

Political Turbulence in Khushwant Singh's Novel Train to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the political turbulence in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan. It portrays the trauma of Partition that gave birth to two political boundaries—India and Pakistan. On the eve of Partition, thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a horrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs.

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Introduction:

Train to Pakistan, the first novel on the theme of Partition, is a brilliant and realistic story of political hatred, violence, and of mass passions during those turbulent and fateful days that preceded and followed the Partition of the British India. It is based on the theme of Partition of India into India and Pakistan, and hence it narrates the pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the swirl of Partition. The novel is considered one of the best novels on Partition. Khushwant Singh became popular with the publication of Train to Pakistan, his first novel, in 1956. This also won for him the "Grove Press India Fiction Prize" for the year 1956. Train to Pakistan portrays the trauma of Partition that gave birth to two political boundaries—India and Pakistan. On the eve of Partition, thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a horrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Partition touched the whole country and Singh's objective in this novel is to see the events from the point of view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village, which is situated at the border between India and Pakistan. Originally it is entitled Mano Majra which suggests static, while the present title, Train to Pakistan, implies change. This perhaps prompts V.A. Shahane comment that "...the change of the title of the novel from Mano Majra to Train to Pakistan is in keeping with the theme of the novel." (Shahane, 68) Joan F. Adkins has great praise for the novel when he says, Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan deserved a high position in Indian –Anglian literature.

The major breakthrough in Khushwant Singh's literary career came in the year 1950 when he published his remarkable collection The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories. Almost all these were based on his real experiences related to his colleagues and friends, it will be very interesting to note that, Khushwant Singh became full-time writer by his choice; he has no such intentions. The decision to write came to him only when he had found something compelling him to write about this was at the time of partition; he was greatly moved by harrowing events during those turbulent days. His outlook towards of life suddenly underwent a drastic change and got

disillusioned with that turbulent atmosphere. His belief of intrinsic nobility of my kind was totally shaken. He said:

“The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accomplished by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country... I had believed that we Indians were peace loving and non-violent; that we were more concerned with matters of the spirit, while the rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things. After the experience of autumn of 1947, I could no longer subscribe to these views. I became an angry middle-aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world ... I decided to try my hand at writing”

(Dhawan 12)

Khuswant Singh was a witness of the holocaust which followed in the wake of the partition of the country. That was indeed a bloodiest upheavals which deprived the innumerable innocent lives and loss of property. This traumatic experience made him so restless and he device the writing to vent his feelings and the result is Train to Pakistan.

Khushwant Singh gives vent all venom and indignation felt by him at the horrifying tragedy of brutality and savagery in his novel Train to Pakistan. He pours out the agonizing tale of human tragedy and the sinister impact of the partition on the peace loving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Mano Majra, realistically with scathing irony. Khushwant Singh has designed the novel explore the brutal and hypocritical image of man and simultaneously present his faith in the values of love, loyalty and humanity. Khushwant Singh had selected the title *Mano Majra* for the novel Train to Pakistan as Mano Majra, a small village, close to the Indo-Pakistan border serves as the setting for the novel. For centuries in this village Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs have loved each other as brothers and lived together in peace. But this tiny village becomes the microcosm of communal conflict and violence generated by the partition. This village had known no communal hatred and distinction before the flames of prepartition communal frenzy reach there. The harmonious atmosphere, the functional ‘integration’, prevailing in this tiny place is vividly described in the novel thus:

Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the money lender Lala Ram Lal. The three brick buildings enclose a triangular common with a large peepul tree in the middle. The rest of the village is a cluster of flat-roofed mud huts and low walled courtyards, with front on narrow lanes that radiate from the centre. Soon the lanes dwindled into footpaths and get lost in the surrounding fields. At the western end of the village is a pond ringed round by keekar trees. There are only about seventy families in Mano Majra, and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims about equal in numbers.... But there is one object that all Mano Majrans –even Lala Ram Lal –venerate. This is a three-foot slab of sandstone that stands up right under a keekar tree besides the pond. It is the local diety, the deo to which all the villagers- Hindu, Sikh, Muslims or Pseudo-Christian repair secretly whenever they are in need of blessing. (2).

