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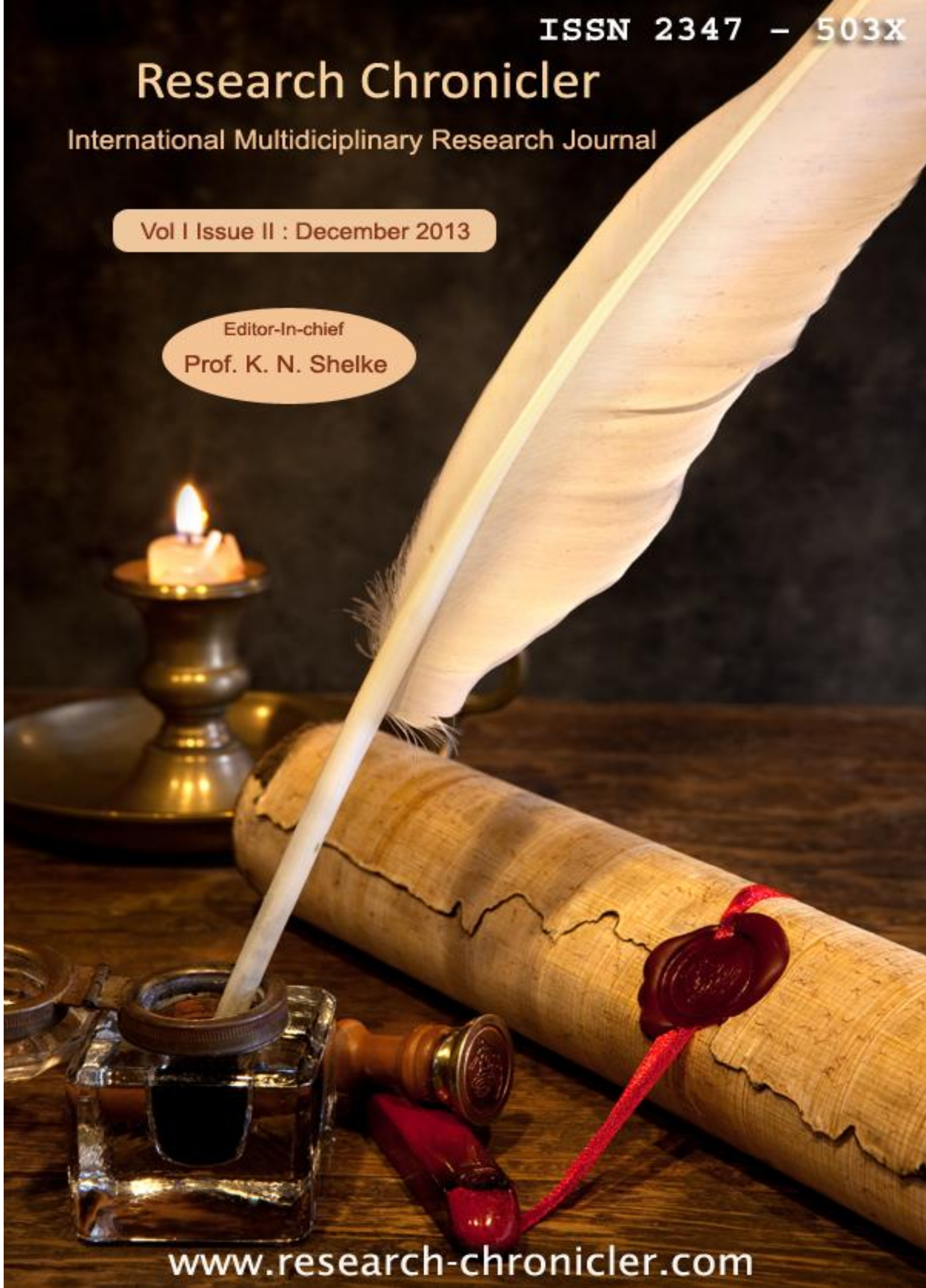
# Research Chronicler

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# Research Chronicler

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**Interrogating Representations of History:  
A Study of Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass***

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**ABSTRACT**

History means inquiry or knowledge about something which is acquired through investigation. It is also a field of research which uses a narrative to examine and analyze the sequence of events, and it sometimes attempts to investigate objectively to the patterns of cause and effect that determine the events. Present paper discusses the Indian history of 1940s, particularly the policies of the Congress which had played the discriminatory policy towards majority community i.e. the Hindu.

