

**An Analysis of Violence on Male and Female in
*Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan***

11

Mrs. S. Rajeswari*

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, does not go into detail about the gender based violence, widespread during Partition as it is not the novel's main concern. There are only passing references of violence enacted on female bodies but a closer reading of the novel shows that violence was enacted on male bodies too, albeit in different ways. Taking my cue from Kavita Daiya, this analysis will show how violence was inflicted on both men and women, with an emphasis on violence done to male bodies.

Early in the novel, Hukum Chand the magistrate and the police sub inspector talk about the communal conflagration coursing through the country. Train loads of dead are being gifted to the two newly formed nations on either side of the border. As a retaliatory gesture the Sikhs attack a Muslim refugee train and send it across the border filled with over a thousand corpses as a gift to Pakistan. In this context the sub inspector remarks:

They say that is the only way to stop killings on the other side.

Man for man, woman for woman, child for child. But we Hindus are not like that. We cannot really play this stabbing game. When it comes to an open fight, we can be a match for any people. I believe our R.S.S. boys beat up Muslim gangs in all the cities. The Sikhs are not doing their share. They have lost their manliness... (19-20)

Later on in the conversation the sub inspector says:

... Did your honour hear what the Muslim mobs did to Hindu and Sikh refugees in the market places at Sheikhpura and Gujranwala? Pakistan police and the army took part in the killings. Not a soul was left alive. Women killed their own children and jumped into wells that filled to the brim with corpses. (21)

And Hukum Chand's rejoinder: "... I know it all. Our Hindu women are like that: so pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them..." (21).

*Research scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University

This conversation brings two points to the fore. One is that a slur is cast on the Sikhs' *manliness* which is counter-balanced by Jugga's bravery later in the novel. This point will be discussed shortly. Secondly, it reveals the stereotypical rhetoric about maintaining women's sexual purity and lauding their suicide which would otherwise lead to their social death. In so doing, Kushwant Singh spouts the stereotypical views about the Hindu/Sikh woman who prefers and desires honourable death over dishonour because she is a victim of sexual violence.

Towards the close of the novel during Hukum Chand's cynical ruminations about independence he recalls an incident about Mansa Ram and his newly wedded bride Sundari, who was gang raped on the way to Gujranwala:

... Sikhs were just hacked to death. The clean shaven were stripped. Those that were circumcised were forgiven. Those that were not were circumcised. Not just the foreskin: the whole thing was cut off. She who had not really had a good look at Mansa Ram was shown her husband completely naked. They held him by the arms and legs and one man cut off his penis and gave it to her. The mob made love to her...(177)

This scene uncovers the different types of violence men and women were subjected to: male castration for Mansa Ram and gang rape for Sundari. It is clear that for Hukum Chand the patriarchal nation-state failed to protect both its male and female citizens from sexual violence. Another point to be noted is that, while violence against women has received much attention, violence against men has neither been discussed nor recorded in any written document of the time. This means that there is a silence on the part of both men and women in order to preserve male as well as female honour.

The concept of male honour gives the reader an ideal starting point to discuss how Khushwant Singh deals with the violation of male honour in *Train to Pakistan*. This can best be understood through Singh's handling of Iqbal and Juggat Singh in the novel. Before going further it is pertinent to point out to an interesting interpretation Ralph J. Crane has to give about the novel. Drawing upon the stereotypical images the British had slotted Indians into; he contends that the novel promotes the image of the Sikhs as the dominant community in the text. He argues that the Sikhs are shifted into the position of power vacated by the colonisers. This is a position which Khushwant Singh clearly presents as bound up with virility: a position which Jugga

occupies. The Hindus, on the other hand, are unequivocally located in a subaltern or female position, as they had consistently been perceived by the British. The Hindu moneylender is not manly for he hides behind women's sarees. Though Bhai Meet Singh refers to Hukum Chand as a "nar admi" (42) - a real virile man - he is nevertheless presented as impotent. Instead of acting decisively, he evades responsibility by releasing Jugga and Iqbal, who are both Sikhs, from prison in the hope that one of them would be able to prevent the impending train massacre, which he is powerless to prevent. Though his strategy works, it emphasizes the fact that he hides behind others. Crane's categorisation while taking on communal overtones introduces two characteristics associated with men: virility and impotence. However, his analysis does not explain how we are to read the violence done to male bodies in the novel and how it impacts virility. If Jugga is the true *naradmi*; the virile man, what are we to make of the other Sikh character, Iqbal and the treatment meted out to him? Iqbal has been sent by the People's Party to spread the message of communism in Mano Majra. He is falsely arrested by the police for the murder of Lala Ram Lal, the village money lender. Since he is a communist, he professes to have no religion, and allows people to read him as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh due to the cross-communal nature of his name. "He could be a Muslim - Iqbal Mohammed. He could be Hindu, Iqbal Chand, or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh" (35). He does not correct any one or disabuse them of their false assumptions. He is a social worker, clean shaven and circumcised. Under normal circumstances, this would not have been very significant but in the communally charged atmosphere of 1947, it proves to be very dangerous.

