

An Analysis of “Train to Pakistan” by Khushwant Singh - A novel based on Partition in Indian Fiction

Dr. Ashwani Rana
A. P. (English) & Research Guide
CT University, Ludhiana

Ms. Ritika Rana
PGT History & Hindi
Bawa Lalvani Public School, Kapurthala

This fact cannot be overlooked that literature has played a very significant role since the time immemorial to highlight as well as to expose the trends, customs, rituals and flaws of the society where in it was written, i.e. in every age there had been some contemporary writers who may or may not be biased about their writings. This way they have contributed to the literary forms and consequently enlightened the upcoming generations about the follies and foibles of that age. At other times it has also been possible that the writers of present age have read and analyzed the minutest details and put forth the same in their writings. The present paper also deals with the observations and experienced views of a titanic novelist – Khushwant Singh, who has described when the partition was announced, the area of Indian subcontinent was swept by a terrible fit of wicked violence i.e. attacks, killing, and torture, rape, abductions and forced conversions afflicted the villages and cities. People were forced to run and to cross borders in the hope of finding their own nation. Travelling was not much safe as the trains were consistently hindered and attacked mercilessly before letting the travelers reach on the other side. There were equally great number of massacres on boats and road transportations. Millions of people were slaughtered cold-bloodedly. People lost their families, friends, relatives, neighbours and every one whosoever were their kith and kin. According to conservative estimates, between half a million and one million men, women and children lost their lives as a result of the partition of British India in 1947, over 70,000 women were raped and about ten million people fled their homes.(1)

Keywords: contemporary = existing, partition =separation, violence =outbreak, slaughtered =murdered, massacres = an act of killing a lot of people

Introduction

Khushwant Singh is one of the most eminent and renowned novelists of our time who is deeply concerned with articulating the national trauma in his works. His novels contain indelible records of what the people had been in the past and what do they aspire to be in the times to come. He has presented a prophetic vision of India in the context of the complex process of national reconstruction and hence contributed to the spirit of the nation. The partition of India left a deep impact on the minds of people. It created so many tensions among major communities. The Hindu and the Muslim stood against each other during the process of disconnection and eventually the Sikh and the Parsi got crushed between them. For many of those who were first and second generation children after partition, had a deep rooted wounds and horrifying memories of the inhuman scenes of partition. Even today the tales of partition are told and retold of the brutality and horror of the time, of the kith and kin who continue to live across the border and visit their ancestral homes and yearn for the past when they lived happily. The partition and the subsequent developments formed a basis for a wide range of writers across the country as well as the ones settled abroad to express their feelings in the form of novels, poetry, prose, fiction etc. Many renowned authors like Salman Rushdie, Manohar Malgaonkar, Chaman Nahal, Amitav Ghosh and many others have dealt with the national trauma due to partition as the main theme of their novels, but Khushwant Singh stands atop among rest of the partition novelists as he has studied India deeply and has succeeded greatly in bringing the requisite impact in his writings. The present paper intends to examine and analyse “Train to Pakistan” by Khushwant Singh and to focus on literary sources that discuss the partition of our country and hence describe a national trauma

Analysis of the novel

The majority of British India’s population did not strive for or initiate the partition. Most were even oblivious to it. Rather, the partition of British India was externally imposed and internally sanctioned. Based on the assumption of a deeply rooted animosity between Muslims and Hindus, the Britishers took a hasty decision to separate the population according to religion. The partition of India was a prerequisite for each politician for each politician to realize his dreams: for Jinnah the dream of a separate Muslim state in order not to be dominated by the Hindu majority, and for Nehru that of India’s freedom from British colonial rule, which he would proudly proclaim on August 15, 1947. (2)

Hence, from the time of India’s and Pakistan’s independence, religion began to play an essential role in politics. It is primarily the issue of religion and the notion of secularism and democratic pluralism in India versus state religion and military rule in Pakistan and Bangladesh that separates these nation states. Ironically the independence of these nations has its roots in European colonial perceptions and modes of government, in which the policy of “Divide and Rule” according to religious distinctions was not only implemented, but transmitted. Religious affiliation was an aspect of life that had not been of much importance. Even today, in many villages differences between Muslims and Hindus are not of much importance and inhabitants of different faiths often share the same festivals and customs.(3)

