

Love Amidst Ruins in Khuswant Singh's "Train to Pakistan"

Chandan Kumar Jha
Research Scholar
Dept. of English
L.N.Mithila University, Darbhanga

ABSTRACT

Among the important Indian writers of English fiction Khuswant Singh's name has a special significance. In fact, he made his debut as a novelist with this searing novel. However, the novel in question was one of the earliest attempts by any Indian writer to deal with the impact of partition on the Punjabi's of United India¹. In fact, when the novel was published simultaneously from Britain and America under two different titles, it at once caught the eye of discerning readers and critics. The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most horrific events of decolonization in the 20th century, bringing death, rape and plunder in its wake. The agony of partition has reverberated in literature in various India Languages in as many ways as the writers themselves.

Key words: Partition, decolonization, massacre, revenge, agony

ARTICLE

As Prof. Shahane has rightly pointed out in his full-fledged book on Khuswant Singh, 'it is Khuswant Singh's supreme achievement, which he is unlikely to excel¹. Among its merits, he mentions its structure, plot, narrative characters and evocations of a powerful atmosphere and symbolic use of certain events. Though the writer has used a naturalistic mode of expression, he has managed to transform the actual incidents into evocative symbols and images. As everyone knows *Train to Pakistan* deals with the lives of the people in a sleepy little village called Mano Majra situated on the outskirts of India and Pakistan. The action covers only a few weeks and deals with the fate of quite innocent and apolitical people caught up in the turmoil of partition. Khuswant Singh begins and ends the novel in an identical manner. First, train load of dead bodies of Sikhs comes from Pakistan and it is decided that by way of retaliation a train load of dead bodies of Muslims should be dispatched to Pakistan. Only the last minute cunning of one man and the sacrifice of another saves the situation from repetition of carnage as a measure of tit for tat. From Khuswant Singh's own autobiographical writings, we can get the genesis of some of the incidents narrated in his 'autobiography' and he is on record that his visits to Sikhs villages provided him with stories from his clients. Not only this, he has also recalled that at one point he had narrowly escaped death when he was moving from Abbottabad to Lahore. He had heard from newspapers that the train by which he had travelled had been stopped Takshila station and many Sikhs passengers were dragged out and murdered *Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography* 2002². From these sources, it becomes clear that he had written the novel on the basis of actual background and factual details of train related killings on the eve of partition. However, credit goes to the novelist for using facts and blending them with imaginative skills into a work of art. In fact, his credit lies in his endeavour of transcending the occasion into a work of enduring beauty and universal significance, and as such, the novel deserves serious appraisal. It appears that the novelist wants to contrast the state of Mano Majra before partition and after partition in terms of the contrast between the prelapsarian Eden and the postlapsarian Eden. "Symbolic Eden is Mano Majra and the date of the fall is the summer of 1947. In a beautiful paragraph, he observes "when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formerly announced, "it was not like other Indian summers", "and even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier.....for weeks, the sparse clouds cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins" *Train to Pakistan*³. At first sight, the novel's title attracts attention. The original title Mano Majra refers to the place