Deo, the local deity, was the symbol of communal harmony in the village. But 1947 was not like other times; it was different in character. The situation of the country deteriorated miserable in the wake of the partition. There were killing and rapes. Evils dominated the scene. The violence that started in Calcutta swept the country and tortured people. Khushwant Singh Vividly describes the tragic scene:

Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta, and within a few months the death roll had mounted to several thousand...From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west to Noakhali in East- Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus, to Bihar where Hindus massacred Muslims.(2).

The people of Mano Majra were peace-loving. In the beginning they were not at all affected by what happened in the country; they were blissfully ignorant of the rampant killing spreading all over the north of the country. The robbery and the murder of the moneylender early in the novel were not accidental; it was a prelude to the swelling acts of murder and violence. Murder and romance – even the romance of Hukum Chand, the deputy commissioner of the district, with Haseena, the hired prostitute, on the eve of inhuman blood-deluge; foreshadowed the disaster that was soon to follow. The sub-inspector emphasized the peace, prevailing in the village so far, when he informed the deputy commissioner: “We have escaped it so far, sir.

Convoys of Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan have come through and some Muslims have gone out, but we have no incidents” (19)

Their conversation revealed the ghastly butchering of men during those troubled days of the partition. The trains carried death; the Muslims in Pakistan had sent the butchered Sikhs. The magistrate said to the sub-inspector: “You haven’t had convoys of dead Sikhs this side of the frontier. They have been coming through at Amritsar. Not one person living! There has been killing over there.

The merciless killing of the Sikhs did not remain ‘unretaliated’. Bloodshed and violence invited violence. The Sikhs could not sit quite; they cried for revenge and indulged in killing. The magistrate said to the inspector: “... the Sikhs retaliated attacking a Muslim refuge train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses? They wrote on the engine ‘Gift to Pakistan!’ (Singh 19).

Hakum Chand, the deputy commissioner of the district, insisted on maintaining law and order. He knew his duty and he restrained himself from indulging in destructive acts as his counter parts in Pakistan had sadly done. The magistrates in Pakistan had become millionaire overnight, and some on this side had not performed to let the Muslims go out peacefully. He said:

Nobody really benefits by bloodshed. Bad characters will get the loot and the government will blame us for the killing. No, inspector sahib, whatever our view sand God alone knows what I would have done to these Pakistanis if I were not a government servant – we must not let there be any killing or destruction of property. Let them get out, but be careful; they do not take too much with them. Hindus from Pakistan were stripped of all their belongings before they were allowed to leave. Pakistani magistrates have become millionaires overnight. Some on our side have not done too badly either... (Singh 2).

The depiction of these developments fairly reveals the inhuman drama enacted during those tragic days of the partition. It constantly reminds the readers of the bloody history that followed Independence. Even the hearts of the people, who were entrusted with the task of maintaining law and order, were burning with the fire of communal hatred. The magistrates and the police were indulging in ruthless cruelties in both Pakistan and India. Psychologically, even

the saviours were ironically affected by the furious winds of change and destruction. The peace-loving people of Mano-majra did not know anything about the black partition that brought destruction and death before the trains, full of the dead bodies of the Sikh refugees, began to pass through the village. But the impact of the partition was noted by the train conscious Mano majrans in the late running of the over-crowded trains:

Now the trains were often four or five hour late and sometimes as many as twenty. When they came, they were crowded with Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan or with Muslims from India. People perched on the roofs with their legs dangling, or on bedsteads wedged in between the bogies. Some of them rode precariously on the buffers (Singh 1).

