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A Kaleidoscopic Unraveling of the Socio Cultural Dilemma in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract:

Train to Pakistan for all its apparent fascination with violence is a tour-de-force of imaginative storytelling, a profoundly moving and moral work that is perhaps one of the most telling refutations of certain types of pacifism to have emerged from the India of Mahatma Gandhi. Khushwant Singh followed it up with a novel that deals with the lure of violence and the paradox of heroism against the backdrop of the partition of India and Pakistan. The novel embodies the exploration of new concepts of reality. The exploration of the human world and its related values in *Train to Pakistan* is more profound and more moving than perhaps the most erudite and expert commentary on aspects of twentieth century civilization. As the events portrayed in the novel had been witnessed in flesh and blood just nine years ago, the work created a sense of solid reality and a feeling of danger, desperation and violence of an unprecedented scale. The work has also been interpreted, in the post-colonial context, as a protest novel against imperialistic designs, communal violence and the indifference of the Indian bureaucracy. The theme of the novel spotlights the human and spiritual implications of a bloody historical massacre. The writer attains this through the recreation of the quintessence of Sikhism against the backdrop of religious flare-ups.

Keywords: Tour-de-force, Bureaucracy, Partiion, Post colonial, Pacifism, Violence, Sikhism

The scene of *Train to Pakistan* is laid in the Indian sub-continent on the eve of partition in 1947. Millions of people from either side of the dividing boundary -Hindus from Pakistan and Muslims from India - were on the way seeking refuge and security. Thousands of non-Muslims from Pakistan longed for a passage to India, a land of hope and peace, whereas thousands of Muslims from India sought the road to Pakistan, the land of Islamic faith and promise. Thus the train in *Train to Pakistan* implies the movement of vast communities torn from their roots and areas of traditional growth to a new 'Jerusalem'. It indicates the harrowing processes of this change, the awful and ghastly experience of human beings involved in a historical, impersonal and dehumanized process. The train suggests the fate of individuals, the destinies of the two newly formed nations, consequent upon a political decision and the miseries, sufferings and privations which issue from it. The 'ghost train' in Khushwant Singh's famous 1956 novel *Train to Pakistan* presents the deterritorialization and amalgamation of the communal. Aguiar points out in *Railway Space in Partition Literature*:

The train has a haunted quality, a description that reverses the temporal orientation of the icon of the train. In transforming the image of the train, Singh disrupts the linearity of time that is central to the notion of modernity. The train, with its perpetual forward motion, functions as an emblem of progress, a concept often rendered in artistic form through the image of the journey... The constitution of a retroactively cast identity created a different modern relationship to the present, one which did not only look forward but also turned to an imagined collective past. It is a communal past that is produced by this technology, rather than a transcendent secular future. (Aguiar 76)

Partition had its adverse effect on the community in general and the individuals in particular. The different communities which lived in perfect harmony suddenly started developing mutual suspicion and hatred. Communal riots became the order of the day and different communities began to engage in mutual attacks which left thousands of people dead. Thus Mano Majra is the representative of the whole country. The novel is the only description at micro level of what happened before and during partition in one particular village. From a socio-political point of view, the distrust, rivalry and mutually implied contempt between old, seasoned bureaucrats and newly crowned power conscious politicians are very well brought out in the portrayal of Hukum Chand and the Sub-Inspector. In assessing the awful situation of bloodshed and mass murder, Hukum Chand maintained his characteristic balance and poise, but the Sikh Sub-Inspector is carried away by the force of prevailing popular prejudices against government action or inaction:

Sometimes, Sir, one cannot restrain oneself. What do the Gandhi cops of Delhi know about the Punjab? What is happening on the other side of Pakistan does not matter to them. They have not lost their homes and belongings; they haven't had their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters raped and murdered in the streets. (*Train to Pakistan* 21)

The Sub Inspector allows himself to be sentimentally involved in the situation marked by communal passion and hostilities, whereas Hukum Chand, the more seasoned, experienced, and balanced bureaucrat, does not lose his perspective:

Nobody really benefits by bloodshed. Bad characters will get all the loot and the government will blame us for the killing. No, Inspector Sahib, whatever our views- and God alone knows what I would have done to these Pakistanis. If I were not a government servant - we must not let there be any killing or destruction of property. (*Train to Pakistan* 21)

Kalyug, or the age of strife, implies the inversion of humanist values and their supersession by forces of destruction, disruption, division, and negation. The view of the world marked by order and harmony gives in to a world view characterized by conflict and disorder. Singh, while portraying the inverted world, skillfully suggests that the time is out of joint and that in Mano Majra the trains became less punctual than ever, the alarm clock

seemed set for the wrong hour and even the children did not know when to be hungry. Kalyug projected itself on Mano Majra, creating chaos and a nightmarish atmosphere. The freight train ceased running because there was no lullaby, instead ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, shattering the dreams of Mano Majra. In this nightmarish world a strange train arrived from Pakistan which had a ghostly quality. Its arrival was followed by secretive and ominous activities of the police and the Sikh soldiers.