**Key Words:** Congress, Indian history, majority community, minority community, Partition, communalism, secularism

What is history? It sounds such a simple question. But it can cause a lot of disagreement. Napoleon called it 'a myth' and Henry Ford called it 'bunk'! While American historian David McCullough thinks that "History is who we are and why we are the way we are". History means inquiry or knowledge about something which is acquired through investigation. Further, it is a discovery, collection, organization, and presentation of information about the past events. It is also a field of research which uses a narrative to examine and analyze the sequence of events, and it sometimes attempts to investigate objectively to the patterns of cause and effect that determine the events. Generally, historians debate over the nature of history and its usefulness. This is not an easy job. You must be able to recognize the evidence, and based on that you have to decide how

much useful it is, and finally come to the conclusion based on what you have found out. We're going to find out how to do all this by using some real historical sources. Each section of the investigation will teach you a new skill so that by the end you will be a history detective! In fact, historians are a bit like detectives – using evidence to find out what happened and why. This includes discussing the study of the discipline as an end in itself and as a way of providing "perspective" on the problems of the present. The modern study of history has many different fields including those that focus on certain regions and those which focus on certain topical or thematical elements of historical investigation.

The historian-cum-novelist Mukul Kesavan's debut novel *Looking Through Glass* (1995) attempts to revisit, from a different point of view, the events of Indian

History of the troubled decade of 1940s – from 1942 to 1947 – leading to the independence and the way the gulf between the Muslims and the Hindus of India widened and political opinions polarized enabling personal destinies to be predicated upon. The novel tries to interrogate the personal as well as political decisions made about/during Partition from the point of view of the present. Kesavan emphasizes the need to understand or experience the past as opposed to simply knowing the facts in order to construct knowledge about the nation, and to make a dynamic connection between the past and the present. He not only interrogates the past to search the causes for current problems but also relativisms the fixed construction of the real, and thereby to open different avenues for interpretation and change. He has problematical history to question both, its authority and authenticity. He attempts to recover the marginalized history of the struggle of Indian Muslims, which is invisible in the dominant historiography of Partition and Independence, with its focus on the creation of Pakistan and the massive migration of the Hindus and the Muslims across the borders. His focus arises out of his sense of disquiet over the crisis in secularism that contemporary India faces. By juxtaposing the unreal presence of the modern protagonist with the real conditions of the Quit India Movement in 1942 – or perhaps from the reader's point of view, juxtaposing the reality of the post-Independence citizen with the unrealized Muslim experience of 1942.

Kesavan focuses on the marginalization of Muslims during the freedom struggle. The unnamed narrator presents the ambiguous and hypocritical attitude of the Congress towards Muslims. Through Masroor, the narrator charges on the Congress to be internally pro-Hindu organization. Though the Congress kept on trumpeting its Hindu-Muslim unity slogan and always posing itself to be a secular nationalist party, it was very much evident by the happenings of the 1940s that Muslims had very weak stake in the party's leadership. Muslims could realize by that moment that Hindu leadership has really outdone the Muslim leaders in the Congress. Reflecting light on the views of Masroor, Kesavan's narrator puts this case very emphatically in the novel. Masroor who had been an active member of the Congress is now disillusioned as the Congress seems to break its pledge of united and secular India. His disillusionment reaches its peak point with the launching of the Quit India Movement in 1942. Congress Muslims had earlier opposed the movement owing to widening communal tension between the two communities. His character, in the novel, serves as a powerful mouthpiece for the marginalization of Muslims by the Congress 'in the name of the Masses and History and Freedom.' This Muslim experience of the Quit India Movement, underscored by the disappearance of Masroor along with other Muslim characters, forms an effective counterpoise to Dadi's version of the uprising. Even forty years later Dadi is so consumed with the guilt that she did not answer Gandhi's call to

do or die in 1942 that she grows progressively weaker and weaker, and finally dies.

On the question of the time to launch the Quit India Movement in 1942 Masroor accuses on the Congress not to make a common consent among its Hindu and Muslim members. Owing to communal tension with the Hindus and the threat of insecurity that would alienate them forever, Congress Muslims have opposed the movement. Masroor opines that the passing the 'Quit India Resolution' by the Congress Working Committee has given the passage to the divisive forces in the country which later makes the firm ground for Partition in 1947. In the novel: "Masroor hoping that the resolution wouldn't be passed, that the August movement wouldn't happen that Partition wouldn't come to pass" (38). But, despite the opposition of the Muslim members, the Committee has passed the bill that asks the British to quit India while earlier "Gandhi said no. There was to be no direct action to push the British out till the Muslims had agreed" (247). The opposition of the Congress Muslims could not deter the Committee and it rectifies the views of its majority Hindu Members, on the pretext that the masses are favoring the campaign, and ultimately the movement is launched. Highlighting the irony of the decision Masroor comments:

Perhaps the committee was right; if the masses simply meant more than half the people counted by the census, you could subtract eighty million Muslims from the total and still have the masses left over. And so the Congress looked through us again in

the name of the Masses and History and Freedom. (190)

Masroor opposes the movement not because he was against the transfer of the power by the British to Indians but because it would lead to the further alienation of secular Muslims from the Congress Party. Explaining his stand, he says that he fully agrees to the demands of the movement but he does not find its timing suitable. In his opinion the Congress should work first on bridging the gap between the two communities otherwise they will have to suffer the consequences of the imminent Partition. Even on Gandhi for not following his words as he said earlier, Masroor blames:

Only six months ago Gandhi himself had said that he wouldn't start a civil disobedience movement without a settlement of the Hindu-Muslim question. ... But now ... he's asking us to do or die! . . . If they go ahead with this Quit India business ... Jinnah will have his Pakistan by the end of the decade. (38)

The novel traces the disenchantment and feeling of the marginalization of secular Muslims with the Congress Party, which originally functioned as the major anti-imperial, nationalist platform, through the protagonist of the novel, Masroor. He is constructed as a mirror opposite brother to the narrator. "Kesavan traces the history of a group rendered invisible by history by making them literally invisible in his novel" (Mee 153). The Congress has breached the pledge about its dream of free and united India; therefore its Muslim members go into enigma and political uncertainty, according to Masroor in the novel, because:

They have risked ostracism within the community by opposing the League's demand for a Muslim homeland they were committed to one secular nation. But they also knew that millions of Muslims distrusted the Congress, that they would have to be brought round, that rhetorical ultimatums to quit India without addressing their insecurities would alienate them forever . . . . For the Muslim League we weren't Muslims – we were Congress lap-dogs. For the British we weren't politically important enough to notice. (247)

Therefore, the fear of ostracism to the Congress Muslims has forced them to quit the Congress party or to live in political enigma. Saleem, a Congress member, goes over to the Muslim League because: "life as a Congress Muslim was inherently unstable" (254). In the novel, further a Muslim speaker also alleges that "It is the Congress which can't see us. It is the party of the nation that is blind" (189). This context of disappearance is a critique of restrictively nationalist conceptions of the body of the nation; it is similar to the birth of the narrator (in *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie) at the midnight hour of Independence. "Through this linkage, Rushdie foregrounds the metaphor of the body politic and critiques the notion of the nation as having some kind of organic coherence" (Mee 153).

Kesavan interrogates the correlation between essential humanity and secular nationalism; the manner in which the appeal to secularism in nationalism is based on the appeal to common humanity. He disturbs the discourse of nation that constructs a seamless progression from universalism to nationalism, a move that serves co-idealize secular nationalism by locating it outside the

scope of socio-political formations, in the sphere of universal, essential humanity. Through his protagonist's dilemma Kesavan points to the crisis in the Indian secular state that exists in the present. This state secularism which claims to perceive all religions as equally (un)important is actually founded on a suppression of the tortured, painful, anguished memories of the minority religions.

Masroor concurs with the protagonist's suspicion of and distaste for grand ideas and meta-narratives against the Congress. Kesavan offers a far more extreme platform to counter that of the Congress politics. This is one created by Ammi, Masroor's mother, who stands for election from Lucknow. In contrast to the grand claims made by the other national leaders and their parties, Ammi's agenda in the election manifesto is starkly simple that will not pave the way to the people to do politics in the name of religion.

For five years after the English leave,  
no roads shall be renamed,  
no statues removed,  
no statues raised,  
no republic constituted,  
no Constitution written,  
no coins minted,  
no textbooks written,  
no stamps issued,  
no laws made,  
no elections held,  
no boundaries erased,  
no frontiers drawn,  
till we sort out what we want to keep,  
from what they leave behind. (336)

The novelist has presented a different view on Masroor's anti-Congress stand therefore when he fails to stir people; he invents a machine for planting doubt about the secular policies of the Congress. With the help of modified press he produces jigsaws which contain the map of undivided India which serves as a metaphor of mapping territories. It symbolizes angst and harrowing of sensitive Indians who were disrupted by the idea of dividing the country, which was like cutting Mother India into two halves. Through the jigsaws Masroor denigrates the Congress for its discriminatory policy against the Muslims that led to Partition of the country. Through the medium of the maps he tries to give the lesson to the Congressmen. He portrays his idea: "First cut your country into pieces with your own hands. Then put it together piece by piece to understand how complex Indian unity is, how hard to built. Those significant instructions! The jigsaw was to teach Congressmen that they were dropping their Muslim pieces" (230). And, further, he presents the Fair in Delhi as a microcosm of the Hindu nationalist face of the Congress and its movements across the country by the wheels in the fair. Through the wheels he emphatically questions:

Were the wheels symbolic of the stoppable march of Congress nationalism? Did they refer to implacable wheels of Jagannath? And if they did, was the idiom of Congress politics borrowed from the Hindu carriage procession? Did it follow that Indian nationalism was a giant *rathyatra* with Gandhi in the main float and the Congress strapped to the ropes? (232)

Therefore, Kesavan has presented a pseudo-secular face of the Congress that is

lopsided towards the majority community – the Hindu. It has a silent tone of Hindu communalism. Through the political activism of a woman Congress-worker named Bose Madam in Azamgarh, the writer has tried to depict the real face of this organization. While the narrative's eyes cannot by any outward sign see what the communal identity of her audience is, everything in her speech indicates that she is addressing, what she considers, audience in which Muslims are in majority. To address the audience she clarifies the standing of the Congress on secularism and its treatment to the Muslims: "You must have heard . . . that the Congress doesn't speak for the Muslims, that our Quit India movement is a Hindu plot . . . I cannot prove to you that this freedom will mean freedom for Muslims . . . . I cannot prove that Congress is secular; I don't know if there is a single Muslim among my comrades . . ." (98-99).

The presentation of the assault on Madhuban as tragi-comedy comes not only from the absence of the Muslims in the revolt, which introduces a lack into the epic of the nation, but also from a confidence that the narrator knows what will happen. As a visitor he thinks that he knows the script of the past and feels caught in a "command performance of some endless period play" (14). Here the history repeats itself, which is progressively shaken as the novel goes on, for in the experience of Masroor and his family, he discovers that history is more complicated than the account given in the history books he studied at the college. The lack in the nation reveals a theatre that is more as well as less than the colonial master



narrative of national identity which privileges identity over difference. The discovery of the excision from Indian history of Masroor and his family brings about a loss of his secular enlightenment faith in the history of the nation. Masroor tells that Congress “bleaches us with secularism till we are transparent and then walks through us” (189). The narrator observes to love the difference of his Muslim friends. Towards the end of the novel, this love has to contend with the growing knowledge of the imminence of Partition and the violent fate of many of India’s Muslims. He seeks to protect them from history, seeking a safe place in which they can be “off stage when the curtain went up” (294). Masroor did not wish to repeat history of his family. He has presented his enigma in politics in 1940s that:

. . . there wasn’t a cause or party that he didn’t make his own. He joined the Congress, he joined the Muslim League. In the elections of 1937 he ran errands for both. When the two fell out, he stayed with the Congress because Nehru should have been his father. Now he distrusted all the parties; he just wanted to help keep the peace. (31)

History does not always give us the irrecoverable personal things. The task of brushing history against the grain is one that does not simply involve in an interrogation of the past; more importantly, it involves asking questions of the present. The history of India written by the British colonisers was duly replaced with the history constructed by the national leaders of the decolonized country, one that focused on the importance of nationalism, secularism, patriotism and unity in a newly independent state. To the characters in the novel, future

is a mystery and an unexplored tract. They see a hundred possibilities and they never know what surprise awaited them. But paralleling this is the narrator’s constant awareness of history. Kesavan ironically uses the historical awareness of the narrator to reveal his anxiety and his feeling of superiority. In the novel, the narrator thinks that I didn’t have to take his world for it. I knew. Jinnah had got his Pakistan well before the decade was out. On 14 August 1947, to be precise, which made Pakistan one day older than my Republic. My armies had fought three wars with that upstart state and here was Masroor hoping that the resolution wouldn’t be passed, that the August movement (the Quit India Movement) wouldn’t happen, that Partition wouldn’t come to pass. For a moment I felt the joyless superiority of a ninety-year-old listening to the enthusiasms of a child. (38)

Therefore we can say, according to the writer that without taking into consideration to the apprehension of the Muslims regarding the Quit India Movement of 1942, launching of the movement had widened the chasm between both the communities which led to Partition of the country in 1947.

