

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* as a Partition Novel

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Abstract

For those of us alive today, it is undeniably hard to imagine the exact circumstances and atmosphere of events that have already gone by and are now a part of history. Nevertheless, though we cannot picture with clarity the tumultuous events that have shaped the reality we currently live in, there are traces everywhere of the profound impact that these events have left. India as a nation has a chequered history of countless such events, both horrifying and inspiring, that have shaped it as a country. Two centuries of colonization, the fight for independence, the divide-and-rule policy of the British, poverty, famine, discrimination, and battles. And of course, the Partition of India.

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There are now not many people left who can recount the stories of the partition from their own memories. Sometimes pain runs too deep to be articulated, and there can be no doubt that the partition was one such event that left scars that could never be healed. Those who did manage to survive the mass exodus were often hesitant to recall and narrate the true horrors of the journey. But when an event of this magnitude takes place, it becomes almost impossible to contain the waves it makes on the collective conscience of humanity. It is not surprising then that it inspired literature and poetry that could give future generations a little insight into the tumultuous times that our previous generations were unlucky enough to have witnessed. In addition, even after more than seven decades the partition has never really lost its significance because even today it continues to influence the geopolitics of our nation.

The deep impact that the partition of the subcontinent left on the minds of the people inspired several works of art. Novels like *Ice Candy Man*¹ by Bapsi Sidhwa, *A Bend in the Ganges*² by Manohar Malgokar, and *Shadows of Time*³ by Nigar Masroor are just a few of the works that have played an important role in informing the future generations of the climate and conditions of the partition. Each has its merits and areas in which it shines light. For this deep dive into the narrative of the partition, we are examining Khushwant Singh's well-known novel, *Train to Pakistan*. Published in 1956, *Train to Pakistan* deals primarily with the narrative of the partition which took place in 1947, immediately after the independence of the Indian subcontinent from British colonization.

What makes *Train to Pakistan* truly stand out amongst the other partition novels is the author's ability to portray a deep sense of the local emotion of the fictitious border village of Mano Majra. Khushwant Singh is able to give a specific identity to the town and its people. It is through this identity and creation of an atmosphere that the Singh is able to present the reality of the partition with such vivid clarity, truth, and horror. This level of atmosphere-creation can be credited to Singh's talent as a writer of social realism, as well as his personal work experience in Indian politics and his work as a journalist.

The identity of Mano Majra that Khushwant Singh creates is deeply linked with the train that runs through this small village on the Indo-Pakistan border. The novel is divided into four parts – Dacoity, Kalyug, Mano Majra, and Karma. In the novel, the village itself is portrayed as a character that has its own identity and little quirks. One of the only remarkable features of this small village located on the border is that it has a railway junction. The entirety of the village population and their schedules seem to revolve around the junction. The ongoing upheaval all over

the country where Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were being compelled to abandon their homes and belongings and lives and migrate to different areas of the subcontinent by any means necessary had placed a lot of importance on trains, which were the primary means of long-distance travel. The people of Mano Manjra too slowly started to center their lives around the train junction. These trains, which at the start of the novel stand as the most important element of the villagers' lives, transform into one of the most horrifying as the trains coming into the Mano Manjra junction are all ghost trains, filled only with the bodies of the butchered: "The village was stilled in a deathly silence. No one asked anyone else what the odor was. They all knew. They had known it all the time. The answer was implicit in the fact that the train had come from Pakistan." (100)

Another remarkable and significant feature of the village of Mano Manjra is that all of its diverse residents are able to live together in harmony. Through the vivid personalities of his characters, Khushwant Singh paints a picture of the utmost good that can be found in humanity and also the utmost evil, which revels in violence for its the sake of it. The Sikh, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu occupants of the village bear no outright animosity to one another. Their conflict with the partition in the novel starts with the murder of Lala Ram Lal at the hands of the local gang of goons. This moment of unnecessary violence is one that has repercussions throughout the novel and shapes the events as they unfold.