The villagers in the tiny hamlet of Mano Majra became anxious over the arrival of the ghostly train. Banta Singh, the Lambardar, Imam Baksh, the Muslim Mullah, Meet Singh, the Sikh Priest and many others conferred among themselves but could not find any clue to the train. They met in the Gurdwara only to exchange expressions of despair and regret: "In the afternoon men gathered in little groups, discussing the train. The groups merged with each other under the peepal tree, and then everyone went into the gurdwara" (94). The arrival of the ghost train in broad daylight created a commotion in Mano Majra. People stood on their roofs to see what was happening at the station. The villagers and the Lambardar, the petty village employee, were all puzzled by the odd appearance of the train and its sinister, ominous nature:

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. 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. (*Train to Pakistan* 100)

The 'red tongues of flame' symbolises the poisonous and aggressive nature of the snake and shows how, in the heat of destructive lunacy, men turn into poisonous reptiles. The faint acrid smell of searing flesh caused a sense of horror and disgust among the villagers. Imam Baksh, the Muslim Priest, and Meet Singh, the Sikh Priest were always keen on upholding humanistic ideals. They realized that the train carried the dead and that it was the outcome of a ghostly, demonic act. Consequently, neither the Muslim Preacher nor the Sikh Priest could utter their sacred word of god in that hour. It was a world without the word of god, bare and naked in its ugliness and horror.

Train to Pakistan captures the mindlessness of the communal violence with great objectivity and also in a chilling fashion through the portrayal of the situation before and after the carnages. Mano Majra is sleepy and obsolete community where, its citizens, lacking in civilised amenities mark their time according to the arrival of trains at the railway station. Sikhs form the majority and the Muslims lead a dependent life, but the symbiosis between the groups had ensured that life has gone on peacefully for all. The pastoral charm, the idyllic beauty of the village and the seemingly eternal peace of the locale create a sense of the unchanging nature of Mano Majra. The impact of such opening descriptions of the novel is to create an impression of an Indian rural utopia, especially when the other parts of India are

engulfed in the fires of the communal carnage. The events of the novel move rather effortlessly as Khushwant Singh has managed to create a clever balance between the fictional characters and the real incidents. Singh's art of portraying and transmitting atmospheric effect is amply shown in the scenes of Lala Ram Lal's murder. Lala Ram Lal was a moneylender in Mano Majra and he was brutally murdered by a gang of dacoits headed by Malli.

When the village dogs gathered around them, they hit them with the flat side of the spear and fired gun into the air which made the dogs run away whimpering. The men began to hammer at the door with their weapons: "The men put their shoulders to the door, pressed, pulled back and butted into it like battering - rams. The wooden bolt on the other side cracked and the doors flew open. One of the men with a gun waited at the door; the other four went in." (17) The women implored not to cause any physical injury and said they were free to take all their jewellery. But nothing could stop the men who had entered the house. One of them tore a little boy from his mother's lap and held the muzzle of the gun to the child's face. The woman fell at his feet with a request to spare him. They went upstairs and caught the moneylender crouching under one of the charpoys. Soon one of the men tore the moneylender away from the leader and hit him full in the face with the butt of his gun. "He sat on his haunches, crying and spitting blood. Two of his teeth were smashed. But he would not hand over the keys of his safe. In sheer exasperation, one of the men lunged at the crouching figure with his spear. Ram Lal uttered a loud yell and collapsed on the floor with blood spurting from his belly."(19)

The tale of Mano Majra offers several morals to its readers which can be understood only when read in a deeper light. It is an allegory on the downfall of human values of a simple, peace loving society triggered by evil forces. When the arm of villainy outreaches that of righteousness, the Mano Majrans are cowardly by their ignorance and simplicity. The educated and the experienced simply turn into pessimistic witnesses to the violent turn of events. They sneer at the situation they find themselves in. The Mano Majrans are the good and the innocent. Malli and his companions occupied with the young fanatics are the evil forces from outside. Iqbal and Hukum Chand represent the cynical and indifferent elites while Juggut Singh, the 'budmash' is the primordial goodness that salvages at least the vestige of Mano Majran morality. Mano Majra which was nothing more than a speck on the globe assumes grave significance due to the religious massacres. It transcends the limits of space and time and becomes cosmic and eternal. Thus the historical novel, concentrating on the life of Mano Majrans, represents no surface wave of escapism but a deep, unconscious movement toward national homogeneity.

