

# Analyzing Existentialist assertions in Indian Literature: a study Humanistic Dynamics in Train to Pakistan

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The creation of two sovereign states “The Republic of India” and “The Dominion of Pakistan” was the result of the process of dividing the sub-continent on the basis of sectorial lines, the so called Redcliff line. It led to the largest mass migration in human history and malevolently routed lives to profound miseries. About fourteen million people attempted to cross the borders of the two independent countries. The history reveals the realistic black narration of Independence of India. There are a few novelists who portrayed the true picture of this partition. These realistic pictures can easily be traced out in Bhisham Sahni’s Tamas, Manohar Mangolkar’s Bend in the Ganges, Chaman Nahal’s Azadi, Raj Gill’s The Rape, Guru Charan Das’s A Fine Family, Bapsi Sidhwa’s Ice Candy Man and others.

“By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was 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 northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding.” (Singh 2)

Train to Pakistan, the debut novel of Khushwant Singh reflects the trauma of ethnic violence and conflict of cultures that existed at the time of Partitions. The novel highlights the futility of blaming each other for the unfortunate event. Train to Pakistan seems to be by and large objective depiction of the event without blaming any community or religious minority for it.

“The fact is both the side killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped.” (Singh 1)

There are numerous works written on partition but Train to Pakistan stays distinguished as it does not treat usual themes of indiscriminate killings as the central theme. The novel highlights other associated

issues arising from partition, especially the human dimensions of the gruesome happenings. Talking about the treatment of the subject by Khushwant Singh, Bhatnagar says:

“Khushwant Singh was the first Indian novelist in English to write about the horror and holocaust of partition with great artistic concern in *Train to Pakistan*. It is not partition but what it gets associated with and what it becomes symbolic of that attracts the attention of the writer.”(Bhatnagar 152)

Existentialist assertions can be defined as the emotions, thinking and deeds of individuals that differentiate them from others. My intention in this paper is to underline these very emotions and deeds as presented by Khushwant Singh in the novel *Train to Pakistan*.

The novel opens in the fictional village named Manno Majra, which “is a tiny place...has only three brick buildings....home of the money lender Lala Ram Lal, .....Sikh Temple and the Mosque.....the rest of village is cluster of roofed mud huts.”(Singh 2) The village is with the demography of about 70 families with a single Hindu family i.e. of the Money Lender Ram Lal, rest is either Sikh or Muslims. “The Sikhs own all the land round the village and Muslims are tenants and share tilling with the owners.” (Singh 2).The Village “has been always known for its Railway Station as the bridge has only one track” (Singh 3). Lifestyles of the people are interdependent on each other and the trains perform the job of a clock.

“This has made Manno Majra conscious of trains.....the driver invariably blows two long blast .....All Manno Majra comes awake.....the 10:30 morning passenger .....Manno Majra has settled down to its dull daily routine” (Singh 4-5).

Initially the novel focuses on the unity of the two communities at the pre-independence period. Before the post-partition riots, all the people – Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs lived in the village in harmony, but the riots created confusion and confronted them ethnically and culturally. There was mutual cultural harmony among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians who visited the village. There was a small colony of shopkeepers and hawkers at the railway station. They were to supply traveler’s foods, betel leaves, cigarettes, teas, biscuits and sweetmeats. This shows the presence of a good cultural understanding in the village. The novelist describes another scene of religious contact. Muslim Mullah at the Mosque sings

“Allah-o-Akbar” and Sikh priest in Sikh temple succeeds them. The prayer of monotonous singsong sounds dear. This context shows the cross-cultural contact and attachment to the ethnicity. There is the symptom of cultural and religious harmony in the village where people of different sects, races and religions live together.

It however failed to arouse the feelings of harmony and unity in the warring factions. Khushwant Singh pictures the story of Dacoits in the Novel and treats them with absolutely different dimensions. Jaggut Singh, also known as Jugga; the Protagonist of the play, Son of Dacoit Alam Singh. The novelist treats him with the theme of love and Sacrifice

“What the police of Punjab have failed to do, the magic of eyes of a girl of sixteen has done....with a Muslim weaver’s daughter. She is dark, but her eyes are even darker. She certainly keeps Jugga in the village. And no one dares to say a word against the Muslims.” (Singh 24)

We can notice the change in Jugga as he was in the influence of love as he call himself as “I am only badmash with you, Nooro.” (Singh 13). Towards the end of the novel, When Jugga reached Manno Majra and saw the circumstances his “immediate concern was the fate of Nooran. He did not look at his companions in the tonga or at the village” (Singh 173).

“He whipped out a small kripan .....Began to slash the rope”. The bullet fired by the leader shot him.....the rope had been cut in shreds....he went at it with the knife and then with teeth. The engine was almost on him. There were volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the center as he fell. The Train went over him and went to Pakistan” (Singh 190).

The roles of government officials who were supposed to control the crisis have also been found questionable. The characters of the government officials have been shown careless, insensitive and impulsive in their behaviour and attitude. The inhuman dimension of corruption can be noticed the way blank warrants were signed by the magistrate.

“Here is warrant of your arrest.....You have no right to arrest me like this .....you have made up the warrant in front of me.”(Singh 55)

The unthoughtful behaviour of the officials can be simply opted out as they did everything on the advice of magistrates. The magistrate who acted in an insensitive manner every time, dominated the area with his impulsive decisions and acts.

