clear ringing message in all Indian partition narratives. This is because each Indian heart throbs with the nation's long and rich tradition of humanism which teaches to embrace every creature with love and respect. This paper interprets Urvashi Butalia's The Other Side of Silence in the Indian concept of humanism and brings out the irony of human relationship as one of the outputs of the partition of the country. The text takes us to the subtlest peak of irony when one becomes sensible and hesitant to knock at the door of his or her own family member. The narrative presents a macrocosmic periphery of human existence where man cannot be confined within borders because according to Indian concept of humanism man is the part of the supreme creator of this universe.*

**Keywords:** Human relationship, tradition, humanism, macrocosm, border, irony

### 1. Introduction

That society is the greatest, where the highest truths become practical... and if the society is not fit for the highest truths, make it so, and the sooner the better.... (Vivekananda; 36)

The word 'humanist' derives from the fifteenth century Italian term "umanista" describing a teacher or scholar of classical Greek and Latin literature and the ethical philosophy behind it. In India, the concept of humanism has a long rich tradition which might have been started with Indus civilization more than 4000 years ago. The massive geographical spread of this civilization far beyond the limits of Indus valley put one thing clear that it strengthened the ground of universal cultural pattern of good living. Soon after them in 1500 BC Aryans put their first imprints in India. Aryans could not develop their own civilization in isolation. They borrowed from the Indus to generate a universal amalgamation of humanity. Their earlier attitude of treating the natives as 'dasa' or 'mlechha'(untouchable) gradually was changed because of their continuous effort to know 'Atma' and the secret of life. Later Vedic texts like Brahmanas and the extensive literature of the Upanishads foreground a broad field of experiments over humanism where human life is imagined as 'Atma', a spiritual essence. Thus, the Vedic period concludes that serving man is serving God. The Upanishads are a revelation of the subtlest essence of our being, which lies far deeper than the level of the common animal man. Human centred philosophy that rejected the supernatural can be found in Lokayata system (1000BC) of Indian philosophy. Known as Charvakas, they believed in the utmost fulfilment of the real life on this earth. Six philosophical schools naming Sankhya, Yoga, Naya, Baiseshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta were all in search of finding a true meaning of human life and its fulfilment. The humanistic approach of these schools lies in analysing the true nature of man, the reason of his suffering and the way of emancipation. In sixth century BC Buddha enriched the concept of humanism by proving that salvation can be attained in earthly life only through the absolute exercise of truth. In the promotion of humanism Medieval Hindu Devotionalism played an important role. During Thirteenth to Seventeenth centuries, a new attitude towards God, emotional, passionate 'bhakti', replaced the old approaches of sacrificial rites and monastic meditations. Humanism in nineteenth century was promoted in the form of social reformation in India. Ramakrishna (1834-86) and Vivekananda (1863-1902) in Bengal evolved a new definition of religion and humanism. They realized that to serve the God means to serve the humanity. Therefore, fulfilling the basic human needs is more important than religious practices. At the same time, Vivekananda urged for the nourishment of such humane instincts like mercy, love, piousness, purity, piety, restrain and self sacrifice. Twentieth century was also a fertilized time for the growth of humanism in India. Sree Arobindo (1872 -1950) had a deep faith in humanism and thought that it is the spiritual tradition of India that can inspire the rest of the world to grasp the unity of all humankind. His aim was to 'divinize the human nature' to know the supreme truths of human life. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) too had opened a new horizon of humanism by his deep philosophical thought and perception. He believed that Mankind itself had a

