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**Gulzar. Footprints on Zero Line. Harper Perennial, 2017.
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‘Footprints on Zero Line’, published in 2017 by Harper Perennial, features fiction, non-fiction and poems on the subject by the writer. Gulzar doesn’t stop at the events of 1947 but explores how they continue to affect our lives, in the book. It is rendered in English by author and translator Rakhshanda Jalil. The Sahitya Akademi Award and the Padma Bhushan recipient, our most enamoured Gulzar Sahab, has turned 87. The poet, author, lyricist, film-maker was born Sampooran Singh Kalra in Dina (now in Pakistan). Having experienced the horrors of the partition first-hand, it is a theme Gulzar often returns to in his writings. Reading the contents of his ‘Footprints on Zero Line’ one will feel that for Gulzar sahab the partition is not merely an act of severance, a historical event located in a certain time and place; for him it is an opus de profectus, a work in progress. The partition of 1947 seems to rise above its time and circumstance and speaks to him, and not just once or twice but, to borrow a metaphor from cinema, as a “voice over”.

This initial impression is reinforced when one takes into account this volume in its entirety. In story after story, Gulzar sahab revisits what has been left behind, sometimes through dreams, sometimes in actual fact, occasionally through a retelling

or a remembrance. Sometimes he re-examines the consequences of the partition – consequences that range from the political to the emotional and psychological. And it is in his keen grasp of the consequences of partition that you see the sharp political understanding behind the poet’s eye.

Dina, the home of his childhood, the one he left behind, figures in several poems as does the experience of going back to Dina, be it through dreams or memories save for that one time when he actually does go back – seventy years after leaving. The closest he can get to describe that experience is through a game he played as a child, ‘dhayya chhuna’.

Gulzar sahab differs from the “partition generation” of writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chandar in many ways; for one, he has the benefit of hindsight and the luxury of introspection. He is not interested in chronicling the events that led to the division of the sub-continent, or putting them in neat labels of “cause” and “effect”, or even apportioning blame.

Instead, he wants to peel back, layer upon layer, the silence that had settled upon the lives of those most affected by the partition. The fact that the Partition has been haunting Gulzar through the years has reflected in his writings, sporadically. *Footprints on Zero Line* collects all the angst in its pages. Most of the content disturbs, pulling at the readers’ comfort, uncovering a disquiet that every violent upheaval has evoked in them and which they have sought to push beneath the many layers of daily living. The poems are particularly poignant. Some recreate images from the poet’s childhood, in others we walk with him as he visits his childhood haunts in Dina, across the border, where ‘it has taken me seventy years to return’. He shares his dreams of mustard fields, and ‘the house where I was born/ where all day long the sunlight /Pouring through the iron grille on the roof/Transformed my courtyard into a chessboard.’ And carries the reader along as he flies on wheels, ‘Pointing out wondrous sights over the Jhelum/ Where boys float over the river on watermelons’.

Other images are less magical. In “Bullet”, Gulzar describes the violence of a gun wound with cinematic precision:

‘The bullet wove its way through the turban
And the blood splattered on the wall
as though someone had spat a mouthful of paan...’

Then the poem turns as only Gulzar can turn it, from violence to a personification of sorrow as he writes:

‘A stunned silence stood for a while
Someone could be heard whimpering
Standing quietly in one corner of the house
An oil-lamp kept quivering.’

The poems are also in the original, printed alongside the translations. And in every turn of phrase in the originals, there is the inimitable voice of a poet who can make us laugh, cry and as here, gasp

at the power of his emotional link with his roots and the angst over being torn away from where part of him still belongs.

Many of the stories in *Footprints on Zero Line* have appeared in other collections. “Ravi Paar”, from a collection of that name, is one of the most powerful Partition stories I have read, and it finds a place here. Two soldiers bring out the irony inherent in the fact that men who are children of the same soil have to fight on opposite sides of an imaginary line. Each story holds a different reflection of the author’s experience, which he bedecks with imagination and sets into evocative prose.

A dialogue between the author and Joginder Paul on their fiction and Partition is the last offering in the book; not counting the translator’s note. The book is an amalgamation of the writer’s artistic caliber of writing and cinematic craft through which he exuberates the pain of partition which he has experienced personally. The aim of the author is to concretize the pain of longing for native place through his craftsmanship. He wishes to be remembered as one of the many who went through life changing alterations due to this cataclysmic event of remaking of the borders. That is why he particularly focuses on the memories of the idyllic state of childhood days which are epitomized as sources of bliss. It would not be wrong to say that the book is interwoven through multiple aspects of childhood, trauma, history, memory and craftsmanship.

It is not easy to read this book in one sitting. The feeling of helplessness, of being a pawn in a game played by blind men that Gulzar conveys is overwhelming. Yet, it is a vital book, from a voice that has over the years been best heard conveying the emotions of celluloid protagonists but now speaks out both as history and a prophet of what the future can still hold, if the wounds the past inflicted pass out of memory.

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