In retrospect, it is easy to point out the intentions of the British to sow division between the Hindu and Muslim populations of the subcontinent, and the failures of the political heads of the time. But at the time of the partition, the propaganda being fed by the British resulted in communal tension reaching such a tipping point that both communities of the subcontinent blamed each other and were hell-bent on destroying the other. Khushwant Singh paints this picture of upheaval and unrest against the backdrop of the unforgiving, intensely dry and harsh summer of 1947. The intensity and suffering of the summer months are only amplified by the blood spilled on both sides. On the one hand Muslims feel that the Hindus had taken premeditated action against them, and the Hindus feel the same: '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, both sides were killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped' (9). This is the crux of the misunderstanding and miscommunication that plagued the partition that Khushwant Singh details brilliantly in his novel. The irony is that a country known and celebrated for its peace-loving and non-violent ways ended up being the battleground of one of the most savage massacres in the history of the world.

The character of Iqbal presents the reader with an interesting position from which to consider the events of the partition and the novel. On the one hand, Iqbal is an educated, atheist social worker who comes to Mano Majra with the primary purpose of educating the locals about the newly formed national and the government policies. On the one hand, he is immediately caught in the middle of a murder charge along with Jugga, purely on the basis of his religion. It is interesting to consider how, no matter the amount of education or liberal mindset, people are quick to judge one another in the harshest light possible. Through Iqbal's eyes the reader is compelled to look at the narrative playing out in front of them without the biases of religion and hatred and yet be forced to consider the personal consequences of belonging to a particular caste or religion. What makes Iqbal's perspective so interesting to look through is the dilemma he finds himself in towards the end of the novel. When the Sikhs and Hindus are all planning to murder everyone on the train that is meant to take the Muslim refugees of Mano Majra to Pakistan, he finds himself unable to take action for or against the planned violence.

On the other hand, it is Jugga Singh who sacrifices his own life in order to protect the passengers of the train, amongst whom is his sweetheart Nooran and his unborn child. Despite being a declared badmash and deceit, his character is shown to have a kind heart. From Jugga's perspective, the reader is compelled to look at the violence only through the eyes of the lover. This violence then loses all religious motives as the love between Jugga and Nooran is an inter-religious one.

It is interesting to see how the value of each human being is determined by their religion, caste and political beliefs. This dynamic that was enforced by the British in order to divide the populace and prevent them from uniting against a common enemy ultimately culminated in the partition. But the effects of this mindset that the British sowed into the minds of the people affect us even today. Even if we leave aside the rivalry between India and Pakistan, there are enough religion-based riots within the nation that hinder the overall progress of the people. The geopolitics of the nation has only gotten more complicated over the years, and it is clear to see that the hate between the two major communities of the nation has significantly increased in the past 76 years of independence. We might have gained independence from the British in 1947 but the partition proved to us that we were not free from the colonial mindset that had been so ingrained in us.

Despite this hatred within the communities, *Train to Pakistan* serves as a reminder that even when two communities are hell-bent on destroying each other, love still finds a way to blossom. The common people are simply trying to earn and provide a decent living for their families, find love and companionship, and live

their lives in harmony with those around them. But when the mob mentality takes over, the individual's hopes and motivations are utterly disregarded. All the characters present at the time of the attack on the train know they have the power to stop the tragedy that is about to unfold. They might have lost their lives in the process but at the very least they would have successfully saved a train full of innocent ones. But only Jugga was able to take action and prevent the violence, the rest simply stood by, too enraged to do the right thing.

Through his novel *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh is able to perfectly capture the atmosphere of the partition. The small border village where Muslims and Sikhs live harmoniously is utterly destroyed in the partition. The bonds of love that they had formed with each other through the generations were all eradicated when the Muslims were told to leave Mano Majra and move towards Pakistan. It is only Jugga's sacrifice that saves the people on board the train. Singh portrays Jugga as the ideal - a man who is able to take action, even though it might end up destroying his life. His actions are inspired only by love, which stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the action throughout the novel and the partition, which is needlessly violent.

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