Kesavan, on the one hand, do not in favor of the continuation of the British government in India during 1940s, that’s why in the novel, Ammi appeals her son Masroor to “throw the English out” for their wrong policies and the writer, on the other hand, do not support the divisive and self-centered politics of the Hindu as well as the Muslim politicians therefore Ammi again criticizes the top politicians of the country for their alleged roles in the happening of

this tragic event named Partition. Urging Masroor to change these politicians for better future of the country, she says: “the young always want to change the world. But Gandhi and Jinnah and Nehru? Experienced old men . . . They must be mad. How do they know that the change will be for the better? That they won’t yearn for things as they were before they were different? Why doesn’t someone stop them?” (326). Further, observing the divisive opinions of Nehru and Jinnah on Partition Haasan comments: “Jinnah wants Pakistan. Nehru tells the whole world twice a day that he dreams a free, united, secular, democratic India . . . . Nehru and Jinnah want to change the world so they need to give their dreams a name. But I don’t have a dream – I like the world as it is” (336).

Therefore, the writer is in favor of secular, democratic and undivided India. The instruction emphasizes the complexity of the issue of Partition, which was looming large over the lives of the people in 1942, over shadowing anything else. It was the destiny of the thousands of people who were to be rendered homeless, uprooted or mutilated – physically or mentally. Kesavan’s narrative, by pointing towards the reality of the time, catechizes the concept of India and articulates traumatic condition of the silenced voices. He has posited the question of possibility and need/pertinent of a new country for the Muslims. The writer opines that most of the Muslims did not in favor of Partition, and if once it happened they were not intended to depart from their native places where they were living for generations. In the mood of self-

interrogation the narrator envisions to ask his Muslim friends: “Will you go to Pakistan? When it wasn’t carved out yet, when no one knew if Partition would actually happen? . . . . Pakistan? Rubbish! No, never! – what comfort would I find in that? Because thousands trekked in ’47 who wouldn’t have moved in ’43” (175). This Partition led to violence which engulfed many more scapegoats throughout the country. In India the target of the frenzied mob was the Muslims. Therefore, according to writer, in India only Muslims were targeted but not the Hindus and the other communities by the rioters. In the early 1940s, imagining about the imminent partition of the country, the narrator utters his concern:

I wasn’t worried for myself. I had been born a Hindu and in Delhi from all accounts it was mainly Muslims who died . . . my friends in Lucknow. Not for Haasan since he was a Hindu too, but for Ammi and Asharfi, and Masroor if they ever found him. Four years from now I could see lose them in one of two ways: they could get killed in the Partition riots, or they could choose to leave for Pakistan. (174-75)

The partition violence forces Muslims to choose – either to live in India or to depart for Pakistan. When they live in India they will have to suffer communal violence against them and if they depart to newly born country for them they will have to leave behind everything earned from generations – properties, business, job, native place etc. Their citizenship was also uncertain. This uncertainty did not leave untouched to the newly born children whose identity was not then determined in the ‘Old

Fort Refugee Camp'. Even these children, like adults, had to choose their national identity either Indian or Pakistani: "So more children lived to confront the dilemma of nationality. Patriots and traitors were born every hour. The newly minted Republic wasn't offering dual citizenship" (361).

Further, the author mulls over the causes behind the communal riots of 1940s which culminated in Partition of the country in 1947. The differences of tradition, way of living or any other cause(s) between the Hindus and the Muslims lay the sound reason for communal violence. The narrator pays careful attention towards the traditional difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. He self-interrogates: "why they (his Muslim friends) used a kettle with a curving spout to wash their bottoms with instead of a mug or a *lota* like everyone else" (175). Through the narrator, Kesavan expressed his opinion:

Religion was a private matter confined to the inner space between brains and bowls, so it couldn't possibly make a difference to arse-washing techniques which fell outside its scope in the secular realm . . . differences were unimportant since we were all identical in our essential humanity. (175)

Therefore, religion is a private matter of concern for individuals and we should not politicize it because it differs from person to

person. The moment it is get politicized, there is a sound prospect of communal disharmony between the communities. Therefore, we should avoid intermixing of religion with politics, because these two things are related to two different domains. Religion, on the one hand, is personal issue while politics, on the other hand, is a social issue. Intermixing of both gives birth to communalism.

At last, in the novel, Kesavan has opined that during 1940s of the Indian history, the Congress had played the discriminatory policy which was lopsided towards majority community i.e. the Hindu. This lopsided view primarily had paved the way to disenchantment to the Congress Muslims from the Congress party, and further, the pseudo-secular face of the Congress had widened the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims which became one of the sound causes for Partition, on the basis of religion, of the country into two parts. We should avoid such type of discriminatory policy either towards majority community or minority community, because this is not good for the prosperity of our nation. All of us are equal, and citizens of secular India, with the same rights without any discrimination.

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