

# “Humanism as a Panacea to Violence in Khuswant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*”

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## Abstract

Nationality has become an identity of every citizen. The history of a nation directly or indirectly shapes and affects the life of any individual. Partition of India is one such historic milestone that has shattered peace and harmony of the natives. This gory event has engulfed millions of lives into the chasm of eternity. It is so much imbibed into the lives even to the subconscious level of every individual that its impact creates ripples and terrors even at its very thought. Khuswant Singh, the pioneer of partition literature has vividly portrayed the indelible moment of history in his novel *Train to Pakistan*. The novel narrates a heart melting tale of love woven on the scarlet canvas of communal frenzy and religious animosity that resulted in partition. This paper is an attempt to reinstate the lost peace and harmony with the powerful weapon of humanism.

Key words: Partition, Religious Animosity, Humanism, Panacea, Diversity and Unity.

India, the nation of pluralistic society had enjoyed its unity in diversity before partition. People had accepted co-existence as a way of life. The two communities –Hindus and Muslims - were never seriously threatened. Hindus never ceased from paying homage at dargahs, the Muslims continued to participate in Hindu festivals. Traders of both the communities carried on with their usual exchange of goods and services. In fact people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore, Nazrul Islam, Gandhi and many more supported the theory of a unified state with a multiplicity of religious, social or moral ideas. The creed “Unity in Diversity” was then a reality. The daily life of the people (both Hindus and Muslims) was so richly interwoven into a common fabric that there was so much similarity in their customs and

practices that the partition came as a rude shock to the common people, leaving them in state of utter bewilderment.

The Partition of 1947 based on religion, shattered the concept of nation as a 'Home'. The nation which was considered as safe haven was transformed into hell with the wide spread of violence and religious enmity. Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) an Indian author, lawyer, diplomat, journalist and politician has vividly portrayed the cause for the digression of national unity in his novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956). It is a touching tale of an imaginary village, Mano Majra that narrates the account of religious animosity caused by the death of Lala Ram Lal, the money lender of the village. It spins the love tale of Jugga and Nooren whose life is lost in the commotion of the communal frenzy and Jugga's act of sacrifice in his attempt to save the train marks him to be a martyr.

The life in Mano Majra is regulated by the arrival and departure of trains. The puffing of engines, the banging of buffers, the whistling, and the clanking of Iron couplings at railway stations became an inextricable part of the village life in Mano Majra. Khushwant Singh emphasises that the villages like "Mano Majra have always been known for its railway station" (TP:3). It is a typical Indian village where multi-ethnic co-existence was a reality. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had lived with peace in mutual tolerance and harmony.

The village Mano Majra is marked by only three main building that represent each community. The villagers had deep rooted respect and honour for each other irrespective of different race and religion. Brotherliness had been the tenet of the village environment for generations. Khushwant Singh writes: "It has only three brick buildings... The rest of the village is the cluster of flat roofed mud huts and low walled courtyards, which front on narrow lanes that radiate from the centre" (TP:2). Singh has depicted the compact intermixed population of the village in a tiny place.

Peace and harmony ruled the village when religious equality was given importance. The Mullah Imam Baksh and the Sikh priest Bhai Meet Singh -the religious heads of the village waited for each

other to make the first call. With regard to the oneness in Indian villages, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his *Indian Writing in English* opines, “here is functional integration and indeed there are tens of thousands of villages like Mano Majra, where the law has always been peaceful coexistence and not communal strife (122)”. Mano Majra proves to be an utopian land amidst the severity of partition.

The fictional characters are carefully sharpened to intensified climax. Juggut Singh, the transformational character whose death serves to be the highest form of humanism. Singh writes “a very big fellow, tallest man in the area must be six foot four-and broad with a police record - Juggut Singh son of Alam Singh, age 24, cast Sikh, of village Mano Majra badmash number ten” (TP:16). Next is Imam Baksh, who is fondly called as “Chacha” or “Uncle” by the villagers. His daughter Nooran is in love with Juggut Singh. Then the Sikh priest, Bhai Meet Singh, a man who is irreligious in his way of life. He tells the social worker Iqbal, “Everybody is welcome to his religion here next door is a Muslim Mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah” (TP:36). His religious faith keeps him from religious bigotry. He maintains “this is Gurudwara, the Guru’s house anyone may stay here” (TP:34). And Banta Singh is the revenue collector and Lambardar of the village. Two strangers intrude the closed and compact world of Mano Majra with partly different intentions. The first one is Hukum Chand, the district magistrate and district commissioner, responsible for the maintenance of Law and Order. And the second is Iqbal, a social worker, sent by his party to the village to spread communist ideology. His pure intention was to bring about a proletarian revolution. He states: “My party has sent me here, since this place is a vital point for refugee movements. Trouble here would be disastrous” (TP:38). Iqbal gets settled in Gurudhwara with the help of Banta Singh.