level of 'infinite Mind' which is identical with the 'supreme person' or the Mahamanab. Mahatma Gandhi has put emphasis on moral purity and also on willing tolerance towards diversity of religious belief and practice. His practice of non violence proves his firm belief in the close relation between man and god. In *My Religion*, he observes, "To me God is truth and love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness" (105). Jawhar Lal Nehru's secular humanism was merged in his concept of socialism. Radical humanism of M. N. Roy too had contributed in the enrichment of the Indian concept of humanism. Nehru believed in the institutional inward experiences which may be explored by science to discover the depth of humanism. M. N. Roy emphatically stresses on his own realization that ultimately what the human desires is 'spiritual freedom' something more satisfying than economic or political liberation. He thought that freedom is the key word of humanism. Dr Mahammad Iqbal (1873-1938), a great master in Urdu, Arabic and Persian poetry had enriched the humanist tradition of education in India. He believed that man should have an integration of the spiritual and the material, the ideal as well as the real for the common good of the humankind. He had a deep faith in human power of creativity. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was a great scholar of Muslim philosophy and an ardent admirer of science and technology. Yet, he was well aware of the 'spiritual thinking' in man. He thought only material progress cannot give man peace and prosperity. Dr Zakir Hussain, an educationist and a humanist, wanted to fulfil his mission of servicing the human through a liberating force of education. He thought that the primary concern of education should be the assimilation of intellectual, moral and spiritual values to which the student must learn to commit himself in his life and work. Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1973) promoted his ideals of humanism in the light of spiritual values in human life. He had a unique blend of Indian as well as western thought and therefore his concept of humanism had its goal to the spiritual awakening of the world. It must be noted that humanism was never felt to be institutionalized in India before Narsingh Narain formed The Indian Humanist Union in 1960 because humanism has ever remained an integral part of Indian culture and mental framework of the Indian people. In India, humanism along with its two basic values- love for fellow human beings and the scientific spirit of free enquiry ultimately is wrapped in a deep understanding of spiritualism. It is a theory of understanding an ideal universal harmony between materialism and spiritualism.

The fabric of human relationship, somehow, is thought to be torn apart with the partition of the country. Historians could not record this 'human dimensions' of this epoch- making event. In the broad canvas of literature those unrecorded facts of 'human' stories were made spoken out in a sensible stream of consciousness and also revived the readers' imagination to rethink about their own responsibility. Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* has attempted to capture not the division of the country but the division of human hearts. She therefore, has emphasized on the focus of the irony of breaking human relationships as a crucial after- effect of the partition of India. She significantly titled the second chapter as "Blood" to indicate that the common human relationships are usually marked by blood. Human blood symbolizes a strong human bond that defies the concept of border. This paper, therefore, explores the impact of partition on human relationships and shows that a lot of humanistic issues automatically come into focus for re-examination. A reappraisal of the Indian concept of Humanism in this context proves to be the best approach to gauge the depth of the human crisis.

## 2. The Author and Ranamama: A Bond Detached

Urvashi Butalia started the journey of narration from her own family with the story of Ranamama. The writer seems to be in search of a universal 'blood relation' that defeats the concept of border. The story of partition could not let the writer stay in peace for a long time as she heard about the separation of Ranamama from other members of their family. She was eager to connect the human relationships that partition broke up. On a summer night, 1987, the author met Ranamama, her mother's brother in Lahore. Partition caused their separation with Ranamama for long years. How much keen was the human dimension of such separation can be proved by the writer's own experience when she reached the house of Ranamama and stood before the gate like a stranger. In the circle of human relationship, uncle-niece ever remained a lovely and sweet relationship of heart. Yet she had to stand outside the door, "nervous, somewhat frightened, and also curious" (30; ch.2). At a time, she felt tempted to turn around and run back like an unknown visitor. When she entered into the house, she felt it "more like home than Delhi" (32; ch.2) She had 'careful conversation' with Rana's wife in the leaving room. She did not find her uncle at home but that seemed almost a great relief for her. She felt depressed to think that for last forty years, no one communicated with Ranamama. Such minute description of her first visit to Ranamama's house in Lahore brings out an irony of human relationship. She had the most loving 'uncle-niece' relationship with Ranamama yet she could not behave like a close relation. The house appeared more 'home' to her yet she hesitated to enter into it. She had to converse with them 'carefully' like an unknown visitor. Although her heart pined for meeting with Ranamama, she felt a relief not finding him in the house. The irony of human relationship, thus, is figured in by the writer very artistically and realistically.