The use of symbolism, imagery and metaphors coronate Khushwant Singh as a master story-teller and lends the story an artistic touch. As the title aptly suggests, the dominant image is that of the train which is symbolic of life and death, locomotion and immobility, tranquility and mayhem. Trains were a symbol of harmony and togetherness among the various provinces and communities of the Indian sub-continent prior to Independence. Trains were used as a standard to measure time in the remote villages through which they passed. When partition became a reality, trains became symbols of torture and

suffering. They were used to transport the Muslim refugees to Pakistan and Sikh refugees to India. These trains were often waylaid and the refugees hacked to death by violent mobs so that the respective countries were greeted with a train filled with corpses with the words 'Gift to Pakistan' or 'Gift to India' engraved on them. Schivelbusch in *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century* remarks:

In the novel, time acts as an organizing structure to show the intermeshed quality of the local and the national; it also calls forth the paradigms of progress embodied by the temporality of the railway. The idea of the railway, which gave rise to the term railway time, has often been represented as imposing a new temporality associated with modernity, a measured time that orders the social world around it. (Schivelbusch 44)

In Singh's novel, the railway time table that organized the villagers daily life begins to fluctuate as violence comes to Mano Majra, The everlasting imprint that remains in the reader's mind after reading *Train to Pakistan* is the metamorphosis of the peaceful Mano Majra into a bloody victim of the partition. As a new era of violence and hatred dawned the country, Mano Majra was left with a set of dehumanized, blood-thirsty, suspicious souls as its citizens. The partition was a scorpion's sting in young Khushwants' heart. He felt a piquent sense of guilt that literate and secular men like himself could do little to prevent this tragedy. This feeling of helplessness provoked him to put his writing skills to the test. He tried to harmonize the different groups with his tale of Mano Majra, something that religion could not achieve. Though born and brought up in an orthodox Sikh household, Singh reclined from his religious values later in his life. But he had an indepth knowledge of the pulse of a predominantly Sikh village. And well versed in the history and culture of the Sikhs, his vibrant creativity moulds out the city of Mano Majra that rightly appeals as the pivot of the novel.

The waves of feelings and expectations in the minds of Jugga Hukum Chand., and Iqbal rise to a crescendo in the final climactic scene in *Train to Pakistan*. The moon rose a little after eleven in the night, and the large eyes of the signals shone brightly in the darkness. A jeep arrived, and the men dispersed in the neighbourhood of the railroad bridge. The strangers whispered among themselves since they were keen on implementing their diabolic design. The leader guided and watched the operation. A man appeared running on the rails and the leader shouted at him. At long last, the much awaited train was on its way to the bridge. Meanwhile, a man, climbing the steel span of the bridge, tugged at the rope. He stretched himself on the rope near the point of the knot. The train was quickly approaching the bridge and its roof was occupied by men The leader shouted at the man who was clinging to the rope: "Come off, you ass! You will be killed. Come off at once!"(206). But the man began to slash at the rope with a small 'kirpan' and went on hacking it powerfully.

The leader, in sheer desperation, fired at him and the man's leg was hurt and it began to dangle in the air. But he was still at work hacking the rope and the train seemed very close to the spot. Another shot was fired but the man clung to the rope and continued

to attack it until it was cut in shreds. He finally cut the tough strand with his knife and teeth and the engine was almost on him. His body was subjected to a volley of shots and he collapsed and fell, but the rope was at last cut in the center: "The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan"(207). While many refugee trains moving across the border of India and Pakistan were reduced to mere wagons of corpses, the train carrying Mano Majra Muslims safely moved on to Pakistan by the heroism and sacrifice of Juggut Singh foiling the carefully laid out plans of attack on it. The novel celebrates and valorises bridges as symbols of reconstruction and reconciliation.

To sum up, Train to Pakistan turns out to be a magnificent novel written in the background of the partition of India. Death and violence became the predominant themes in the novel which is all about killings, lootings, rape and a lot more. Mano Majra the village represents the whole country and whatever happens in this tiny village is a reflection of what happens in the country at large. We find that hundreds and thousands of Hindus and Sikhs are made to flee the places where they lived for years. When people are divided on communal lines human qualities become the casualty and consequently the warring groups engage in mutual killing completely oblivious of the fact that they are fellow countrymen who are to live like the children of the same mother. Very often leadership becomes a crucial issue and those who are required to give the right leadership become a slave to emotions and not thoughtfulness. At a time when communal divide is becoming sharper than ever before the novel does have a message to convey and that is the importance of having a peaceful co-existence where the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and every other community lead a peaceful and harmonious life leaving no scope for communal tension or bloodshed. In this sense, the novel undoubtedly has a lasting appeal and will continue to be read for the generations to come.

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