The train showed the plight of the people running away from Pakistan. There was obvious jubilation on crossing the border. Reaching the safe land was certainly an occasion of relief and rejoicing during those troubled days when the 'Two-Nation Theory' was put into practice, resulting in an indescribable human tragedy. The Mano Majrans wanted to know from Iqbal all about Pakistan and Hindustan, and what made the British leave this country. Independence did not mean anything to them. Lambardar expressed his doubt about freedom when he said to Iqbal: "Freedom must be a good thing. But what will we get out of it? Educated people like you, Babu Sahib, will get the jobs the English had. Will we get more lands or more buffaloes? (Singh 19).

Train to Pakistan portrays the picture of ghostly horrors enacted on the border region during the horrible days of the partition. It begins with the horrors in the east and very scientifically focuses the camera on the bestial activities committee in the madness of communal frenzy on the Indo-Pakistan border region in the north. The train loads of corpses, their cremation and burial, the swelling of the Sutlej with corpses presenting a dreadful sight, the young group believing in the theory of 'tit for tat', the in human killing on both the sides of the border, Hukum Chand's ironical thinking on tryst with destiny, Sundari's tragic fate and thousands of such terrible incidents give an idea of the ghastly deeds that accompanied Independence.

Khushwant Singh exhibits a genuine faith in the humanistic ideal, in depicting a real-to-life Jugga lying down his life for the woman he loved. It is Khushwant Singh's deep and ethical humanism that govern his portrayal of the real and the actual. Vasant Shahane says:

Train to Pakistan, therefore, is no mere realistic tract nor is it a bare record of actual events. On the contrary it is a recreation of the real and it reaffirms the novelist's faith in man and renews artistically his avowed allegiance to the humanistic ideal. (76).

The novel states clearly that the outgoing rulers brought the nation to a terrible chaos. The leaders responsible for such an unprecedented tragedy had not been spared. The insanity of the two-nation theory, of a safe homeland, and of the partition, uprooting the masses of humanity, has been fully exposed. K.R.S. Iyengar says:

Khushwant Singh, however, has succeeded through resolved limitation and rigorous selection in communication to his readers a hint of the grossness, ghastliness and total insanity of the two- nation theory and the Partition tragedy. The pity and the horror of It all!- and the novel adequately conveys them both.(502).

Thus Train to Pakistan is a story everyone wants to forget; yet one cannot overlook this stark reality of our past. When the nation was on the threshold of new dawn, it also faced unprecedented destruction, bloodshed and trauma. Khushwant Singh has successfully delineated this unpleasant phase of our national history in the novel. The novel explores and lays bare the mysterious wellsprings of courage, endurance and affection, from which human beings draw inspiration at moments of distress to rebuild their lives and to sustain faith in themselves. Train to Pakistan remains, like all Partition literature more a warning for the future than a reminder of the past.

Khushwant Singh's version of Partition in this novel is very balanced. He makes it quite clear that on the score of massacres no side was less guilty than another. While the two communities in Mano Majra pledge their mutual distrust, Jugga and the Muslim girl Nooran pledge their love. While at the lowest end of the moral scale are the parasites of Partition who massacre for pleasure and plunder (people like Mali and his dacoits who at the beginning of the novel, murder the moneylender of Mano Majra and at the end plan to reap a harvest of Muslim death), at the opposite end of the scale, of course is Mali's enemy Jugga, without whom

Khushwant Singh's version would lack a morally-redeeming aspect. Moreover, the author is careful not to exaggerate his village characters: while they succumb to mass hysteria, genuine moral bewilderment is also an important part of this process. They are manipulated by the authorities who want to create sufficient discord to ensure that the evacuation of the Muslims is desired by both groups, but there are mutual demonstrations of affection and regret when it is time for the Muslims to leave.

With respect to the actual narration, an important example of Khushwant Singh's balanced presentation of Partition version concerns the way in which he introduces news of the atrocities. Though brutal violence provides the basis of the story, the restraint with which Singh approaches this subject, particularly at narrative points when excessive or premature description would be at the expense of real-life expectancies, is commendable. Thus Singh so manipulates the version that a gradual and refracted revelation of the atrocities is necessary to coincide with the villager's growing suspicions: psychologically the main interest is in the impact the violence makes on their minds and also on Hukum Chand. Moreover, sinister suspense is as much part of the horror as the evidence of butchered corpses and is certainly a key aspect of the psychology of Partition violence.