The writer observed that the irony lies in the fact that man is regarded as the most rational being. But his activities prove his foolishness. She realized the fact right at the time of getting visa for crossing the border into Pakistan. She remarked, "Getting a visa was difficult, though, ironically, the visa office at the Pakistan High Commission ran two separate counters, one for people they called 'foreigners' and the other for the Indians" (31-32; ch.2). When she crossed the border, everything appeared to her same as in India, "...the same chaos, the same language, the same smells, the same clothes" (32; ch.2). She could not find in what basis the country was partitioned. She felt the same strong emotional bond in Lahore as she used to feel in Delhi where she had spent her whole life. Human heart does not know the impositions of borders. It only knows the language of emotions.

## 3. Man and Nature: A Humanistic Relationship

Partition of India could not separate Man from Nature. The writer heard from her mother that Ranamama, her youngest brother did not want to come to India for his deep attachment to their father's property. He felt an inevitable responsibility to preserve those lands along with their ancestral house after his father's death. He had, as if, a blood relation with the land properties and for that, he

sacrificed his own religion. The rest of his family members misunderstood him as to be greedy of property. They could not believe that human too, like tree, has his root under the soil. Cultivating lands was a matter of their family pride and it was like nourishment and growth of a child. It had a special attachment to Ranamama. Humanism gives value to such integrated relation between man and nature. Ranamama could feel every pulse of his land productions in his heart. No fear could stop him to protect them. Rabindranath and Wordsworth both worshipped this philosophical relation between man and nature as an inevitable part of humanism and advised man to be always in tune with nature for the well being of humanity.

The relation between Man and Nature is a humanistic one because Man fulfils his basic needs from Nature. Ranamama became a Muslim and married a Muslim woman. His conversion into a Muslim was not his perversion of character. Rather, it should be regarded a great sacrifice on the part of his personal life. His decision to stay in Lahore was more than sacrificing life because he had to sacrifice his own identity which is very crucial for anybody's existence on this earth. Ranamama was a man of free thinking. He himself took the decision of conversion. He admitted, "No one forced me to do anything. But in a sense there wasn't really a choice. The only way I could have stayed on was by converting" (37; ch.2). He argued that he was uneducated and he would get nothing to do in India. Moreover, it was illogical to depend on others for a long time. In Lahore, he would have shelter and lands for food. He repented for that decision but there was no other alternative. A deep anguish came out when he said, "I have not slept one night in these forty years without regretting my decision" (38; ch.2). The writer could feel Ranamama's heart full of natural sympathy and fellow feeling when the narrator heard him addressing her, "Beti" over the telephone. Her confidence on humanism grew when she felt anew the power of family ties. The word 'beti' (daughter) defeats all the distances that border makes. Human relationship has such spontaneity of connection that when suppressed, can come out more vigorously with a universal response.

In 1987, when Ranamama met the writer for the first time, all the flood gates of his emotions broke. The words that he could not share even with his wife and children found no obstacle that day. It was indeed an irony of human relationship that Ranamama could not trust his own children and wife to share the pangs of partition in his heart. Narration of his 'long disconnected life' raised various humanistic questions. He expressed how conversion made his living turned into a 'no-man's living'. He could not leave his earlier religion and could not accept the new one. The people for whom he was compelled to convert, too, could never welcome him as Muslim. He expressed the irony of such existence to the writer saying, "Even today, when walk out to the market I often hear people whispering "Hindu, Hindu". No, you don't know what it is like. They never forgive you being a convert" (38; ch.2). He began to live a no- man's life within himself pricked by his two souls at a time. He used to listen to the Indian news on Television everyday and supported the Indian cricketers against Pakistan. He admitted to have a home in Lahore but he ever thought India as his own country. Thus, partition divided one human into two selves without any consideration of human values.