which is the centre of action in a sequence of events that culminates in the final calamity. The title of the novel in both forms is quite suggestive. While the new title *Train to Pakistan* refers to the mobility of the people who are heading for various destinations, the original title indicating the name of a Village refers to a fixed point in space. In fact, the train implies the movement of a vast number of people who are uprooted from their soils and culture and heading for a New Jerusalem. The train's symbolic meaning has been recognized by all leading critics and at various levels. For example, Professor Shahane suggests that the movement of this train suggests the 'fate of individuals' as well as the 'destination of two newly formed nations' but, at the same time, the train also suggests the arrival of a 'machine age' resulting into dehumanization of human beings who are in the grip of demonic powers. As Shahane has rightly suggested, 'the train is a dual symbol. It symbolizes life and action but it also stands for 'death and disaster'⁴. In the novel, there are very rhythmic uses of the recurrent patterns created by the 'regularity of train' which makes the people very conscious of the railway station as well as the arrival and departure of two passenger trains, but after the riots, life at Mano Majra everything is still except for the barking of dogs and a few night trains which have a ghost-like effect in the absence of light and that of long whistles. As the novelist describes the arrival of a train from Pakistan, one particular morning at Mano Majra, it creates a different impression and an effect of a ghost is immediately felt. The arrival of the ghost train in the broad day light similarly creates a totally different impression and people are curious to know what had happened at the station. In other words, the writer creates a proper atmosphere to lend an air of authenticity. In fact, the symbolic significance of trains has also been captured in a recent dissertation. Trains happen to be one of the most enduring images of the partition of the subcontinent⁵. In fact, she has mentioned that in a number of stories and narratives on partition there are authentic mentions of the arrival of trains. Bhasham Sahni, Krishna Chandra, Amrit Rai have all made use of the arrival of trains as a central motif in their partition stories. From all those narratives, one thing becomes clear that trains don't just carry dead bodies but also bring horrible tales of atrocity, bloodshed and various rumours of violence and mutilation. In some of the stories, there are specific mentions of revenge and homicide while in others we are presented the ghastly stories of abduction, rape and other forms of cruelty against women⁶. By contrast in *Train to Pakistan* violence is presented in a very unusual manner. The novelist, of course, describes the arrival of train containing loads of corpses of Hindus and Sikhs and that awareness creates retaliation and the entire edifice of long harmony and camaraderie is completely shattered. He presents this contrast in terms of running of trains to and from Mano Majra symbolizing the regulation of life and its normal rhythm. By contrast, the irregular arrival of train after partition means disruption of social harmony. Trains become less punctual than ever before and many more move during night. In fact, there is a detailed description of the irregular movement of the trains and their arrival and departure after sunset or night. All this is treated as a kind of prelude to a major catastrophe. As Bhai Meet Singh, the priest of the Gurdwara observes to a Communal leader Iqbal "what has been happening? Ask me what has not been happening? Train loads of dead people came to Mano Majra. We burnt one lot and buried another. The river was flooded with corpses. Muslims were evacuated and in their place refugees have come from Pakistan"⁷.

Train to Pakistan has a well-constructed structure and a kind of solid architectural pattern. It covers areas of plots, sequence of events and a blend of various narratives and episodic arrangements. In other words, it is a novel in the well-made tradition of a conventional novel but, at the same time, it is a strange combination of documentation, narrative pattern and also human values. According to Professor Shahane, it is a kind of dramatic novel as well as a novel of action. He even calls the novel a 'realistic, epic novel' in the great tradition of Russian novelists like those of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The scene of *Train to Pakistan* is laid in India on the eve of Pakistan in 1947 but what differentiates it from other novels is its 'architectural design' which was like a kind of imitation of Forster's *Passage to India* where there is similar 'tripartite division'⁸. In Khushwant Singh's novel, we have 'four parts' appropriately named the Dacoity, Kaliyug, Mano Majra and Karma. The first part begins with scene of robbery where realistic description of actual robbery in Mano Majra village is treated as a kind of prologue embodying man's inner spiritual deprivation. In the second part, he uses the expression 'Kaliyug', a term which, according to Hindu mythology, refers to the fourth and last phase of the four cycles of existence. However, in terms of the novel's mechanism, it becomes a mythical expression of 'Hard Times', the 'Troubled Times' of strife and hatred where everything has run out of gear and voices of sanity and compassion are drowned in the sea of violence and bottomless perdition. Mano Majra, the third part of the structure, is the centre of focus and it really suggests that reign

