

# Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan: Depiction of Unprecedented Destruction

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## ABSTRACT

**Train to Pakistan** is a symbol of motion or movement. It signifies groups or multitudes of people who are heading for various destinations. It also shows horrifying process of change, a ghastly experience of human involved in a historical change. This change is impersonal and dehumanized. The train suggests the fate of individuals, the fortune of the two newly born nations. The partition is a political decision which had given the people the miseries, sufferings and privation. The train is an indicator of the machine age, an age dominated by science and technology. This has devalued humanistic values. The human race far from nature and God, finds itself rootless, lifeless and completely alienated. This alienation is symbolic in **Train to Pakistan**. The train goes from Mano Majra, a village on the Indian side in the Punjab, to Lahore, the capital of the undivided Punjab before partition.

**Key Words:** contemporary, threshold unprecedented, bloodshed, turbulent, drastically, nostalgia, communalism, partition, riots.

Khushwant Singh (born Khushal Singh, 15 August 1915 – 20 March 2014) was an Indian author, lawyer, diplomat, journalist and politician. Khushwant Singh was born at Hadali in West Punjab (now in Pakistan). He attended public school in Delhi and Lahore. He was admitted to St. Stephen's College, Delhi in 1930. He attended King's College, London in 1934. He was called for the bar in 1937. He was appointed as information officer of the government of India at Toronto in Canada and Press attaché and public relations officer for the High Commission of India in the United Kingdom and the embassy in Ireland in 1948-50.

With the publication of his first novel **Train to Pakistan** (1956) Khushwant Singh arrived on the contemporary literary scene. This brought him recognition and wide acclaim. This won for him the Grove Press India Fiction Prize for the year 1956.

It is very interesting to note that Khushwant Singh did not become a full-time writer by choice; he had no such intention. The decision to write came to him when he found something compelling to write about. It was the time of partition which greatly moved him. The horrifying events and turbulent days drastically changed his outlook to life. His faith in the nobility of human race was shattered:

“The beliefs that cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country....! I became ... an angry middle aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world ... I decided to try my hand at writing.”<sup>1</sup>

On the fundamental quality of Mr. Singh, V.A.Shahane writes:

“Although Singh’s consciousness appears to range from fiction to journalism certain basic qualities govern his creative talent and characterize the development of his art. His writing, critical as well as creative, falls into a pattern which emerges from, and is imperceptibly linked with the primary characteristics of his creative mind.”<sup>2</sup>

**Train to Pakistan** is the story that everyone wants to forget, yet one cannot overlook this stark reality of our past. When the nation was on the threshold of a new dawn, it also faced unprecedented destruction, bloodshed and trauma. Khushwant Singh has successfully delineated this unpleasant phase of our national history in the novel. Khushwant Singh reveals the effect of partition, both mental as well as

physical, on the human beings. Communal riots broke up during the partition days and claimed the lives of many innocent Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus.

**Train to Pakistan** is a saga of miseries, hardships, agonies and a sense of nostalgia which the people had to face due to the communalism. In **Train to Pakistan** we find Khushwant Singh's original response to partition and the impact of partition on the people. From the very first page of the novel we get the impression of physical violence where the Muslims blamed the Hindus that they had planned and started the killing, whereas, on the other hand, the Hindus blamed the Muslims for the same reason. But the fact is that both the sides killed, shot, and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both were tortured and both were raped. Hundreds of people left their homelands and sought protection for their families. They travelled on foot, bullock carts, crammed into lorries, also clinged to the sides and roofs of trains. But many of them were killed in their way by the Muslims or the Hindus.

Mano Majra is a tiny village far from these riots. There Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs live with peace and with brotherhood feeling. They even don't know about the partition. They have their own peaceful life. But soon this peace disappeared with the murder of Lala Ram Lal. This violence is not an end but just the beginning of the bad days of darkness for the Mano Majarans. Juggut Singh was suspected for the murder of Lala Ram Lal but the fact is that he is innocent.