Partition destroyed the fabric of human relationships. Ranamama and his sisters were the children of the same parents, same blood yet they stood strangers after a long time as they were inhabitants of two enemy countries. When the author took Ranamama's sisters with her in Lahore, Ranamama took his sisters on a proper tour of the house in which they all once had grown up. They could know from Rana that one of his sons had filed a case against his father accusing him of being a Hindu spy. He appeared to be a man haunted in his own house by his own children.

The political division of India brought change in the life of Ranamama's mother too. She at her old age had to change her name to Ayesha Bibi. She must have undergone a severe mental struggle with her traditional values and idealism to accept the pang of conversion and stay with her son. After her death, she was buried, not cremated according to the Hindu custom. She too passed her life in two clear halves, one as Dayawanti, a strong believer in pujas and prayers and another, one Ayesha who used to sit for daily Namaj. Ranamama, actually, could defeat all the narrow thinking regarding religion and work by welcoming two lives at the same time but he remained sorrowful to see the evil game of religion to show power and to gratify self interest of the fundamentalists. Even his family members in India could not become generous and open- minded like him.

#### **4. Human Relationship and Untouchability**

On the eve of the Partition of India general human relationship which was based on the traditional spiritual concepts of 'Nara Narayana' (regarding each human as the incarnation of Narayana or the supreme creator) went misdirected. Most of the Indians remained confined within their own religious practices as there was no scope of scientific education for all. The writer very poignantly observed, "The two countries were tied together in a relationship of fierce hatred and grudging interdependence" (87; ch.3). It was really ironical that partition of the country forced a group of Muslims and as well as Hindus to depart their native land. But it cannot destroy their socio-economic interdependence and a human bond born out of that relationship in their past life. The departure of barbers, weavers, tailors, goldsmiths and cleaners who were mostly Muslims, crippled the certain aspects of urban life in India. Similarly, the departure of clerks, bankers, lawyers, teachers, created an unavoidable problem in Pakistan. Thus, the socio-economic interdependence which formed a spontaneous and natural human relationship among the affected people received a great threat and caused a social disharmony. The writer also explained the point of 'fierce hatred' that has its origin in the practice of 'untouchability'. The concept of 'untouchability' that widened the gap between the poor and the rich, the upper caste and the lower, the Hindu and the Muslim, actually misled the people of India before Independence. The issue of 'untouchable' was really a humanistic issue as it hurt human relation. Ranamama's two daughters who had such experience in company of one Hindu couple of a distant relative reiterated the issue. The couple cooked their own food and somehow made their hosts feel inferior. In the name of religion, what they did was humiliation and mental torture. The writer agreed with them and admitted that Hindus used to keep themselves aloof from the Muslims although they did not hesitate to take service from them because all the lower jobs like cleaning and washing were used to be done by them. The writer remembered that her mother and sister too used to "throw the roti from such a distant fearing that they may

touch the dish and become polluted” (40; ch.2). Such treatments in most cases were to show power and dominance. Humanism does not encourage such discrimination because all humans are equal in Humanism. History tells us about kings and queens, leaders and heroes but there remains no corner left for those common people to speak about their stories of joy and sorrow. They remained ever silent. A humanist perspective can voice for them for proper justice.

### **5. Partition, Human Relationship and Loneliness**

The goal of Humanism is to express natural compassion and greater feeling of oneness among all creatures on this earth. Humanism opposes loneliness because it leads man to depression. The major gift of Partition to Indian people was loneliness. It rendered many women homeless and kinless as it did to Damyanti Sahgal. It opened up a new chapter for the women specially as the writer noted in chapter four, “Just as a whole generation of women were destroyed by partition, so also partition provided an opportunity for many to move into the public sphere in a hitherto unprecedented way” (112; ch.4). As Damyanti failed to convince her father to leave Amritsar for the outbreak of a riot, her father advised her to stay for few days to one of their relative’s house in Kulu. Her father had a firm belief on his workers who worked as a unit in spite of their different religious background and would fight for any sort of problem together. She had to set out all alone for Kulu because the servant whom her father ordered to go with her escaped in due time. She faced terrible problems of food and money on the way. She started to know life in a new way. She became all alone for the rest of her life. This loneliness and hardship helped her to gain an exclusive spiritual strength to fight and go ahead depicting the Indian philosophy of ‘charoibeti’ (life goes on). She dedicated herself in ‘karmayog’ in the form of service for humankind- for the poor, the helpless and the illiterate. She could feel the substance of Vivekananda’s humanism that ‘seba’ or service to all creatures is the only religion of human being. Service is a kind of meditation or ‘sadhana’, a deep involvement which would open the way to the God. In the light of love, all creatures are lover of ‘karmayogi’, a saint of karma. Damyanti in her story focused on this aspect of Indian humanism and expressed how she gained a universal touch in serving the affected people of partition after an irreparable loss in her personal life.

