



THE NIGHT DIARY: AN QUINTESSENCE OF INDO-PAK REFUGEE EXPERIENCES ACCENTUATING HOPEFULNESS AMONGST THE STATE OF DIVISIVENESS

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ABSTRACT:

*The Present article is to understand the refugee experiences of xenophobia and divisiveness pronounced in the novel *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani; it is an fictional account of a family's experiences of journey during Indo-Pak partition in 1947. There are many literary works of great calibre describing the horrors of this historical event, but the present novel is different as it is written as dairy entries by a twelve year old girl Nisha moving from Mirpur Khas, Pakistan to India. These are the reactions of an adolescent towards the turmoil, tribulations, displacement, xenophobia and sense of divisiveness and the way the narrator copes up with the situations.*

INTRODUCTION:

The Present article is to understand the refugee experiences of xenophobia and divisiveness pronounced in the novel *The Night Diary* by Veera Hiranandani; it is an fictional account of a family's experiences of journey during Indo-Pak partition in 1947. There are many literary works of great calibre describing the horrors of this historical event, but the present novel is different as it is written as dairy entries by a twelve year old girl Nisha moving from Mirpur Khas, Pakistan to India. These are the reactions of an adolescent towards the turmoil, tribulations, displacement, xenophobia and sense of divisiveness and the way the narrator copes up with the situations.

The Indian subcontinent has experienced a massive migration and displacement of around 20 million people due to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 resulting in brutal violence and creating the atmosphere of hostility, suspicion turmoil, tribulations, displacement, xenophobia and sense of divisiveness. It entailed in fierce riots, massive casualties, rapes, abduction, mass killings and atrocities in the name of religion, abundance of communal violence and ethnic cleansing.

The present novel under study *The Night Diary* has the background of Indo- Pak partition in the above mentioned horrific atmosphere. Nish, a twelve year old maintains a diary during her migration days; all these letters are addressed to her dead mother who was muslim. This novel is partially autobiographical as Veera Hiranandani was raised in a small town in Connecticut; her mother is Jewish-American and father comes from a Hindu family in India. Hiranandani was raised in both cultures-same as a protagonist Nisha is daughter of Muslim

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mother and a Hindu Father. Her novel *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* was named a Sydney Taylor Notable Book and she is a South Asian Book Award Finalist.

The present novel, *The Night Diary*, is a New York Times Editor's Choice Pick. This is a poignant story born out of one of the most intense moments in the world history- the partition of India and Pakistan, resulting in Nisha's search for home, her own identity, and a hopeful future. The novel has received several awards including the notable Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature (2018), Malka Penn Award for Human Rights in Children's Literature the Newbery Honour Award (2019), and the Walter Dean Myers Honor Award (2019). It has been presented on NPR's Weekend Edition and also chosen as the Best Children's Book of the Year by *The New York Times* in the year 2018, *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, *Amazon*, *School Library Journal*, and *Kirkus Reviews*.

The novel is in the form of diary entries by the protagonist Nisha, a twelve year old girl. It is her birthday gift by the family cook, Kazi- a muslim who tells her,

"Someone needs to make a record of the things that will happen because the grown-ups will be too busy." (p. 3)

Nisha decides to make the best use of the gift and write to her dead mother Faria. Nisha has a twin brother Amil who receives a collection of tales from *Mahabharata*, a book with beautiful pictures as Amil is not good with words. They live in Mirpur Khas with their father who is a head doctor in the City Hospital and their Dadi, grandmother. They live in government quarters. They have a very settled peaceful life in a large bungalow provided by the government; the servants- Kazi Syed and Mahit live in the cottages in the large compound of the hospital. Nisha is in girls' school and Amil goes to boys' school.

Nisha records, on July 18th of 1947, the unusual event happens to them. Three men visit their house in the absence of their father, speak to Dadi. Nisha and Amil are sent into the kitchen with Kazi; Amil comes to know that these men were insisting the family should leave Mirpur Khas as they are Hindus and the city will be a part of Pakistan, a Muslim country. The very next day, two Muslim boys follow and throw stones at Amil and Nisha while going to school. Amil is aware of the changes, he tells her,

"It's because we are Hindus... There are lots of places all over India where Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims fight one another all the time now... That's why those men came to the house yesterday. They said the Hindus should leave and they don't want Kazi to live with us."