The social harmony of the village is disturbed with the intensified situation of partition. On a night of August 1947 the village money lender Lala Ram Lal was murdered and his possessions were looted by a mob. The murder created the first ripple of communal frenzy. Hukum Chand, the new officer was

sent to the village to prevent the outbreak of communal violence. The violent ripples further intensified when a train loaded with Sikhs arrived the village from Pakistan at the village station. The train carried “Sikhs massacred by the Muslims” (TP:121). The villagers’ usual way of life gradually disintegrates into mistrust, selfishness, cruelty, hatred and violence.

Hukum Chand, the district Magistrate and Commissioner, upon his arrival enquires the sub-inspector and appraiser: “You haven’t had convoys of dead Sikhs this side of the frontier. They have been coming through Amritsar. Not one passenger living! There has been killing over there” (TP:19). Hukum Chand further says: “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!’” (TP:19). The sub-inspector confirms the nastiness of communal orgy along these words: “Did your honour hear what the Muslim mobs did to Hindus and Sikh refugees in the market places at Sheikhpura and Gujranwala? Pakistan police and army took part in the killings. Not a soul was left alive. Women killed their own children and jumped into the wells that filled to the brim with corpses” (TP:21). After the arrival of the “ghost train” (TP:78) carrying massacred men, women and children in the village, the whole village hushed into eerie silence.

The two aghast incidents explain the injustice given by the Muslims of the Pakistan to Hindus and Sikhs. The first incident is marked with the arrival of the “Ghost Train” in which all the compartments were filled with Corpse of Hindu and Muslim Refugees who were travelling from Pakistan to India. It was even difficult for the officials to dispose of the corpse as most of the compartments in the train were burnt to ashes.

The magistrate Hukum Chand, the Sub-inspector and the other policemen from Chundunnugger were informed about the arrival of the Ghost train. As soon as the news about the train reached the police station, the busy railway station of Mano Majra was evacuated and the public were not allowed to enter into the Railway Station. Hukum Chand was not able to tolerate the nauseating smell of

Charred corpses, but still managed to enter and check the compartments. There they found an old man in one of the compartments. The team of investigators were surprised to see the old man without any cut or injuries in his body. When Hukum Chand shook the old man and tried to wake him up they found nothing but a drop of blood from the old man's ears which ran all through his beard. They understood that the old man died out of fear of getting killed. As the villagers were not allowed to enter the railway station, they were so much curious to know about the events taking place in the railway station. So, the villagers gathered on their rooftops and tried to see what was happening. But all they could see was the ghost train and group of police personalities going in and out of their tents. As they did not know anything from the station the villagers gathered into a group and started their gossip.

The villagers were busy with their full day of gossiping and trying to know things from standing on the roof tops and observing, they found an officer who entered the village. A meeting was called over, which was interrupted by the unexpected appearance of the policemen. The officer asked for the Lambradar. The Lambradar went to the officer and he asked about the train, but the officer did not give his attention to words of Lambradar and told him to get as much wood and kerosene as possible. The officer also added that they will be paid for it.

When the Lambradar came to the villagers they thought that they could get some information about the train, but instead they were asked to bring wood and kerosene. The villagers thought the Lambradar was hiding something from which later was explained by the Lambradar himself to the Villagers. The Lambradar helped the officers in noting down the name and quantity of the wood and kerosene given by them so that it can be paid accordingly. At first the villagers were oblivious of this event but they suspected some foul game. The villagers' deepest fears were confirmed. The novelist writes: "Red tongues of flames leaped into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow toward the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then of wood. And then- A faint acrid smell of searing flesh" (TP:84). The novelist further writes:

The village was stilled in a deathly silence. No one asked anyone else what the odour 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. That evening, for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh's sonorous cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the glory of God (TP:84).

Although the village was devoid of any political consciousness, glimpses of their aloofness from political upheavals are scattered throughout the novel.

The novel portrays the trauma of Partition and the catastrophe suffered by the people on both sides of the border. It is not a story of one-man Jugga or Mano Majra, in fact the disintegration of the village reflects the fragmentation of the country due to political indecision, external circumstances, rumours created and bloodshed enacted all along the communal lines. Govind Prasad Sharma in *India-Pakistan: Partition perspectives in Indo- English novels* maintains "the tale of Mano Majra led to the moral action through its own indifference (34)".

The novel emphasises humanity under duress as well as moral polarity and courage of the individual. It also emphasized at the same time that when Bureaucracy, Intelligentsia, men of religion and political leadership failed and lost in the jungle of ideology; grappled by inaction, people like Jugga proved that he was a gallant . The passion of the one man saved hundreds of innocent lives. Chirantan Kulshrestha in his remarks from *Khushwant Singh's Fiction in Mukherjee* says: "Jugga's act of love and sacrifice silhouetted against the backdrop of hatred and violence towers above the communal differences and lends a meaning to the general aimlessness of life in the partition days"(152). The act of Juggut Singh shows that there is Humanism and Love which could always stand ahead of all division and animosity. Even when religious animosity is playing a vital role throughout the novel, Humanism of Juggut Singh proves to be more vital which saves hundreds of people. Therefore Humanism proves to be the penance to violence created by partition.

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