of Kali or cosmic violence. The fourth part is again appropriately named *Karma* which, in Indian philosophical tradition, stands for human destiny in terms of consequence of man's actions over successive cycle of his existence. Now the word 'Karma' means both a consequence of past action and future of man in terms of a cycle. Even in the narrative design, the novel is quite unique because it shapes the tone for future events. The opening scene describes how the summer of 1947 was quite different from any other Indian summer. It was longer, drier and dustier, perhaps symbolizing man's excessive hatred⁹. Thus the dry, dusty, parched earth becomes the symbol of suffering, humanity trapped in the ordeal of partition from excessive heat, hatred and anger. For quite some time, there is no evidence of rain and people began to interpret it as a kind of divine retribution. In fact, in the opening scene itself the significant background of three season's viz. winter, summer and rain is symbolized in corresponding to a fourfold structure in the manner of Forster's *Passage to India*¹⁰. But Khushwant Singh introduces an Indian element of 'superstition into the seasonal pattern that God was punishing people' for their 'sins'. In other words, the scenic and symbolic link between the first and subsequent division of book is established in the opening scene itself. In the novel, there is also a pattern of contrast in the form of interaction of two different sets of values namely hatred vs. love, anger vs. affection, and revenge vs. impulse to sacrifice¹¹. The novel also deals with various religious diversities in terms of beliefs, traits and rituals. The characters and events are so arranged that the village in Mano Majra becomes a microcosm of the greater world. The novel's authenticity also comes from the writer's graphic and precise presentation of bureaucracy, common people and also the outlaws. The characters also form pairs in contrast. Like Henry Fielding, Khuswant Singh's realism is sociological and episodic but he also reveals the human side of the characters with dark shades. Thus Jugga and Iqbal, Hukum Chand and Hassina, Jugga and Nooran all represent various sides or aspects of human nature. However, in the end, the novel draws our attention by the writer's humanistic faith. In this novel we do not have any traditional vision or an angelic character of the allegorical kind. Both Jugga and Hukum Chand move through a life of sin and corruption but the novelist adopts the tone of forgive and forget taking everything in the stride- "it was everyone's destiny...he had watched young and old, brought on crowd bamboos stretchers lamented for and then burnt. Visits to the cremation ground left him with a sense of tranquility¹². Even the end of the novel suggests that there is life after violence and human solidarity and faith does not break. It is suggested in various ways through various statements, songs, prayers, and communications among the two communities.

As already stated, *Train to Pakistan* was the outcome of author's mental agony and deep sense of disillusionment called by the harrowing incidents of 1947, which had shaken the faith of many sensitive conscious people of India in the intrinsic nobility of man preached and practised by its sages and sense in all periods of Indian history including those of Mahatma Gandhi. He also believes in the innate goodness of man. As Khuswant Singh had narrated in very well-chosen words 'after the experience of the autumn of 1947', I could no longer subscribe to these views. I became.....an angry middle-aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world.....I decided to try my hand at writing *Compulsion to Write*¹³. This explains his compulsion to write about grim human tragedies with scathing irony and stark realism. In fact the events of partition exploded the myth of "Innate goodness in man' and convinced him that there is 'innate evil in man'¹⁴. He has also made it clear that only one character has been shown to be basically good though this character is a fictional one. However, the novel remains a classic in the post-independence Indian English fiction because of its brutal and bold realism with which the writer exposes the mask of hypocrisy and human decency. But at the same time, the novel shows that the basic values of love, loyalty and humanity survive in the midst of bitterness, weakness and gloom. In this respect, he seems to be recalling the realist writers of both varieties namely Henry Fielding, the master of comic epic in prose and Thomas Hardy, exponent of fatalistic attitude to life because both of them have shown that what appears on the surface is not necessarily real, and what is more, dignity of man abides for all his helplessness and insignificance. The novel is, therefore, both a grim and pathetic tale of lives of individuals trapped in the trauma of partition. A novelist is at pains to describe that the people of Mano Majra are not aware of the rumours of partition and most of them are blissfully unaware of the departure of the Britishers and ruled by the popular Congress ministry. For example- one character is on record to have stated to the deputy commissioner- "I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British had left and the country is divided into Hindustan and Pakistan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah¹⁵". Life in the village is regulated by passing of trains across the Sutlej Bridge nearby. The village