“Babu Sahib, we are only doing our Duty. You settle this with the Magistrate.” (Singh 55)

Hukum Chand is the regional magistrate, and the most influential character in the story. It converts deceptive that he is a morally disputed man who has probably used his authority over the years with ample corruption. He is frequently described with a filthy physical appearance as if he is overwhelmed with unclean actions and sins, and is just as repeatedly trying to absolve himself of them, as Pontius Pilate did after Christ was condemned. Hukum Chand's ethical issues are shown in one of repeated meets he has with two geckos, which likely represent Muslims and Hindus in conflict, on the verge of fighting each other. When they start fighting, they fall right next to him, and he panics. The guilt he gets from not serving when he partakes more than sufficient power to do so literally jumps onto him.

“Hukum Chand felt as if he had touched the lizards and they had made his hands dirty. He rubbed his hands on the hem of his shirt. It was not the sort of dirt which could be wiped off or washed clean” (Singh 91)

Alcoholism is an alternative means which Hukum Chand practices to mitigate the pricks of conscience. He feels the guilt of his activities by day and feels relieved of them by night, when alcohol justifies his interactions with a teenage prostitute of the same age as his deceased daughter. At all his confusions, he admits that what he is doing stands wrong, but still he is incapable to promote right. Kali Yuga (Kalyug) that is “age of (the demon) Kali”, or “age of vice” is the last of the four stages the world goes through as part of the cycle of yugas described in the Indian scriptures. The same treatment have been given to the chapter Kalyug in Train to Pakistan

“... The ordinances of the Vedas disappear gradually in every successive age... the duties in the Kali age are entirely of another kind. It seems, therefore, that duties have been laid down for the respective age according to the powers of human beings in the respective ages.” (Mahabharata)

The arrival of train filled with corpses and the flood carrying stabbed and blood-oozing bodied created a hush. The bodies were burned with the materials they got from villagers. Interestingly enough the villagers were not informed about it. The magistrate and the Sikh officers estimate the death of people and the scene was sensitively depicted in the novel.

“There were more than thousand. I think he just calculated how many people could get into the bogie and multiplied it.....another four or five hundred must have been killed on the roof.....roof was certainly covered with dried up blood.....fifteen hundred innocent peoples! What else is a Kalyug?”(Singh 102)

The novel reaches its climax in the chapter Manno Majra when it was discovered that the train had brought a full load of corpses. The coming of refugees to villages increased. For the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them. Oder was now sent to Muslim camp to evacuate Muslims as soon as possible. The villagers were now confused, it could be noticed through the words of novelist

“The lambardar shouted at him. ‘You are a hothead one sometimes you want to kill Muslims, sometimes you want to kill refugees’ ” (Singh 131).

The novel is also treated with the theme of Lack and Gap of conversation. The voice of the villagers was either not heard by the troops or it was deliberately ignored. The same was from the villagers’ side; as the message from them was either manipulated or misunderstood as:

“The news that the Manno Majra Muslims were going to Pakistan came as a surprise. The lambardar had believed that they would only go to the refugee camp for few days and then return”. (Singh 142)

The philosophy of ‘Karma’, that is, action, as described in The Bhagavad Gita A person has to perform his or her duty, sacred duty (dharma). One is to act "because it must be done" (18.9). Performing duty sustains oneself, the society, and the cosmos (3.14, 24 and 26). Have faith in sacred duty (9.3) is portrayed by the novelist. In this section, the story reaches its catastrophic dramatic end. The fanatic leaders of both the communities played disastrous role in fanning the fire of communalism. The provocative speeches given by the vested interests were disastrous.

“Do you know how many train loads of dead Sikhs and Hindus have come over? Do you know the massacres of .....you expect government to do anything .....do Muslims in Pakistan apply for permission when they rape your sisters?”(Singh 156)

The situation was just getting out of their control, but the officials made no effort to stop it. They, on the contrary, supported the plan of the massacre. “Well Inspector Sahib, let them kill, Said Hukum Singh” (Singh 163). It ends with Jaggut Singh sacrificing his life to save the lives of his girlfriend, Nooran and other Muslim refugees. Thus we see that Jugga to save his love of life the so called “only one bad character in the village” reaches the center of the rope tied there to kill people over the train, does not hesitate even for a moment while sacrificing his life for Nooran and other Muslims. He never, like Iqbal, indulges in the dilemma of morality or consequences of his actions, and he leaves them to Guru (God) to discriminate between the right and the wrong or good and bad acts and reward them accordingly. Jaggut Singh understands the philosophy of “Guru Granth Sahib” in real sense, which says: “For God is True and dispenseth Truth. There the elect his court adorn, And God Himself their actions honors.” (Singh 183)

From the above discussions and excerpts from the text, it can be concluded that Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan stands apart from other partition novels as it focuses on the associated issues of violence and the wide range of Existentialist assertions as its central concern. Like other partition novels, Train to Pakistan does not focus on the mere descriptions of the loathsome and inhuman happenings, but more on the human character and human aspects of the happenings. The novel seems to raise questions like what were the consequences of the Partition? Who were the major gainers? Who lost the battle?

The answers might differ from person to person and from ideology to ideology, but we all would agree with and fact that It is now time for us to affirm and find an Indian brand of existentialism which should now be traced in the literature of the country and its relevance in society. The paper would end its discussions with Sadat Hasan Manto’s observation which he makes in one of his stories and which seems to so well capture the central thrust of Train to Pakistan-

“Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its inception but man was still slave in both these countries—slave of prejudice....slave of religious fanaticism....slave of barbarity and inhumanity”

## Works Cited

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‘The Mahabharata’ and ‘The Bhagwat Gita’ have been taken from the websites.

