

Significance of Trains in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

Jasmeet Kaur

Asstt. Prof., Deptt. of English, Dyal Singh College, Karnal

Abstract:

*Khushwant Singh, a versatile author, columnist and a lawyer who wrote numerous works of great artistic value. The present work of study *Train to Pakistan* is one of his masterpieces which recounts massacre of 1947. Singh has used fictional village and characters to depict realities of the traumatic times. His gripping manner of recapturing a historical moment is unmatched. Singh has chosen Mano Majra as the locale of this novel and very skillfully woven all the incidents to recreate a blood soaked aeon. He has significantly used trains to highlight major as well as minor events of the novel which makes it different from other partition based works. Present paper is deep analysis of a train-conscious region Mano Majra, trains which were cause of hustle and bustle during pre-partition period, later turn into ghostly carriages displaying death, displacement, and despair. Khushwant Singh has magnificently woven scenes and incidents in connection with trains.*

Key Words: *Partition, Massacre, Odd Hours, Ghost Trains, Violence, Agony, True Love*

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Jasmeet Kaur,

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Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), a legend in Indian English literary history voiced his words through more than eighty classic titles including fiction as well as non-fiction. This Hadali born Sikh tried his hand in diverse fields like law, Public Relations, Journalism, Politics, editing before finally devoting himself to the creative world and left with us a rich heritage of his precious pearls of wisdom to brighten our lives forever. Singh, a protean author and a columnist, was acclaimed by President (2012-2017) Pranab Mukherjee as a "fearless intellectual."¹ In an interview conducted by AFP in the year 2005, he expressed his compulsive passion for writing and said, "I don't know what to do with myself if I don't write, I have lost the art of relaxation."² He is the writer who wrote his own epitaph:

Here lies one who spared neither man nor God
Waste not your tears on him, he was a sod
Writing nasty things he regarded as great fun
Thank the Lord he is dead, this sun of a gun.³

He got several prestigious awards including Padma Bhushan (1974, which he returned in 1984 in fulmination against the Union government's siege of the Golden Temple, Amritsar) and Padma Vibhushan (2007). He penned several works of outstanding artistry like *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *Delhi* (1990), *The Company of Women* (1999) in fictional category and *India: An Introduction* (1990), *Need for a New Religion* (1991) *Sex, Scotch and Scholarship* (1992), *Men and Women in My Life* (1995), *Nature Watch* (1997) in non-fictional. The present work of study *Train to Pakistan* is one of his splendid hues from the mesmerizing rainbow of his works. In the words of K R SrinivasaIyengar, "*Train to Pakistan* projects with pitiless precision a picture of the bestial horrors on the Indo-Pakistan border region during the terror haunted days of August 1947."⁴ This novel magnifies brutality of partition by merging facts with fiction. Originally, *Mano Majra* was the title of this novel but later writer found *Train to Pakistan* more appropriate, as major incidents in the novel are somehow associated with movability, arrival and departure of trains and not to a single stagnant place.

Khushwant Singh has chosen a fictional hamlet named Mano Majra in Punjab nearby border of India and Pakistan as setting of this novel. It is a simple small village like any other and showcases just three brick buildings and rest around seventy are mud huts with flat roofs scattered on the sides of the narrow lanes connected to surrounding fields. Apart from atypical village milieu, "Mano Majra has

always been known for its railway station.”⁵ This is something which provides its uniqueness, because normally rickshaws, bullock carts and buses are seen as a means of transportation in rural areas but trains in this village hint towards development or technological advancement of a nation as a whole.

In *Train to Pakistan*, trains play a pivotal role in scheduling social as well as domestic lives of the villagers. Moreover, trains assist in the smooth running of the tale by bringing into spotlight major and minor occurrences. Though limited number of trains stop at Mano Majra yet arrival and departure of those a few trains announces hours for specific activities. Khushwant Singh says:

“Not many trains stop at Mano Majra. Express trains do not stop at all. Of the many slow passenger trains, only two, one from Delhi to Lahore in the mornings and the other from Lahore to Delhi in the evenings, are scheduled to stop for a few minutes. The others stop only when they are held up. The only regular customers are the goods trains.”⁶

Singh has very intelligently created Mano Majra as a train-conscious region. Where dawn is reported with the whistling of the train. He says:

“Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge, the driver invariably blows two long blasts on the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake.”⁷

At the passing of the mail train, crows start cawing, bats fly, the mullah Imam Baksh at the mosque recites in long notes, ‘*Allah-o-Akbar*’, and Bhai Meet Singh ji gets ready for prayer in Gurudwara.

