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**REVISITING 1947 IN KHUSHWANT SINGH : A STUDY
OF TRAIN TO PAKISTAN**



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

To Khushwant Singh, 1947 was a period of great disillusionment and crisis of values, a distressing and disintegrating period of his life. The belief he had cherished all his life were shattered. Giving went to his inner struggle and agony, he says, "The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied 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 the autumn of 1947, I could no longer subscribe to this view. I became... an angry middle-aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world... I decided to try my hand at writing" (Talk). The sinister and venomous impact of partition and the indignation it spawned in him has been realistically expressed in a scathing irony in *Train to Pakistan*. Originally entitled "Mano Majra", the novel portrays with a bold and unrelenting realism, the brutal story of political hatred and violence during the turbulent and fateful days that preceded and followed the partition of British India when the spirit of communal frenzy and a passionate zeal for self-expression were fanning and fumbling within the mass. Every citizen was caught up in the holocaust. No one could remain aloof; no one could be trusted to be impartial. The administration, the police, even the armed forces, was caught up in the blaze of hatred. Mob ruled the streets, burning, looting, killing, dishonouring women and mutilating children; even animals sacred to the other community became the legitimate targets of reprisals. As Malgonker quotes, "The entire land was

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being spattered by the blood of its citizens, blistered and disfigured with the fires of religious hatred; its roads were glutted with enough dead bodies to satisfy the ghouls of a major war” (Author’s Note).

KEYWORDS

Khushwant Singh, Train to Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

It is true to note that partition touched the whole country and Singh's attempt in the novel is to see the events from the point of view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village which is considered to be the backdrop of this novel. All the actions depicted in the novel, the dramas enacted by the characters take place in this tiny and typical Punjab village. Before narrating his story the author gives a brief but adequate account of the heart rending national tragedy. What impresses us most in this description is the author's balanced and unprejudiced account of this tragedy. He writes, “Muslim said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured, both raped” (Train 11). In the first part of the novel, the writer has repeatedly pointed out that even after the savage blood bath throughout the Punjab, in the wake of independence, Mano Majra remained surprisingly free from communal stress and tension. It was in fact like a small oasis in the vast desert of communal violence and unprecedented carnage. The slow process of corruption of the village by communal virus, in fact, forms the crux of the novel. The writer painstakingly points out all the factors leading to this process of corruption and how the peaceful life in Mano Majra suddenly came to a jolt. Here Singh effectively depicts the pangs of partition of the Indian subcontinent which was certainly a dark chapter in its history.

Khushwant Singh made the very appealing comment regarding the pangs of partition during one of his interviews after the screening of the film version of *Train to Pakistan* directed by Pamela Rooks at International Film Festival in New Delhi. (11-20 January, 1998). It seems to be very pertinent even today i.e. fifty years after the unfortunate tragedy of partition took place. Khushwant Singh commented that partition must be remembered and it is relevant today. It did, in fact, happen and can happen again. That’s why people who clamour for an independent Kashmir, Khalistan or Nagaland are reminded to realize the possibilities of recurring what happened in 1947. Thus, he advised people never let partition happen again. The partition serves both as a background and a foreground to the novel's vision. The action of the novel centers around a tiny village called Mano Majra on the Indo–Pakistan border during the partition. As P. C. Kar writes: “Singh weaves a narrative around life in this village, making the village a microcosm representing a larger world” (91). All the events that follow seem to have resulted from the dacoity; Singh here introduces most of the important characters in this section. The next day of the murder, the train unloads at Mano Majra station a group of armed policemen and a young Marxist radical named Iqbal. Hukum Chand, the Deputy Commissioner of the district also arrive in the village around the same time. The police arrests Iqbal and Jugga suspecting them for the murder. Thus, the sleepy village awakes to life and slowly joins the turbulence outside. The sudden activity in the village brings history in motion and the isolation of the village gradually disappears. In the next section, appropriately called “Kalyug” suggests that the novel has a cosmic vision. In the Hindu concept of epic time, Kalyug comes at the end of the cycle when the old order is

destroyed and foundations for a new one are laid. The train that carries corpses from Pakistan to be cremated at Mano Majra suggests a symptom that the old world has died. The incident of mass cremation completely disturbs the rhythm of the village's life. There is a pall of gloom on the village. Everybody in the village takes the train as a premonition of evil times. Imam Baksh, the Mullah, who had maintained regularity in his prayer every evening, does not pray that morning. As the author writes; "His sonorous cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the story of God"(84). This disruption in the rhythm of Mano Majra's life suggests that the end has come.