When these tensions increase, fight takes place between a Hindu boy and a Muslim boy and Amil is followed again after the school is over. Father stops their school and explains the present situation of partition of the country and their town will be in the new country called Pakistan and the worst days are going to come as they are Hindus.

Nisha and Amil stay at home due to the increasing uneasiness outside. On 2nd August, few people break down their door, looting, ransacking, demolishing the furniture; Dadi takes Nisha and Amil to pantry and hide there. Kazi comes with a bleeding head and helps them to



come out. After this horrific incident, their father decides to leave the place as it is dangerous to continue there. He invites his friends and family for a party before leaving Mirpur Khas. When the party is over, Nisha understands that she has to depart with the fond memories attached to her birth place and she has to create new memories in India. She writes, “*My childhood would always have a line drawn through it, the before and after.*” There is a different partition taking place in her mind. Nisha’s family decides to start their unexpected life changing journey towards India. Nisha wonders, “*Wasn’t independence from the British supposed to free us? We’ve never been less free.*” (p. 194).

The Night Diary of Nisha develops in the form of a diary kept by her from July 14, 1947 to November 10, 1947- the peak of partition era. She resolves to employ the diary as a way to write to her mother, who died while giving birth to Nisha and her twin brother Amil. Nisha and Amil know very little about their Muslim mother as they grew with their Hindu grandmother and a total busy father. They know very little about their mother’s paintings, which their father keeps hidden.

A month after Nisha gets her diary, on 14th August 1947, after almost two hundred years of Rule over India Britain renounces the rule over India at the cost of Partition and British India is partitioned into two countries: Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. Nisha’s family leaves their homeland now in Pakistan and want a refuge in Jodhpur- a safe place in India. They have to leave their cook Kazi behind as he is a muslim. As the family travels, they face armed refugees, deprivation of shelter, food and water; experiences of sadness and uncertainty out of divisiveness. Nisha continues to write to her dead mother about the events of their journey as well as her struggle to open her mind and her brother’s inability to read because as *the words jump around and change on him*. In the beginning, Nisha writes to her mother out of loneliness, but by the end of the novel, she promises to write for her mother, promising that “*no matter what happens, you will not be alone*” (p. 254).

Veera Hiranandani writes in poetrylike language – light, lyrical, and descriptive all at once. She writes about a family and its search for identity; of religious differences, hatred and the ways that humans overcome them again and again. Throughout the novel, Amil turns to his drawing to avoid responsibilities, to keep himself occupied when stuck inside; and to distract himself from the challenges his family faces in the time of difficulty. Over the period of time, Nisha begins to understand that cooking does the same for her, as it provides her with a sense of continuity amidst change, comfort amidst chaos, and control when she has none regarding her family’s fate. At the end of the novel, Nisha is aware, as she cooks alongside Kazi, that even though she left home, the most important elements of home — the people she loves — came with her.

Conclusion:

The Night Diary is a fascinating, nuanced story of the human cost of conflict described by a twelve-year-old girl which comes in a poignant, personal, and hopeful way, and it is Nisha’s journey to find a new home in a divided country called India. The horrific divide has created much tension between Hindus and Muslims, and hundreds of thousands are killed while crossing borders. Half-Muslim, half-Hindu twelve-year-old Nisha doesn’t know why she has to leave her homeland, where she belongs, or what her country is anymore. Nisha and her

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family become refugees without any of their fault and the journey is long, difficult, precarious and dangerous; and after losing her mother as a baby, Nisha has to lose her homeland, too. But even if her country has been ripped apart, Nisha is optimistic and believes in the possibility of putting herself back together. Told through Nisha's letters to her mother, *The Night Diary* is a heartfelt story of one girl's search for home, for her own identity...and for a hopeful future.

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