“By the time 10:30 morning passenger train from Delhi comes in, life in Mano Majra has settled down to its full daily routine.”⁸

Men proceed towards fields, women get busy in routine chores, children take cattle for grazing by the river side. And,

“As the midday express goes by, Mano Majra stops to rest.”⁹

All come home for lunch and after that take siesta in the shade of the peepul tree, women gossip about marriages, births and deaths while applying clarified butter into

each other's hair and picking lice from children's heads. Thereafter,

“When evening passenger from Lahore comes in, everyone gets to work again.”¹⁰

Women start preparing dinner, cattle are driven back to byres and milked, and at night after taking supper all sit idly here and there until they get signal to sleep.

“When the goods train streams in, they say to each other, ‘There is the goods train.’ It is like saying goodnight.”¹¹

“The goods train takes a long time at the station, with the engine running up and down the sidings exchanging wagons. By the time it leaves, the children are asleep. The older wait for its rumble over the bridge to lull them to slumber. Then life in Mano Majra is stilled, save for the dogs barking at the trains that pass in the night.”¹²

It was daily practice in Mano Majra, ‘until the summer of 1947’¹³. KR SrinivasaIyengar comments:

“...indeed there are tens of thousands of villages like Mano Majra where the law has always been peaceful coexistence, and not communal strife. But 1947 was not like other times. Suspicion and violence filled the air, and an ill wind carried them even to little oases of communal harmony like Mano Majra.”¹⁴

By the time of the partition, trains were helping people in spending a sort of disciplined and punctual life. Unknowingly, trains were always at the back of their minds working as a sort of movable clock tower in the village to alert them for discrete tasks.

Apart from being a guiding force, coming and going of trains in the village Mano Majra casts light on the chain of important events happening in the novel. The very first incident that ignites the spark of communal violence is the murder of moneylender Lala Ram Lal by dacoits. Dacoits come to the village to loot Lala and wait for the right moment to execute their plan. And as soon as the goods train seems to be approaching one of them says:

“Listen, there is the goods train.”¹⁵

And leader of the dacoits declares:

“It is time to call on Ram Lal.”¹⁶

It shows that on the brighter side trains are a source of convenience but on the darker side ring alarm for malicious actions.

The other important scene which occurs at the moment of dacoity, is between gangster Juggut Singh, son of dacoit Alam Singh and Muslim girl Nooran, daughter of mullah of the mosque Imam Baksh. It's a love-making scene which moves parallel to the movements of the train. Following lines emphasize presence of goods train in the incidents of that black night.:

“Juggut Singh had been gone from his home about an hour. He had only left when the sound of the night goods train told him that it would now be safe to go. For him, as for the dacoits, the arrival of the train that night was a signal.”¹⁷

At the very moment of the appearance of the goods train Juggut starts from home to meet Nooran. And after some time, trains' exit whistling, groaning, creaking and puffing marks the intensified passion between lovers and its departure leaves private time for them. In the lines quoted below, such privacy with the departure of the goods train is highlighted in one more scene at the same moment but that is between Magistrate and deputy commissioner of the district Hukum Chand and a young singer girl Haseena.

“The goods train had dropped the Mano Majra wagons and was leaving the station for the bridge. It came up noisily, its progress marked by the embers which flew out of the funnel of the engine... Its passing brought a feeling of privacy.”¹⁸

So, the goods train's arrival indicates commencement of some secret acts mostly illicit and felonious. And its departure marks coziness, caresses and closeness on the one hand, and violence, problems and worries without solution on the other.

Next in the list are passenger trains which carry huge symbolic significance. Basically, it is a transportation in which people of diverse backgrounds and communities meet accidentally, rest, relax and proceed towards unexplored destinations. In the novel, a social worker Iqbal Singh encounters various strangers on his way to Mano Majra from Delhi by train. Passengers get involved in conversation with him and try to extract information regarding his identity. During his journey, he thinks about his plans. He is completely unaware about the unknown realms where train is taking him. He takes things easily being ignorant of the problems which wait for him because of his name Iqbal. He is Iqbal Singh, could be Iqbal Chand also, but falls under the suspicion of being Iqbal Mohammed. Though he comes with the policemen (who come to investigate Lala Ram Lal's murder case) on Delhi to Lahore passenger yet they arrest him on the pretext of being a Muslim.

As, 'The riots had become rout.'¹⁹ So, the passenger trains coming from and going to the Pakistan depict massacre, bloodshed, violence, horror, dead bodies and various other gruesome acts. About harrowing incidents occurring with trains magistrate Hukum Chand reveals:

“Do you know, ... ‘the Sikhs retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses? They wrote on the engine **“Gift to Pakistan!”**”²⁰

Pre-partition period's well-timed trains indicating progress, activity, company, expectations, journeying into new relationships start to get delayed due to horrendous happenings on both sides of the border.