The third section, "Mano Majra", takes the action to its further intensity. It is built around the image of the village in transformation. There is a perceptible change in not only the appearance of the village, but also in its awareness of the human condition. The section opens with a note on the changed climate: ... a heavy brooding silence descended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all night talking in whispers. Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him, and thought of finding friends and allies(84). As Mano Majra loses its healthy seclusion and gets embroiled in the national cataclysm, the action of the novel moves into the surreal. The Head Constable divides the village into two halves between the Sikhs and the Muslims and even succeeds in convincing the Sikhs that Muslims deserve punishment for their atrocities on their Gurus. As the mass exodus begins, the village turns into a ghastly scene. The houses of the Muslims are robbed, and ironically, Malli, who had robbed Ram Lal, is entrusted by the police to look after the property of the evacuees. The last section is "Karma" that gives the novel a metaphysical dimension. Singh seems to suggest that in such an atmosphere of brutality human action is meaningless. Even a heroic act done in such a time does not carry any consequences whatsoever. In a strange reversal of roles, the anti – hero Jugga turns into a hero and the dacoit Malli becomes a custodian of the Muslim's property. The novel closes with such an ironic reversal order. Jugga's act of sacrifice saves the lives of thousands of people, but their fate remains uncertain. Through Iqbal the author reflects philosophically on the nature of human action and on the price of freedom, "If you look at things as they are, he told himself, there does not seem to be a code either of man or of God on which one can pattern one's conduct. Wrong triumphs over right as much as right over wrong triumphs. Sometimes its triumphs are greater. What happens ultimately you do not know? In such circumstances what can you do but cultivate an utter indifference to all values? Nothing matters. Nothing whatever..." (172).

It is true to admit that the harrowing incidents of 1947 had shaken the faith of all the sensitive and thinking people of India in the intrinsic nobility of man, taught by its sages and saints including Mahatma Gandhi during various stages of its cultural evolution of thousands of years. They brought great disillusionment and crisis of values in the life of Khushwant Singh also. It is therefore not surprising that *Train to Pakistan* is both a grim and pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the swirl of partition. Therefore, the author effectively depicts the pangs of partition of the Indian subcontinent which was certainly a dark chapter in its history. The novel begins with a reference to the summer of 1947 which was noted for its scorching heat and rainlessness and marked for hot and dusty atmosphere, "The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. No one could remember when the monsoon had been so late. For weeks, the sparse clouds cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins"(9). The summer before, communal riots, precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta and several thousand had been

killed. The Hindus and the Muslims were blaming one – another for killing, “From Calcutta the riots had spread north and east and west. In Noakhali in East Bengal Muslims massacred Hindus and in Bihar Hindus massacred Muslims. Mullahs were reported to have roamed the Punjab and the Frontier Province with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims killed in Bihar. The Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the Northwest Frontier were made to abandon their homes and flee towards the Sikh and Hindu communities in the East. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding”(10).

The action of the novel spans a few weeks of the fateful days of August and September in 1947 in Mano Majra a border village, with a river fringing it and a railway bridge spanning the river Sutlej. Though the frontier between India and Pakistan turns a scene of rioting and bloodshed, everything is quite and normal in Mano Majra where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims still live peacefully together as they have been living since times immemorial. Partition does not yet mean much to them. Many of them do not even know that the British have left and India is partitioned and is being governed by the popular Congress ministry. One of the characters in the novel, the Sub–Inspector of police, points out to the Deputy Commissioner, “I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah”(33). But soon things began to change. Partition began to take its toll in this tiny village also. As mentioned by Manaver, “Partition touched Mano Majra's at both levels... The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, who have lived together for centuries. Yet feelings of brotherliness have not disappeared, and they meet for consultation in a scene that is both intensely human and touching”(68). The routine life of Mano Majra was disturbed one evening in August 1947 when a local money lender Ramlal is murdered by dreaded dacoits. Juggat Singh, a tall, handsome, and robustly – built farmer, known as a bad character is suspected and arrested. He was in love with Nooran which in a sense cut across religious barrier. Along with him is also arrested Iqbal, England–educated and Communist – inspired young man who has been sent by the People's Party of India to preach Hindu – Muslim unity and stop bloodshed in the villages of Punjab. He, being a stranger in the village is suspected to be a Muslim Leaguer and is remanded to police custody. Meanwhile the condition in Mano Majra deteriorates further and its time schedule starts going wrong because of the sudden irregularity of trains. People whisper about a train which comes from Pakistan at an unseal hour, carrying dead bodies of Sikhs and Hindus. Simultaneously are heard rumours about Muslims being slaughtered in Patiala, Ambala and Amritsar mosques being demolished and the holy Koran being torn by infidels. Soon the village becomes a battlefield of conflicting loyalties. Though Mano Majra's still pledge to protect their Muslim brothers, yet afraid of the angry and aggrieved refugees from Pakistan, they shift them to the refugee camp.