The historiography of the partition of the subcontinent results into the creation of many different facets of the society. The society at the time and before the time of partition faced the innumerable losses. The indelible marks on the face of the society were not easily removed. All the historical events had a deeper influence on the minds of the people, writers and the society. The proposed partition of the country left it to witness the upheaval of unimaginable proportions on the eve of independence. The communal riots engulfed the country. Most of the freedom fighters tried to restore the communal peace and normalcy. The writers portrayed the real picture of the society. This way Khushwant Singh’s

Train to Pakistan pictures the brutal, realistic story of political hatred and of mass killings during the tragic days of the partition. It was really bad when human values were killed by the demons of the communal violence. The people of the opposite communities were transformed into rogues who worked for spreading communal fights only. They merely acted as an active catalyst in the freedom fight. The story of the novel revolves around the freedom struggle. The novelist's main motif is to hint at the aspect of partition and communal riots.

"Train to Pakistan" written in 1956, differs from the most of the novels on the partition in respect of canvas and unity of time, place and action. It has greater unity of time and place, its action centers in the vicinity of Mano Majra and it covers a period of not more than a month. Perhaps this is an important factor that enables Khushwant Singh to transform the horrendous raw theme into a fine fiction that is steeped in human compassion and love.

"Train to Pakistan" deals with the period of partition. It is a sensitive and realistic picturization of the trauma of partition that gave birth to two political boundaries- India and Pakistan- destined. "The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally 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. The only remaining oasis of peace was a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra.

Characteristically enough, the novel begins with a small paragraph on the unusual weather condition which is exceedingly hot and dry in the month of August and is very much in consonance with the exceptional heat and holocaust of communal riots generated by "reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan." It is interesting to note that nature in its different moods – summer, monsoon flood, and rain is functional in the novel. As nature's holocaust in the month of monsoon coincides with the holocaust of partition, the two movements are taken together throughout the novel to reinforce the total effect of the events described in the novel.

It is through the pattern of contrast between preparation and post-partition scenario, Khushwant Singh best illustrates the tragedy of partition and indirectly suggests the short sightedness of Indian leadership who failed to foresee the consequences of division and to handle the situation even after Churchill's forecast of blood-bath. Communal discord was not a feature of Indian rural scene but it was engineered first by the British Government under the policy of divide and rule and then by the nationalist leaders, though unintentionally. As Bipin Chandra says: "In the beginning of the 20th century what nationalist thought we had and what was propagated under it had a Hindu tinge on the major part of it."

The section "Dacoity" shows how calm, placid and indifferent to the greatest political event in a nation's life – independence – is the life at Mano Majra. As the lambardar questions "But what will we get out of it? Educated people like you, Babu Sahib, will get the jobs the English had. Will we get more lands or more buffaloes?" freedom becomes important for the villagers only when it brings "more land, more buffaloes". Otherwise it hardly appeals to them. As a Muslim says, "we were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians or the Pakistanis." They cannot welcome freedom at the cost of mass destruction. The lambardar expresses the feelings of the common man when he says: "The only ones who enjoy freedom are thieves, robbers and cut-throats," and goes on to add "We were better off under British. At least there was security. "But Mano Majra retains its integrity and age-old communal harmony and brotherhood:

"Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the money lender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque. The three brick buildings enclose a triangular common with a large peepul tree in the middle. The rest of the village is a cluster of flat-roofed mud huts and low-walled courtyards,.... There are only about seventy families in Mano Majra, and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims about equal in number. The Sikhs own all the land around the village: the Muslims are tenants and share the tilling with the owners. There are few families of sweepers whose religion is uncertain. The Muslims claim them as their own, yet when American missionaries visit Mano Majra, the sweepers wear khaki sola topees and join their womenfolk in singing hymns to the accompaniment of a harmonium. Sometimes they visit the Sikh temple, too. But there is one object that all Mano Majrans – even Lala Ram Lal- venerate. This is a three foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keekar tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the duo to which all the villagers- Hindi, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo- Christian- repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing."

So in the beginning, peaceful coexistence & communal harmony prevail in the village. It stands as a replica of unity and integrity in diversity that is the fundamental feature of Indian culture.