Unable to discern Iqbal's ethnic allegiance from his name the sub inspector orders a strip search. As the cross questioning continues, with him standing naked and handcuffed in front of the inspector, Iqbal's confidence evaporates. He is unable to demand his rights - so complete is humiliation. Because he is circumcised, the sub inspector refuses to believe that he was sent by the People's Party of India and imputes he is a member of the Muslim League.

What must be noted is that, besides humiliating a man, stripping was commonly employed to ascertain a man's proper ethnic identity before killing, castrating or converting him through circumcision. This scene in which Iqbal is made to strip is reminiscent of ultimate foolproof test of being a Muslim, Iqbal's ethnic identity like his name, continues to remain ambiguous and in doubt. Since he is in the hands of the police he is spared a lynching as the sub inspector

tells him later in the novel after his release as Iqbal Singh, social worker, that this is the only test the mob has for a man without long hair or a beard.

In *Train to Pakistan*, Iqbal's circumcision is deployed differently to further Hukum Chand's ends. Initially, under Hukum Chand's orders, the authorities read Iqbal as a Muslim when attempting to implicate him in Lala Ram Lal's murder in order to encourage a Muslim exodus before the real storm of communal violence breaks. Later, when manipulating his release, in an attempt to prevent the rail sabotage Hukum Chand conveniently reinterprets Iqbal as a Sikh.

In another context, Haseena, a girl prostitute knows she is spared because of her profession as all communities, Hindu and Muslim, come to hear her sing. She goes on to tell Hukum Chand the story of how a group of *Hijras*, hermaphrodites, in Chundnugger were spared by a bloodthirsty Hindu and Sikh mob by displaying their lack of any bodily communal markers. As such, they could be Muslim, Hindu or Sikh; male or female. Iqbal, after his release, realizes that "the body is the ultimate signifier of both gender and communal affiliation" (174) says Peter Morey in *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power*. As he muses later on in *Train to Pakistan*: ... *Where on earth except in India would a man's life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed? It would be laughable if it were not tragic...* (164)

Somatic markers are not a matter of choice, it shows your religious affiliations, a means of humiliating a man and later, an excuse for putting him to death. Though Iqbal is a pawn in Hukum Chand's machinations, he, like a politician wants to be imprisoned, make headlines, and even meet a glorious end. However, his imprisonment turns out to be farcical. Similarly, his desire to die and gain glory is not achieved simply because he has *voluntarily* circumcised himself. He decides not to face the mob when asked by Bhai Meet Singh to stop the train massacre, and as Hukum Chand expects him to do. In an alcoholic daze, he pictures himself falling under a volley of blows and rifle shots with dignity. However, this would not get him name, fame or glory in the ranks of the party for eventually he would be considered a Muslim, since he is circumcised.

Here Kushwant Singh effectively shows that Iqbal, in *voluntarily* circumcising himself, is neutered like the *hijras* in Haseena's account. He is emasculated, and as a Sikh, has lost his manliness confirming the police sub inspector's remark to Hukum Chand earlier, the Sikhs are not doing their share. They have lost their manliness. He

is ineffective and can only survive in these troubled times because he has police protection and Bhai Meet Singh's unconditional endorsement of his being a Sikh.