As the flooded Sutlej brings the dead bodies of more Hindus and Sikhs, tension rises in the village. Even the tension is observed in arrival of the train also. As mentioned, “the engine driver stated blowing the whistle and continued blowing till he had passed Mano Majra station. It was an expression of relief that they were out of Pakistan and into India”(84). A reference has already been made of the ghost train. The author has given a ghostly, nay, blood curdling description of the massacre. There were women and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror, their mouths still open as if their shrieks had just then become voiceless. The communal fire is fanned by the young Sikh boys who

come from outside and incite Mano Majrans to take revenge upon Muslims. They succeeded in getting the support of bad character like Mali who hopes to reap a profitable harvest by the annihilation of Muslims. They conspire to fire at the train taking refugees to Pakistan to massacre them, the Sikhs and Muslims, who were living like brothers, turned ferocious wolves overnight. A Sikh youth tells, "Tomorrow a train load of Muslims is to cross the bridge to Pakistan. If we are men, this train should carry as many people dead to the other side as you have received" (151). Khushwant Singh has depicted the bestial cruelties with objective analysis of the consciousness of people during partition. How the emotions of people are roused by the rumours spread by both the communities about the barbaric deeds of each other, is described by the author though the mounting tension between Sikh and Muslims who had hitherto lived in amity in Mano Majra. As the village gets divided into two halves, Muslims and Sikhs gather in separate group and talk of inhuman savagery of each other. Muslims brood over the rumours of atrocities compiled by Sikh, "They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. They had heard of mosque being desecrated by the slaughter of pigs on the premises, and of copies of the holy Koran being torn by infidels" (141). Sikhs, on the other hand, feel, "Never trust a Musalman. Sikh refugees had told 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" (142).

The blood-curdling account of the bestial cruelties let loose by the partition is conveyed through the- recollection of incidents by the Deputy Commissioner, Hukum Chand. The author relates these incidents with stark realism. Prem Singh, a colleague of Hukum Chand, made his wife's jewellery from Lahore and was killed by dozen heads with fez caps and Pathan turbans. Sundari, the daughter of Hukum Chand's orderly, had been married four days. She had not yet slept with her husband. She had hardly seen even his face through her veil. As she day-dreamt of her first night with her husband, her bus suddenly blew up. Then hundreds of people surrounded them. Everyone was ordered off the bus. Sikhs were just hacked to death. The clean-shaven were stripped. The mob held the husband of Sundari and cut off his penis and gave it to her. The mob made love to her and she was molested brutally. Sunder Singh's case was different. Muslim did not kill his family; he killed them himself. Stranded for four days during scorching heat of summer on a wayside station in a small railway compartment stuffed with five hundred men and women he could not bear the agony of his children whom he could not provide even urine to drink. So he pulled out his revolver and shot them all. Mob attacks were a common phenomenon in those days and when they attacked they never waited to find out whether the persons concerned were Hindus or Muslims. For example, the day four Sikh Sardars in a jeep drove alongside a mile-long column of Muslim refugees walking on the road. Without warning they opened fire with their stand guns. A lot of women were abducted and sold cheap. Police stations were concentration camps and third degree methods were adopted to extricate 'truth' from those who were caught. Hands and feet pinned under legs of charpoys with half a dozen policeman sitting on them. Testicles twisted and squeezed till one become senseless with pain. Powdered red chilies thrust up the rectum by rough hands, and the sensation of having the tail on fire for several days. As Harish Raizada points out, "Khushwant Singh's treatment of brutal atrocities committed on either side of the border is characterized by artistic objectivity and detachment. He exaggerates nothing, he leaves nothing" (166).