Train is another important symbol in the novel that stands for the routine life of Mano Majra before independence and disordered life after independence. Daily life at Mano Majra runs parallel with the systematic arrivals and departures of trains there. "All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains. Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge the driver invariably blows two long blasts of whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake. Crows begin to caw. The Mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the Morning Prayer. By the time the 10.30 morning passenger train from Delhi comes in, life in Mano Majra has settled down to its dull daily routine. Men are in the fields... as the mid day express goes by, Mano Majra stops to rest... when the evening passenger from Lahore comes in everyone gets to work again."

All this stands in contrast with the new found situation in Mano Majra with the succession of national government which finds a laconic description in the second part of the novel named "Kalyug". The first visible effect is in the running of train that disrupts normal life of village.

The situation is further vitiated by the arrival of the "ghost train" carrying the bodies of thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan for their common funeral at Mano Majra. With this comes the first experience of nightmare "the killings, flaming, raping and pillaging." It creates commotion in the village. Everyone tries to get as much information as they can. This has been a way of life at any village where the people have plenty of leisure. The soldiers collect the fire- wood and kerosene oil from the villagers and cremate the bodies by the station. They are not told anything but they are tense and suspicious. The truth is discovered by the night and this discovery is suggested with color and smell images:

The northern horizon, which had turned a bluish gray, showed orange again. The orange turned into copper and then into a luminous russet. Red tongues of flame leaped into the Black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of

Burning Kerosene, then of wood. And then a faint acrid smell of searing flesh.

When the truth is known they are gripped with “deathly silence”. Imam Baksh, who has borne the death of his wife and only son, is so shocked that he forgets to do his evening prayer for the first time in his life. The seed of “religious” suspicion inherent in the heterogeneous social structure of the village shows its head first when the people of Mani Majra come to know the truth behind the “ghostly train”.

The partition of India led to the evacuation of the Hindus from Pakistan and the Muslims from India and border crossing of refugees. This also precipitated the communal riots in retaliation of killing Hindus and Muslims in Pakistan and in some parts of India. Even in the village Mano Majra, the condition gets worse. It is divided into two halves. The Muslims are ordered to leave the village and to take shelter in the refugee camp. As the Sikh families are watching the pathetic condition of Sikhs and Hindus who are murdered in other villages, they decided to take revenge on Muslims. The Sikhs are sullen and angry and want to kill them. At this critical juncture, the lambardar diplomatically handles the situation and convinces both Imam Baksh and the Sikhs of the necessity of evacuation in the wake of in-coming refugees who may wreak their vengeance on the Muslims of the village, “As far as we are concerned, you and your children and your grand children can live.”

In face the partition plunged India into a blood bath and sparked off civil riots. But all this is given hint of and not directly shown as the sample village Mani Majra has witnessed no communal riots, no act of bloody reprisal. By the large, they are still committed to peace and The ultimate optimism of the novelist is shown in the end that shows the victory of virtue and love over wise and hatred even in the utter chaos. Interestingly the crusader is not even the social and political worker but a robber and self confessed badmaash. The plan to sabotage the train is known to everyone but only Jugga rises to the occasion. Implicit in this preference is Khushwant Singh’s fire against the power hungry leaders of national movement who could celebrate ‘the baptism of freedom’ with blood bath. He leads credibility to his feelings by making Humkum chand, who is a part of government and a legacy of the colonial rule, rail against national leaders. Malgaonkar , Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal have taken to task the British rulers and short sighted national leaders afflicted with sudden blindness and loss of nerve for exploding this horrendous catastrophe.

Conclusion

Train to Pakistan is also a valuable social and political document and a highly readable fiction that keeps the reader engrossed. As Arthur Lal puts it in an introduction to this book, “its intrinsic qualities as a fine novel grip the reader. Throughout, the action sweeps on along. The characters are vivid and highly credible, and Khushwant Sigh keeps them going magnificently on two levels: in their quotidian matrix compounded of their passions of their love and revenge, their tremendous sense of belonging to a village community and their insolence and heroism; and then again n the wide stage by the Tornado that brakes on their lives in the shape of the cataclysmic events of the partition of India in 1947.” As a piece of fiction *Train to Pakistan* is cleverly contrived and articulate of the pity and horror involved in the partition tragedy. The third person omniscient narrative technique helps the novelist dive into the mind of characters and presents his candid view with precision and objectivity on the different shades of this tragedy.

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