The arrival of the ghost train in broad daylight created a commotion in Mano Majra. This train was filled with corpses of men, women and children:

“There were ladies cramped against the far and wall of the compartment looking in terror at the empty windows through which must have come shots, spears and spikes.”<sup>3</sup>

The trains that were coming over to Mano Majra with dead bodies create panic and terror in the heart of the villagers. The horrible picture of the corpses is depicted through Hukum Chand's words:

“There were women and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror, their mouths still open as if their shrieks had just then become voiceless.”(102)

The whole train was filled with corpses and the foul smell of putrefying flesh, faeces and urine was coming out of the train. Even if the reader imagines this scene he can feel the horror that was faced by those innocent people who got killed without any fault of theirs. Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** picks up the event of the partition. He explores the impact of it on a small village of Mano Majra. The village allegorically stands for India. The multiple responses of people reveal the responses of people in general. He tries to discover the true Indian response. He does so by juxtaposing the people, their views and also their actions. He tries to present the Indian/ Punjabi/ Sikh ethos and even tries to identify it. There are many shades of this identity and the novelist succeeds in showing them in categorical terms. All the while he maintains his perspective very clear and gives each view critical treatment. He convincingly gives true Indian response to the event through this novel.

The author like other commonwealth writers shows the nation on a quest for its roots and identity. The novelist shows how people go back to the scriptures, heroes and their actions during the time of crisis and how they interpret them in their own convenient ways. The author succeeds in bringing the truth to the readers.

As a result of the partition refugees start flowing to India from Pakistan. They bring with themselves unnarratable sad stories of displacement, arsons, murders, rapes and so on. Furthermore, Mano Majrans witness how the communal forces from Pakistan send a trainload of dead bodies of Sikhs and Hindus. The river Sutlej is

flooded with corpses of Hindus. The only Hindu of the village Ram Lal is murdered. All these things led to the rise of tension. Now the village can't remain unaffected. The police want to maintain the law and order situation.

The police want the Muslims to go to Pakistan for their safety. They are ready to provide them facilities to reach Chandan Nagar safely from where a train is to go to Pakistan. At this juncture of time, a group of youths want to take revenge on Muslims. The leader is heard speaking that if hundreds of innocent Sikhs are being killed and women raped and abducted, why not do the same to the Muslims here in order to make Pakistani Muslims stop nonsense. This is the climax of the novel.

Khushwant Singh focuses on the impact of partition on the minds of the people and its marks on the body of the people. He presents diverse views that came on the surface then. He, at the same time, tries to bring to light the genuine Sikh/ Indian/ human voice and through it its ethos. He reveals these voices by putting them in debate over the issues. He makes Bhai Meet Singh the Lambardar. Banta Singh and Jugga Singh represent the rural rooted true Sikhs. They have right understanding of the Gurus and their teachings. On the other side are Iqbal Singh, the nameless youth in military dress, Malli and the police inspector, representing the perversion or misinterpretation of Sikhism.

The novelist constructs an overall picture of these people i.e. their appearances, actions, words and feelings. These people are selfless, generous and accommodating. The opposite group though varied and isolated, shares a few features in common. Having been well prepared, they have arguments, which are at the very first instance so rational and convincing. They are what the circumstances have made them in the given situation. They are, therefore, concerned with what is temporary or temporarily relevant. They are prejudiced in their vision and are self-centered. They have a sort of force in them, which often becomes arrogance.

Iqbal Singh is one of the prominent voices from this group. He is an outsider in both literal and metaphorical senses. He is from city, educated in England, and he thinks himself to be progressive, socialist and reformer. He feels that he has solutions to the problems of the people. Iqbal Singh is a parasite on the society. He stays in the Gurudwara, enjoys its facilities as well as the charities of the villagers. Yet he does not honor the traditions of the place. Iqbal Singh is a big hypocrite. As such he subscribes to the leftist ideology, and he has been in Mano Majra to unite the peasants and workers and also to make them fight against the government and injustice. He thinks that the politicians are cheating the public and not honoring their feelings.

Satirically, whatever he thinks and says is equally applicable to his own self too. The author reveals this by showing the gap between his words and actions. His ideology remains confined to his words only. He thinks that religion is irrelevant and it has played havoc with mankind. Iqbal wants to be a leader but he does not have the qualities of a leader. He is neither honest nor courageous. He is not ready to face hardships of life. The author drives a bitter satire on him. He stands exposed and is ridiculed. He falls in the eyes of the readers. The author has been successful in bringing to light the wide gap between what he promised to be and what he did. He attacks on his hypocrisy.

Hukum Chand is another hypocrite but he is soft at his heart. He is the magistrate and deputy commissioner of the district. He is a type as well as an individual, a person as well as bureaucrat and in many ways, an evolving character. Actually Khushwant Singh tries to capture the physical reality of the human world and attempts to comprehend as a whole the small, insignificant gestures, facial expressions and the mode of behavior of his character and in this way makes them bubble with life in portraiture and Mr. Singh's portraiture of Hukum Chand's action and attitudes are remarkable.