Apart from these, there are certain situations like the arrival of the ghost train that makes the reader flabbergasted. A train load of Sikhs massacred by Muslims had been cremated in Mano Majra.

Hindus and Sikhs were fleeing from their homes in Pakistan and having to find shelter in Mano Majra. The villagers ultimately decided to be angry with the Muslims. Soon the Muslims began to come out of their homes. Driving their cattle and their bullock carts loaded with charpoys, rolls of bedding, brass utensils etc. There was no time even to say good-bye. Truck engines were started. Contrasted against these scenes of heinous crimes is the moving picture of the people who feel utterly broken as they are compelled to leave the land of their and their forefathers' birth. When Imam Baksh is asked to leave Mano Majra for Pakistan lest he be tortured by Sikh refugees, he is moved and tears trickle down his eyes. He broke down. Meet Singh clasped him in his arms and began to sob. Several of the people started crying quietly. When after much deliberation, all come to the conclusion that in the interest of Muslims themselves, it will be better for them to leave the village. Describing the condition of the village and its people on the eve of the departure of Muslims from there, the author writes, "Not many people slept in Mano Majra that night, they went from house to house-talking, crying, and swearing love and friendship, assuring each other that this would soon be over. Life, they said would be as it always had been"(153).

Khushwant Singh has accurately depicted the real picture of the adverse effect of partition and the suffering that people were made to experience. In this atmosphere of all around madness and hypertension among communities, the novelist has given a turn to the story of brutality through the universal element i.e. love. Unable to stem the tide of violence and finding themselves helpless, police authorities release Juggat and Iqbal of whose innocence they are by now fully convinced. The authorities feel that Jugga is being a friend of Mano Majra Muslims and Iqbal being a non-communal political worker, may exert some influence on the misguided people and save Muslims from being slaughtered. Iqbal, the idealist and nationalist, considers discretion to be the better part of valour and keeps himself away from the fire. As Pathan writes, "In this all round madness, the plain earthly love of a Sikh peasant for his Muslim sweet-heart asserts itself"(22). Realizing that the attack on the refugee train must mean death to his sweet-love Nooran, the tough Juggatsing, "budmash number ten" of the village, prevents the attack at the cost of his own life. He climbs over the bridge and diverts the attention of the conspirators by cutting the rope meant for killing Muslims. The train of Muslim refugees passes over to Pakistan without any damage but Jugga dies, being shot by his co-religionists. The heroic sacrifice of Jugga who is treated as a ruffian by the civilized society poses a challenge to it and unmasks its hypocrisy and duplicity. Apart from the depiction of the trauma of partition, the crisis of values suffered by people during this period of unprecedented human tragedy is conveyed by the author through his satirical portrait of three characters typical of their three different situations epitomizing the civilized human life. These are Hukum Chand the high officer in the Government administration, Meet Singh the Sikh priest, and Iqbal Singh, the rationalistic and idealistic non-communal political worker. Jugga's moral stature stands out in strong relief against the hypocrisy, cowardice and shame of these characters. Cowasjee aptly remarks, "Through the portrayal of Hukum Chand, Khushwant Singh shows how the much maligned Indian bureaucracy was itself caught between the hatred of a people and the bungling of politicians"(193). Iqbal thinks: Could he stop killing? Obviously not. Every one Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Leaguer, Congressite Akali or Communist was deep in it. It was famous to suggest that the bourgeois revolution could be turned into a Proletarian one(Raizada, 64). As Vasant Sahane remarks, "His soul, like that of the phoenix, rises from its ashes only to proclaim that at least this 'Train to Pakistan' is a symbol of hope and light amidst the cruel world of darkness and despair"(88).

Hence, the partition of the Indian sub-continent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. The violence it unleashed by the hooligan actions of a few fanatics, the vengeance that the ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wreaked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgments and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness. The real sorrow of the partition however, as portrayed by Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* was that it brought to an abrupt and a long and communally shared history and cultural heritage. It is also true to say that for millions of peoples, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uproot. This is not what they had aspired for in the name of freedom- the partition was a dirty trick Khushwant Singh brings to the centre stage the fact of the partition of the question of the subsequent violence on both sides of the border in a very effective, vivid and graphic manner.

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