awakes when the mail train rushes through the bridge before the day break. In fact, the whole village echoes with the cries of mullah of Allah ho Akbar from a nearby mosque as well as the Sikh priest prayers from the Gurdwara. When the next morning train, a Passenger from Delhi, arrives at 10:30 AM, villagers start their daily routine and when the midday Express train passes, people take rest and come home for dinner and midday break. Similarly, when the evening passenger train from Lahore arrives, everyone goes to work again and on the arrival of the nightly goods train, the people of Mano Majra get ready for sleep with similar echoes of prayers from the mosque and the Gurdwara. But with the riots trains become less punctual and they acquire ominous dimensions. In fact, the 'train symbolism' has been highlighted by every perceptive reader and critics. Apart from that, Khuswant Singh has tried to show that the people of Mano Majra may be illiterate and superstitious but they are God fearing, religious and innocent people and have their own code of morality and friendship and Communal harmony. As the writer explains, "the Punjabi's code was even more baffling. For them truth, honour, financial integrity were all right but these were placed down scale of values than being true to one's salt to one's friends and fellow villagers. For friends, you could lie in court or cheat and no one would blame you"¹⁶. Khuswant Singh is very specific in establishing the point that love is the most exhilarating experience of life. Another point that emerges from the novel is that politicians and government officials of all sorts often take a casual attitude or play safe and adopt the device of discretion in preference to communal loyalty and religious spirit of tolerance. That is why in the novel certain incidents become so important in the context of the novel. The first one takes place when dacoit is committed in the house of Ramlal, a local money lender and he is murdered subsequently. Suspicions fall on Jugat Singh known to be a bad character and his absence causes all sorts of rumours. The second incident is the arrest of an Iqbal, the England educated Communist activist, who is sent by the political party to preach amity but he remains a suspect in the eyes of the villagers and is taken into police custody. The third incident occurs when the trains become late and irregular and rumour is heard that a late train has arrived from the borders carrying dead bodies of Sikhs and Hindus. Similarly, the fourth incident refers to a counter rumour about millions being killed in Patiala, Ambala, and Amritsar along with demolition of mosque and burning of the holy Quran by Hindu Zealots. Very soon, the village becomes a battlefield of conflicting loyalties and Mano Majra is also affected by this sudden change of communal tension. The communal fire is fanned by Sikh refugees who come from outside and provoke the Hindu Sikh communities to retaliate on Muslims. During this period bad characters like Mali and other dacoits of his gang who are actually murderers, have a gay time and they reap a rich harvest by killing Muslims at random at the station and elsewhere. The fifth point or the climactic point comes when the authority releases Jugga, a local badmash, because he is considered friendly to Muslims. Similarly, the political activist Iqbal is also released for a similar purpose. But while Jugga, accused of conspiracy to kill Muslims in the train, climbs over the bridge and cuts the rope meant for mass killing. However, Iqbal manages to slip for safety. Khuswant Singh's irony suggests that the people of low status and reputation often come out with heroic gestures of generosity and supreme sacrifice¹⁷. The roles of administrative authoritative and intellectuals of high calibre are often found wanting in courage and noble gestures. Thus, in the novel the priest Meet Singh excels while Iqbal Singh with his better education and rationalist outlook flatters to deceive and disappoint. As a partition novel, Khuswant Singh's attempt is worthy of serious attention because a novelist succeeds in demonstrating that in this act of massacre and carnage, Hindus and Muslims are equal offenders. At the very beginning the writer shows objectivity and detachment and he does not romanticize and sensationalize the actual incidents like a detached observer. He observes 'Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to Hindus, the Muslims were to blame; "The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and club. Both tortured. Both raped."¹⁸ In fact, the writer is at pains to demonstrate that the emotions of the people are roused by the rumours of barbaric deeds of each community and this result into the division among two communities and they become disturbed over the reports of inhuman savagery of each community. The Muslims are offended and shocked by the reports of gentle women being stripped and marched down, crowded streets to be raped in the market place and the stories of mosques being demolished or being defiled by slaughter of pigs and the copies of Holy Quran being burnt by infidels. Sikhs are similarly taught to disbelieve a Musalman and the tales of refugees make them similarly angry because many of them are said to have committed suicide to save their honour while the unlucky ones were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public and then murdered. Thus Khuswant Singh is trying to maintain objectivity and aesthetic distance without trying to pass moral judgment. The reactions of the people are also narrated and sarcastic remarks are made about

