

## Unprecedented Destruction, Bloodshed and Trauma: Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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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 North India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding. (10)

Khushwant Singh, one of the major Indian writers had been internationally acclaimed as a distinguished historical fictionist in the post-independence era. A brief account of his achievement as a novelist, short-story writer, historian, essayist, journalist and editor is sufficient to establish him in Indian Writing in English as a versatile genius. His creative urge as a fiction writer has been the gradual achievements of self expression and a continuous search for self-seeking. He values Indian art and culture and is deeply rooted in the soil of India. His writing has grown out of the grass roots of the social milieu as his experience of rural India is the base of his creative endeavour.

Khushwant Singh very efficiently portrays the real picture of the contemporary history and society and the social, political and religious behaviour of the people in his first novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956); the original pictures of the village Mano Majra before and after partition, the love story of Nooran and Jugga, the greedy people, death and violence. Khushwant Singh depicts the peaceful co-existence of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh in a multi-religion society.

The intimate relations between Muslims and Sikhs are faithfully depicted. The 'partition' brings disharmony in the co-existing society. The present paper focuses on *Train to Pakistan* as a magnificent novel where Khushwant Singh tells the tragic tale of the partition of India and Pakistan and the events that followed which will be remembered as one of the blackest chapters of human history.

The action of the novel is in Mano Majra, a tiny village situated on the Indian border, half a mile away from the river Sutlej where the Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus lived in perfect harmony.

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Originally titled as *Mano Majra*, the novel suggests static, while the present title, *Train to Pakistan*, implies change. This perhaps prompts V.A. Shahane to 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)

*Train to Pakistan* narrates the pathetic and pitiable tale of individuals and communities wedged in the swirl of partition. 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 and protection. 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 this novel spotlight the events seen from the point of view of the people of this village.

The individuality in Khushwant Singh's writings is on account of his anger and disenchantment with the "...long cherished human values in the wake of inhuman bestial horrors and insane savage killings on both sides during the Partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in August 1947." (Harish 126)

The novelist brings to the centre stage the subsequent violence on both sides of the border manifested in ruthless mass destruction as well as the evil impact of partition on the peace-loving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of *Mano Majra*. In the words of Warren French:

Singh's terse fable suggests a profound disillusionment with the power of law, reason and intellect in the face of elemental human passions—Singh is brilliant, sardonic observer of world undergoing convulsive changes; and his novels provide a unique insight into one of the major political catastrophes of this country. (French 818-20)

The focus of the novel is mainly on the partition, on the events before it, the holocaust caused by it and its aftermath. Prof. William Walsh comments: "*Train to Pakistan* is a tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people. It goes forward in a trim, athletic way, and its unemphatic voice makes a genuinely human comment." (Walsh 18)

Though the village is dominated by the Sikhs, *Mano Majra* has, as its inhabitants, the Hindus and the Muslims too. This village has always been known for its railway station. All the activities in *Mano Majra* are closely linked with the arrival and departure of railway trains. The morning mail train to Lahore tells Mullah and the Sikh

Priest that it is time for morning prayer. The Mano Majrans eat and have a forty wink when the midday express passes by and they are back to work as the evening passenger from Lahore comes in. When the goods train steams in, it is signal for them to sleep and to Mullah and the Priest, the call for evening prayers. Thus, the life in the village is, in a way, centered around the railway station.

Out of the seventy families in Mano Majra, Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The village is equally populated by Sikhs and Muslims. They know each other very well and live in amity and harmony like a close-knit family. The peaceful life of the village is not affected by the political events of the country. The harmonious atmosphere and functional integration that prevails in this small village is vividly described in the novel thus:

...there is one object that all Mano Majrans even Lala Ram Lal-venerate. This is a three foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keeker tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the deo to which all the villagers—Hindu, Sikh, Muslims or pseudo-Christian-repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing. (10)

The situation of the country deteriorates miserably in the wake of partition. There are murders and rapes. Evil dominates the scene as the unusual summer of 1947 suggests that all is not well in Mano Majra or elsewhere and the village becomes the microcosm of communal conflict and violence caused by the partition.

Partition touched Mano Majrans at both levels—at the community level and at the individual level. At the community level it affects very badly the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, who have lived together for centuries. (Manawar 31)

Khushwant Singh portrays the reality of the situation by laying the blame of the horrible tragedy upon both the communities:

Muslims said that Hindus had planned and started the killing. On the other hand, the Hindus, put the blame on the Muslims. The fact is that both sides killed. People belonging to both sides were shot and stabbed, speared and clubbed, tortured, raped. (9)

Millions of non-Muslims from Pakistan longed for passage to India, a land of hope and peace, whereas millions of Muslims from India sought the road to Pakistan, the land of Islamic faith and promise. It is a nightmare, writes Srinivasa Iyengar, "the details accumulate to a poisonous mass and numb the sensibilities." (Iyengar 336)