“Early in September the time schedule in Mano Majra started going wrong. Trains became less punctual than ever before and many more started to run through at night. . . People stayed in bed late without realizing that times had changed and mail train might not run through at all. . . In the evenings, everyone was indoors before sunset and in bed before the express came by—if it did come by. Goods trains had stopped running altogether, so there was no lullaby to lull them to sleep. Instead, ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra.”²¹

Irregularity and procrastination of trains gesture towards disturbances, inactivity, lack of trust, and indiscipline. And Odd hours give feeling of something uncanny, something unusual with the trains. What's more,

“All trains coming from Delhi stopped and changed their drivers and guards before moving on to Pakistan.”²²

As Non-Muslims were not being spared across the border. Imam Baksh openly expresses his concern and says:

“...there have been many incidents with trains.”²³

And immediately,

“The word incident aroused an uneasy feeling in the audience.”²⁴

As,

“One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the days of peace. No one sat on the roof. No one clung between the bogies. No one was balanced on the

footboards. But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had **a ghostly quality.**”²⁵

Train with approximately fifteen hundred dead bodies halts at Mano Majra railway station. Magistrate HukumChand, who goes to inspect the train, describes panoramic succession of darker and redder voiceless, terror struck images, like a man grasping his own intestines, women and children with dread dilated eyes, toilets jammed with young men’s corpses and most vividly image of the old peasant in the broad day light. This heart-rending scene was unbearable for Hukum Chand. Tariq Ali in his book *Can Pakistan Survive?* expresses soreness of hearts owing to partition massacre through the following poem of Amrita Pritam translated into English by him as he says:

“The most fitting statement on the carnage and suffering that ordinary people were inflicting on each other was expressed by a teenage Sikh girl, Amrita Pritam, who wrote a poignant poem appealing to the nationalism of the Punjab’s most famous Sufi poet, Warith Shah:

I call on Warith Shah today:
O speak up from your grave
And from the Book of Love unfurl
A new and different page.

When one daughter of the Punjab did weep,
You wrote countless verses.
Today millions of daughters are in tears
With this message for you:
‘Arise, you healer of inner pain,
And look now at your Punjab;
The forests are littered with corpses
And blood flows down the Chenab.’”²⁶

These trains during partition times were playing the role of a hearse and giving deadly shock with brutal images of slaughtered passengers, panic of being uprooted accompanied by unendurable pangs of separation. There was a mass cremation after the arrival of the ghost train in Mano Majra. This agony was not yet over that

another ghost train comes from Pakistan which shakes Mano Majras to the depths.

“The train came to halt at Mano Majra station. It was from Pakistan.

‘There are no lights on the train.’

‘The engine did not whistle.’

‘It is like a ghost.’”²⁷

Just at the thought of second ghost train hearts pounded hardly. It was like a haunted place where no one was alive, where humans were scared to step in. Such were the trains which were coming to Mano Majra after witnessing cruel, inhuman and dirty face of humanity. Riots filled revenge type feelings in the hearts of the people. This vengeance turned humble humans into blood sucking monsters and ultimately led to a plan made to kill Muslims on the train going from India to Pakistan. A Sikh boy in his teens with boiling blood comes to the village and provokes people by saying:

“Tomorrow a train load of Muslims is to cross the bridge to Pakistan. If you are men, this train should carry as many people dead to the other side as you have received.”²⁸

No love, no attachment was left among people, only fear in the hearts of those unfortunate ones who were going to some unknown regions after leaving their homes. Here trains convey displacement and destiny.

Another significant reference given related to trains is ‘atrust with destiny’²⁹. It is described through the story narrated by Hukum Chand about an army man Sunder Singh who comes to his tryst by train along with his family and misfortunately loses his wife and children because of his lack of hope.

And ultimately the most horrid incident of the novel happens which separates two lovers Nooran and Juggut Singh forever as Juggat Singh dies while saving train going to Pakistan in which Nooran was travelling.

“The train got closer and closer. ...

The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went to Pakistan.”³⁰

- 12) *ibid*, p.6
- 13) *ibid*, p.6
- 14) Iyengar, K R Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1985, p.498-499
- 15) Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2016, p.7
- 16) *ibid*, p.7
- 17) *ibid*, p.11
- 18) *ibid*, p.32
- 19) *ibid*, p.2
- 20) *ibid*, p.21
- 21) *ibid*, p.81
- 22) *ibid*, p. 81-82
- 23) *ibid*, p.85
- 24) *ibid*, p.85
- 25) *ibid*, p.82
- 26) *ibid*, p.149
- 27) Ali, Tariq. *Can Pakistan Survive?*. England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983, p.40
- 28) Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2016, p.159
- 29) *ibid*, p.185
- 30) *ibid*, p.190
- 31) Iyengar, K R Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1985, p.501