

Female Characters and Realism in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh is a prominent writer in Indian English literature. Train to Pakistan is his most influential novel out of all his famous novels. Train to Pakistan is based on the theme of India's partition in 1947. This novel is a micro-level presentation of life before and after partition. It artistically depicts the conflicts and tension in human mind. The main motive of this paper is to bring out the crises in the novel of which women have always been victims and to show how Khushwant Singh has penetrated deep into reality and imaginatively portrays the reality in the novel. Train to Pakistan is a representative of realistic tradition in the Indo-English literature. The novel grows out of a chronological sequence of time with a synthesis of reality and value.

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Introduction

Khushwant Singh, one of the most eminent and influential writer in Indian English literature, penned bulk of English writings in Indian English literature. His works are best known for his secularism, sarcasm and humour. Train to Pakistan (1956), I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1959) and Delhi: A Novel (1996) are his three popular novels. The realism of Khushwant Singh is of an earthier variety. He has declared that his “roots are in dunghill of tiny Indian village”. His fiction reeks with the odour of his roots.

The novel Train to Pakistan (1956), initially titled Mano Majra, is Khushwant Singh’s best novel. Much of his reputation as an English writer of excellence has come to him through this masterly creative work. The novel is based on the theme of India’s partition in 1947 when nearly ten million people, Muslims from India and Hindus from Pakistan, left their location for new destinations from either side and they were caught in virulent communal frenzy in which nearly a million were killed.

Female Characters

Woman victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world. This evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. Partition literature explores the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the partition. In spite of numerous merits, the novel has its demerits too. It is essentially patriarchal in its representation. It conspicuously misses women characters and their points of view of the partition.

Women in the novel are presented as menial creatures doing their menial household chores. “Women rub clarified butter into each other’s hair, pick lice from their children’s head and discuss births, marriages and deaths”. Endowing women with no individuality displays a patriarchal approach towards women.

Most of the characters in the novel are male characters. There are only two female characters in the novel who manage to have some space in the novel. They also are not of much importance in the novel. The first is Nooran the object of Juggut’s passion and the second is Haseena who is described as an object of lust for bureaucrat Hukum Chand. All the novel revolves around male thought. One can hardly find a woman thought in the novel. Women are described as “weaker sex” at a point in the novel. This shows the existing social conditions. Hukum Chand says:

“I know it all. Our Hindu women are like that. So pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them. We Hindus never raise our hands to strike women but these Muslims have no respect for weaker sex....”

Women in the novel are represented just as an object of sex. Apart from this

they have nothing of any significance. Nooran is an object of sex for Juggut Singh. Their scene of love making is described in three pages. After having sexual intercourse with Nooran Juggut asks her whether she will come tomorrow. This shows how he is obsessed with sex for Nooran. Haseena, a nineteen years old Muslim girl, is used as a sexual object by Hukum Chand. The magistrate has paid for her. The intimate scenes of Jugga and Nooran and Hukum Chand and Haseena are described simultaneously. This shows that this type of act may be happening at many places at that time. This reinforces the notion of woman as an object of sex.

Women suffered more than man during the holocaust of partition. Men of both communities, Muslim and Hindu, were just killed. But, the women, on the other hand, were not just killed. They were brutally raped by mobs and their breasts were cut.

Realism

Khushwant Singh is well known for realism in his novels. He believes in the stark realism of life unlike the photographic and artistic reality portrayed by R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. He is like the French socialist realist Balzac.

In the novel, depiction of rural life of Punjab in colonial era seems to be very real. When we read through the pages of novel we feel as if we are physically at Mano Majra. A very real scene of Mano Majra railway station is depicted in the novel:

“Mano Majra has always been known for its railway station....A small colony of shopkeepers and hawkers have grown up around the station to supply travellers with food, betel leaves, cigarettes, tea, biscuits and sweetmeats. This gives station an appearance of constant activity....”

The novelist has created very realistically that the likes of Hukum Chand, Iqbal, Juggut Singh and Malli gang are still present in the India. In his realistic depiction of the then prevailing atmosphere of the hatred and violence and distrust between the Hindus and the Muslims Khushwant Singh spares neither. As a realist, Khushwant Singh in the novel blames both the communities for the holocaust in his portrayal of the real situation. He says:

“The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped.... Mullahs roamed the Punjab and the Frontier Province with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims killed in the Bihar.”

V.A Sahane also labelled this novel as a realistic novel. Sahane says:

“Train to Pakistan (1956) is one of the finest novels of the post World

War II Indo-Anglican fiction. It is Khuswant Singh's supreme achievement, which is unlikely to excel. This realistic masterpiece contains, among other things, a well thought out structure, an artistically conceived plot, an absorbing narrative, and imaginatively realized characters."

Critics K.K Sharma and B.K Johri in their book, *The Partition in Indian English Novels*, commenting on **Train to Pakistan** echo the view of V.A Sahane about realism in the novel. They say:

*"Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** pictures the brutal, realistic story of political hatred and of mass passions during the tragic days that preceded and followed the partition of India."*

The novel realistically depicts how man, during partition, became enemy of man, cause for the destruction and disaster and in the ultimate analysis turned against his proclaimed values of cultivating friendship, brotherhood, equality and justice.

On the basis of above discussion it could rightly be said that realism is at its peak in **Train to Pakistan**. It is also clear that women have not given so much importance in the novel. Women characters are Just puppets in hands of male characters. They do not have their own identities.

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