After his release from prison Iqbal realizes that it was the company of Jugga and the constable, who were known Sikhs that saves him. Even in the gurdwara, which is filled with refugees Meet Singh's deliberate use of his surname "*Iqbal Singhji*" (166) defuses the tension. Iqbal, in *Train to Pakistan*, occupies an ambivalent space and is simply tolerated. Though his circumcision does not prove to be the ultimate fool proof test of his Sikhhood, Kushwant Singh tries to convey that the newly formed nation-state, India, would tolerate such people only if their affiliations are *not* with Pakistan but would nevertheless view them with suspicion. Moreover, like Hukum Chand he too hides behind others and is as impotent as the District Magistrate. Here, through Iqbal, Singh reiterates his view from his book *A History of the Sikhs*, that the sense of belonging to the Sikh community requires both the belief in the teachings of the Adi Granth and the observance of the Khalsa tradition initiated by Guru Gobind Singh; and that there is no such thing as a clean shaven Sikh – he is simply a Hindu believing in Sikhism. (303)

By this definition, Iqbal too, in a sense, becomes a Hindu since he does not have the necessary hirsute Sikh markers. Again, by *voluntarily* divesting himself of his hair, he, like Hukum Chand, becomes cowardly and impotent and has inculcated the qualities of a Hindu. This upholds Crane's argument that Hindus were unmanly and not fit to rule the country.

It is left to another Sikh, a true *Khalsa*, Jugga *budmash*, who passes the test of virility in the novel by preventing the train massacre. Jugga, the hyper-masculine village rogue, goes around like a stud bull and boasts of his conquests with women. He is always in and out of prison for some misdemeanor or the other. He has a liaison with the Muslim weaver's daughter, Nooran, who is also the *mullah* of the village. Early in the novel there is an attempt to emasculate him when Malli and his gang throw a packet of glass bangles into his courtyard:

"O Juggia," he called in a falsetto voice, "Juggia!" he winked at his companions. "Wear these bangles, Juggia. Wear these bangles and put henna on your palms." "Or give them to the weaver's daughter. One of the gunmen yelled."(10)

Here Jugga's authority is challenged on two fronts. Firstly, Malli and his gang have dared to rob and murder in his village. Secondly, his masculinity is challenged by throwing bangles into his house showing that he is effeminate and castrated.

Nevertheless, Jugga does have a real fear of castration. This is apparent when the police threaten him with torture because he refuses to divulge Malli's name. Under threat of damage to his testicles, which can be read as a threat of emasculation and castration, he implicates Malli. Nevertheless, Jugga has proved his manliness in more ways than one. In his relationship with Nooran he has an obvious power over her and can subdue her with force if need be. Unknown to him, Nooran is pregnant with his child thus proving his potency. This is in contrast to Hukum Chand, who cannot consummate his affair with Haseena because he has qualms about her age. She is almost his daughter's age had she been alive. This shows that the District Commissioner is impotent in more ways than one, whereas Jugga leaves no one in doubt about his manliness. This is evidenced in his act of supreme sacrifice when he cuts the rope that would have derailed the train carrying the Mano Majra Muslims to Pakistan. This, virile, common criminal is a man of action, who has ensured the safety of the Muslims not the government bureaucrat, Hukum Chand, who is seen as the government by the uneducated villagers.

Kavita Daiya rightly pointed out in *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*:

However, if Jugga's lower class criminality is redeemed by his heroic true love, it is done only through the dematerialization of his body. It is on his crushed, rural, masculine body that the triumph of secularism – figured as interethnic love – is inscribed. (51)

Even Jugga, the true heroic figure, cannot escape violence, in this case, death. If Kushwant Singh has heroicised Jugga, it is because of his virility, whereas Hukum Chand and Iqbal, because of their impotence and inability to act, are not accorded this status.

Jugga's valiant death also makes the point that, at this stage, neither the country nor the novelist can envision an inter-communal marriage or an alliance. It is for this reason that both, Haseena and Nooran, are banished to Pakistan. The troublesome problem of Nooran's unborn, illegitimate child is taken care of by her departure to Pakistan, so that the country can stave off the threat to ethnic impurity in the *secular* nation. Both Jugga and Hukum Chand suffer psychologically too. Through an analysis of the violence Jugga,

Hukum Chand and Iqbal experience it becomes amply clear that violence inscribed on male bodies takes on different forms and can be both physical and psychological.

Reference

Crane, Ralph J. "Inscribing a Sikh India: An Alternative Reading of Khushwant Singh's

Train to Pakistan." *Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism.* New Delhi: Overseas Press India, (2008): 181-195.

Daiya, Kavita. *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India,* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008.

Morey, Peter. *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan,* New Delhi: Time Books International, 1989.

— *A History of the Sikhs.* Vol. 2: 1839-1974, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.