Thus the people of the village witness the train load of dead bodies Hindus and Sikhs brutally murdered by the communal forces in Pakistan. The river Sutlej is also discovered with corpses of Hindus. The refugees who start flowing into India from Pakistan as a result of Partition bring with them tragic stories arsons, murders, rapes and so on. Tension mounts in the village and it no longer can remain unaffected. For the safety of the Muslims and equally to maintain law and order situation, the police wants the Muslims of the village to go to Pakistan. It offers to provide them all facilities to reach Chundunnugger safely from where a train is to go to Pakistan. Thus the administration plays the final game to cleave it into two halves for easy evacuation of the Muslims and the visit of the head constable "...had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter.

The Muslims are scared. They remember the atrocities inflicted upon them by Sikhs in some parts of India. They recall stories about how Muslim women were stripped of and raped in market places. To them every Sikh in the village is now a stranger with an evil intent and is to be suspected. "For the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them—a heaven of refuge where there were no Sikhs."

The Sikhs on the other hand are also reminded of the atrocities inflicted upon them by the Muslims in Pakistan. They are reminded of the preaching of their Guru who warned them not to trust a Muslims as they have no loyalties. History tells them how Sikhs and Hindus are put to innumerable insults by Muslims. Why the reason that they are not surprised by the inhuman acts of Muslims, especially to women "...Sikh refugees had told them of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered."

The evacuation of the Muslims from their own village is the most poignant part of the entire novel. Two communities had been together for centuries in such an amicable manner that the thought of Muslims leaving the village brought tears to both. Most of the villagers did not sleep that night. They kept moving from house to house – talking, crying and swearing friendship. The next morning, Muslims are to be evacuated to a refugee camp at Chandannagar, later to be transported to Pakistan. "The women sat on the floors hugging each other and crying. It was as if in every home there had been a death"

Chacha Imam Baksh comes to the Sikh assembly in the faint hope that they will ask him and his fellow Muslims to stay. He breaks down "what have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers". (110) The Sikh lambardar answers instantly:

Conclusion:

Thus partition reveals the weaknesses as well as the strengths of our society as a nation. This strength is the tremendous capacity of Indian society to come out of the most traumatic crises. Its capacity tolerates whatever pain and shock and returns to normalcy soon again. This capacity to rise again after the setback has kept India alive in spite of constant onslaughts for over two thousand years. This is because of psychological toughness as well as the flexibility on the part of the society.

The title of the novel is suggestive of the plight of Muslims who are migrating to Pakistan by train as a result of Partition. But the human concern of Khushwant Singh is very obvious. It raises him successfully above the narrow levels of politics and religion at the same time he exposes the evils of Partition as well. So the novel can be categorized as Punjabi version that finally reaches to the greater height of Indian version.

Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan differs from most of the other novels on Partition in respect of canvas, and unity of time, place and action. It has greater unity of time and place. Its action centres in the vicinity of Mano Majra and it covers a period of not more than a month. Perhaps this is an important factor that enables him to transform the horrendous raw theme into fine fiction that is full of human compassion and love.

The tragic love story of Jugga, the Sikh boy and Nooran, the Muslim girl, cutting across the religious barriers seeks to bridge the wide gulf of communal hatred. His love for her carries with it a commitment unto death. Jugga's last act of saving Nooran and also the lives of Muslims on the train to Pakistan demonstrate that private values are transmuted into a general good. Jugga also intuitively knows that what he is going to do has something good in it. "In the uncomplicated and un-self conscious harmony of the Sikh peasant, ...a spiritual force survives amid a torrent of chaos and despair". (Adkins, 11) He destroys only to create again and thus symbolizes the triumph of good over evil within himself as well as the concept of renewal. His soul, like that of the phoenix, rises from its ashes only to proclaim that at least his Train to Pakistan is a symbol of hope and light in the cruel world of darkness and despair.

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