Pandit Nehru's famous speech about the 'tryst with destiny'. The writer shows how a colleague of Hukum Chand is killed when he goes to Lahore to fetch his wife's jewellery at the gate of a famous hotel. Similarly, the daughter of Hukum Chand's orderly is similarly killed on the road to Gujranwala, when she was just a newlywed young wife. Sundar Singh's case is different because he kills himself and his small children. Against, the cruelties and crimes of Muslim zealots, there is the picture of the pathetic Imam Baksh, who is asked to leave Mano Majra for Pakistan. He does not understand why should he leave a country of his birth- "what had we, to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors? We have lived amongst you as brothers"¹⁹. Imam Baksh breaks down and the priest Meet Singh tries to console him and begins to sob. However, he had to leave the country of his birth. Meet Singh's efforts do not yield any positive result. Khuswant Singh shows that after such events, people are unable to sleep that night and they move from house to house, swearing love and friendship hoping that all shall be well. The behaviour of the common man thus comes in for lot of praise. Even Hukum Chand who was always known for sycophancy, realizes that something must be done but the train containing so many dead bodies frighten him and he adopts a fatalistic attitude and he tries to save Muslim lives in accordance with provision of law. The writer shows that he lacks courage and does best what he can, namely to maintain law and order and, if possible, allow the Muslim to get out quietly of the country. Later on, he even tries to adopt an attitude of duplicity in the name of duty and console himself in an attitude of self-complacency- I have done all I could. My duty is to tell people what is right and what is wrong²⁰. Iqbal Singh is equally satirized for his rational and logical attitude and social evils. But Iqbal Singh's moral inadequacy and cowardice is clearly exposed by Meet Singh- "why Babu Sahab, you have come to stop killing and you are upset by one murder? I thought you had come to stop such things, Babu Sahab"²¹. However, the end of the novel suggests that neither Hukum Chand nor Iqbal is able to show courage and take a plunge into the incident. In fact, it is only people like Jugga or the priest Meet Singh who have the courage of conviction and both of them are typical Punjabi people in their strength, courage, loyalty, rashness and outspokenness. Hence before taking the final plunge Jugga comes to the Sikh priest Meet Singh and recites a few lines from Granth Sahib and readies him for final sacrifice and he is able to save lots of Muslims by stooping the train and cutting the rope. "The engine almost goes over him. He faces a volley of shouts and collapses" As Khuswant Singh narrates, "The rope snubbed in the centre as he fell. The train went over him and went on to Pakistan"²². Thus, Khuswant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* is deeply disturbing novel with extra ordinary power and unrelenting realism.

Though the novel *Train to Pakistan* evoked unanimous praise from discerning readers and critics, there has been some criticism of certain flaws in Khuswant Singh's use of figurative language and transliteration of local phrases, slangs and swear terms. From one point of view, this kind of innovativeness perhaps lends an air of authenticity in the depiction of scenes and characterization. The fact remains that most of the characters speak in the same idiom. At least, one critic and scholar has found fault with Khuswant Singh's use of Punjabi proverbs and similes. In terms of aesthetics of the novel, this limits the individualization of characters that seem to be speaking in the same idiom²³.

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- (4) Shahane, V.A. Opcit. p. 17
- (5) Roy, Rituparna P. (2010). *South Asian Partition Fiction in English from Khuswant*

Singh to Amitav Ghosh, Amsterdam University Press: p. 35

- (6) Ibid, Pp. 35-36
- (7) *Train to Pakistan*, Opcit. Pp. 191-192
- (8) Shahane, V. A. Opcit. p.76. Sahane refers to 'four part division' of the novel called *Dacoit*, *Kalyug*, *Mano Majra* and *Karma* in imitation of the tripartite division of Forster's novel *A Passage to India*.
- (9) Ibid, p.77
- (10) Ibid, p-77
- (11) Ibid, p.78 Sahane; *The Interaction of two Forces and Opposed Values*.
- (12) *Train to Pakistan*, Opcit. p. 76
- (13) A quote from an essay *Compulsions to Write* by Khuswant Singh in *Exploration in Modern Indo English Fiction*; Ed- R. K. Dhawan, New Delhi: 1982, p.185
- (14) Ibid
- (15) *Train to Pakistan*, Opcit. p.20
- (16) Ibid, Pp.35-36
- (17) Shahane, Opcit. p.87.
- (18) *Train to Pakistan*, Opcit. Pp. 1-2
- (19) Ibid, p. 110
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- (21) Ibid, p. 31
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