The peace and harmony of the village is shattered with the brutal murder of Ram Lal, the local money lender. One night, Mali with his gang raided the house of Ram Lal and murdered him. On their way back they fire shots in the air and throw bangles over the walls in Juggat Singh's house—just to mock him as he has been their enemy. Juggat Singh, popularly known as budmash number ten in Mano Majra, served several terms in jail for dacoity and is ordered by the police not to leave his house after sunset. However, at the time of murder, Juggat Singh is in the fields with his girlfriend Nooran, the daughter of the old Imam of the village mosque and the whole village knows of their association. At the same time, Hukum Chand, the District Magistrate, camping at the Officer's Rest House is involved in a sordid affair with Haseena, a teenager prostitute.

Hukum Chand, like Juggat Singh, plays an important role in the novel. At first, he appears as a typical Indian representative of bureaucracy in British-governed India. His position as district magistrate makes him acutely conscious of the calamitous situation of his people and the events of the novel, for the most part are portrayed from his vantage point. With the relatively few Hindus in Punjab—and Ram Lal now dead—Hukum Chand emerges as a catalyst of British power and authority and to the villagers he is a figure of manliness and a symbol of peaceful order.

Next morning policemen arrive at Mano Manjra to conduct an inquiry into the murder of Ram Lal. The same train also brings Iqbal

Singh, an England educated communist reformer, to Mano Majra. Iqbal has been deputed by the People's Party of India to create political consciousness among peasants at that crucial period. Juggat Singh is arrested for he is found absent from his house at the time of the incident and is unable to explain the cause of his absence. Along with him Iqbal is also arrested. During his conversation with Bhai Meet Singh, Iqbal explains his purpose of working in the village. He says to Bhai Meet Singh:

I am a social worker, Bhaiji. There is much to be done in our villages. Now with this Partition there is so much bloodshed going on someone must do something to stop it. My party has sent me here, since this place is a vital point for refugee movements. Trouble here would be disastrous. (48)

People of Mano Majra cannot welcome freedom at the cost of mass destruction. The Lambardar expresses the feelings of the common man when he says that the only ones who enjoy freedom are thieves, robbers and cut throats. Iqbal finds himself in a predicament and is not in a position to do anything to ease the situation:

what could he—one little man—do in this enormous impersonal land of four hundred million? Could he stop the killing? Obviously not. Everyone—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Congressite, Leaguer, Akali, or Communist—was deep in it. It was famous to suggest that the bourgeois revolution. Could be turned into a proletarian one... (64-65)

Juggat Singh narrates the barbarity of the Baluch soldiers on their way to Lahore from Amritsar. Reaching near the Pakistani border, these soldiers

“...began to stick bayonets into Sikhs going along the road. The driver would slow

Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter.” (141)

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 and “for the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them—a heaven of refuge where there were no Sikhs.” (141)

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.

...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. (142)

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”. (113)

Nooran who is against leaving the village, prays for Jugga’s return from the police custody. She, who has conceived Jugga’s child, visits his mother and reveals the secret to her. She also gives vent to her fear that if the child is born in Pakistan, the child will be murdered for having born to a Sikh father. She pleads to her for mercy, but the mother is so stubborn that she shows a callous disregard for her condition and Nooran is compelled to go to the refugee camp.

Muslims of the village thought that they are going to the refugee camp only for a few days and then come back to Mano Majra once the storm was blown over. Now they realize that they will be taken to Pakistan from there and that they cannot take their belongings with them. They can only what they can carry in their hands.

Man's inhumanity continues to invade Mano Majra. The tempo of the death increases. The Sutlej River yields hundreds of floating corpses of Muslims tortured and mutilated. Swelling Sutlej is another horrible sight, with floating corpses of men, women and children. In the night, the river's looking like a sheet of paper, symbolized the bleak deeds of violence. The cries of human voices, calling for help, seemed to arise from the water. The corpses floating on the water made the scene horrible. The ghastly murder of these innocent people—men, women and children—told the tale of woe caused by partition.

A pathetic portrayal of this ghastly scene is presented:

There were also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies; little children sleeping on their bellies with their arms clutching the water and their satiny buttocks dipping in and out. The sky was soon full of kites and vultures. They flew down and landed on the floating carcasses. They pecked till the corpses themselves rolled over and shooed them off with hands. (143)

It is Jugga who combats the forces of darkness and sacrifices himself selflessly to save innocent lives threatened by the planned Mano Majra massacre.

Khushwant Singh, like Thomas Hardy, invests the common man of the soil with tragic grandeur to show, as Bonamy Dobree remarks, "The dignity of man for all his helpless littleness in the face of the universe, for all his nullity under the blotting hand of time." (Dobree 328) and the novel may remain the most comprehensive description of the tragic suffering affected by partition. Thus *Train to Pakistan* is a story every one 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.

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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.

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