Hukum Chand has in his mind the horror of death. The sight of the dead in the ghost train deeply affected him. His inward eye re-created the scene which he had seen in the train:

“There was a man holding his intestine, with an impression in his eyes which said: ‘Look! What I have got? Lavatories were filled with corpses. An old peasant with a long white beard did not look dead at all.”(90)

Hukum Chand, the sober bureaucrat, is shaken by the sight of the dead bodies in the train. Though from outside he looks hypocrite but from inside he is also man of flesh, blood and heart.

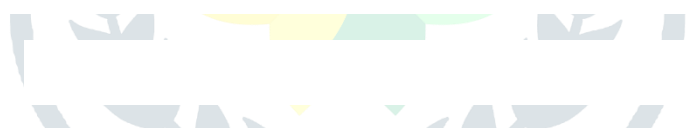
Nooran is another character who is also not far from partition effect. Because of partition she is going to depart from her lover Jugga. Nooran is a young, beautiful daughter of Mullah Imam Baksh. She is in deep love with Jugga. They meet outside the village in the fields now and then. Though everybody in the village knew about her relation with Jugga but nobody dares to speak about it.

Nooran carries Jugga’s child in her womb when he is arrested by the police in Lala Ram Lal’s murder case. When Jugga got released from jail he comes to know about Nooran and her departure from the village. He at once gets ready to sacrifice his life to save Nooran’s life. It is Nooran’s love which compels Jugga to save her and that leads to his final sacrifice for Nooran. Though Nooran’s character is small but it is much important to the novel as its story. The novel without Nooran’s character cannot reach at its end and without the end a novel cannot be successful.

The author also reveals the interaction between the religious bhai and the earthly and sensual Jugga. Jugga is presented as a badmash, dacoit and hooligan. He is seen with the Muslim girl Nooran, involved in sensual pleasure. He is ill-reputed and

ignorant of the Gurbani, i.e. the teachings of the Guru. Yet he has full faith in the Gurus and their teachings. He also has trust in Bhai Meet Singh.

The author reveals the character of Jugga symbolically. When Jugga goes to Gurdwara in the night, “In dark he looks larger than ever.”(198) In the darkness of anarchy and madness all around, he looks bigger and brighter. He has come to hear the words of the Guru. It hardly matters whether the words are from the Guru Granth Sahib or any other source. The Bhai reads from the Morning Prayer as morning is to take place, i.e. the forces of darkness in the form of Malli and his companions are to fail because of Jugga. The way morning brings hope Jugga is the hope for humanity in his own way. He has now transcended his earthy character. Jugga does not know the tradition of the ritual of ‘seva’. What is important, however, is the fact that he is closer to the ideals of Sikhism. He has conviction that by saving the innocent Muslims, he is going to do something good. He has overcome the sensualism. He now feels for others and their well being. Of all the narrations, Jugga’s last act of bravery is quite poignant:



“He pulled himself up, caught the rope under his left armpit, and again started hacking with his right hand. The rope had been cut in threads. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with a knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The lan shivered and collapsed The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.”( 207)

Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** (1956) juxtaposes the plight of Mano Majrans before the summer of 1947 with their plight after the partition. Mano Majra is the setting for almost all the incidents of the novel. The novel covers the time span of a few months from the summer of 1947 to September of the same year. During this



period the people of the whole village pass from the state of happiness and steadiness to that of bitterness, disturbance, insecurity and uncertainty.

**Train to Pakistan** is the expression of anguish which Khushwant Singh has in his heart after experiencing the horrible consequences of the communal riots. Mr. Singh depicts the environment in such a way that the reader experiences the violence throughout the whole novel. The death lurks all around humanity, wilted away, the hearts and minds of people were filled with panic unheard and unknown before. Khushwant Singh, though often known as a writer writing in the journalistic jingo - successfully captures the mood, the tone and the ethos of Mano Majra filled with fright during the summer of 1947. Every line reveals the disaster of communalism and ultimately its consequences. Singh highlights the way Indian subcontinent was swayed by the devilish feelings of hatred and massacre.

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(All the subsequent quotations from the text are from this edition only and the page numbers have been given in parentheses after the quotation itself.)