Damyanti narrated her journey being alone, quite weak, dying of cold and having no warm clothes. She felt the touch of humanity in a bus in which she was vomiting and sinking. One young man offered his seat and picked her up gently and put her on his seat. He dusted the vomit off her clothes and took her in his own bungalow. He called someone as ‘bahenji’ and one woman who came out was none other than one of her students. She put her arms around Damyanti and said “this lady means more to me than my life” (124; ch.4). She nursed Damyanti with warm water and clothes and kept in her house fifteen days for full recovery. She was moved by this hospitality and fellow feeling that remained twinkling in her memory as a mark of moral value and humanity in that unusual atmosphere of distrust.

### **6. Triumph of Human Love**

The story of Zainab and Buta Singh was described as one of the hidden stories that uncovered the irony of human relationship. Zainab was a Muslim girl who was said to have been abducted while her family was on the move to Pakistan. She was sold to a Jat, Buta Singh who married her and became parent of two girls. Families of both Zainab and Buta Singh took help of search party and separated them to grasp their share of property. Someone from Pakistan informed Buta Singh that Zainab was forced to marry his uncle’s son. Buta Singh sold his land and collected money for going to Pakistan. He converted him into Zamil Ahmad. But in the court Zainab denied her relationship with Buta Singh. Buta Singh committed suicide and left a note wishing that his body should be buried in Zainab’s village. For the objection of the villagers, his body was brought back to India. Zainab remained silent, unable to grieve and mourn for her lover. The story of Zainab and Buta Singh left crucial humanistic issues like liberty of living according to their own choice. Liberty of living was forcibly snatched away from them. The magistrate too could not judge the matter boldly ignoring the social pressure. Thus, the relationship between Zainab and Buta Singh turned into an irony of fate under the wheels of the partition machine. They were deprived not only of their home of love but also of their fundamental right.

### **7. Conclusion**

Urvashi Butalia has been active in the women’s and civil rights movements in India. The oral history that she narrates in *The Other Side of Silence* reflects her own heart-felt message of human relationship. The text is crowded with innumerable human characters who, although, are distant in locations, are actually intra-related in terms of sufferings. Ranamama, Damayanti, Zainab and Buta Singh, Subhadradevi, Rajinder Singh, Satya, Mongal Singh, Bahadur Singh, Basant Kaur, Gurmeet Singh, Kulwant Singh, Murad and lastly Maya Rani- all appear to belong to the same family of greater humanity and tell a common story of human relationship that is eternal. The stories of the pangs of conversion, indignity, identity crisis, humiliation, physical torture, distorted childhood, crisis of the Dalits and Harijans, are intermingled with each other in the text and raise various humanistic questions to ponder over. Three different chapters are dedicated to women, children and the Margins who were the worst affected and ironically enough were the least concerned about the partition. The realistic graph of the tragedy as sketched by the writer hints that it shook the base of the nation’s long tradition of humanism. The concept of Ahimsa and truthfulness is questioned again. The spirit of the Indian concept of humanism which worships each creature on this earth as the part of God needs review and this paper, through the critical analysis of *The Other Side of Silence*, attempts a little contribution to revive the consciousness of our national heritage.

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