
Humanity vs. Hatred during Partition in Khushwant Singh's novel

'Train to Pakistan'

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Abstract:

The Partition of India, which took place in August 1947 with the emergence of Independence, divided the country in two new nations i.e. India and Pakistan. This incidence devastated the life of innumerable people who were forced to migrate and even many of them lost their lives in the process. This horrific event is marked not only in the history of India and Pakistan but also in the world history. The communal fanaticism and frustration of losing their loved ones made the people forget their sense of humanity, compassion and love. Khuswant Singh has very aptly portrayed the psychology and the actual condition of the common people who suffered the havoc of Partition through his novel 'Train to Pakistan'. The Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who used to live with each other in brotherhood before Partition failed to have the same feelings of unity as well as harmony for each other during Partition. But at that time of chaos also there were some people who sacrificed their life to save the victims and proved that however strong the feeling of hatred is but it could never overpower love and humanity.

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'Train to Pakistan'

“Train to Pakistan “is different from other novels of partition in respect to the canvas and unity of time, place and action. In this novel Khushwant Singh transforms the horrific theme into a fine fiction that is full of human compassion and love. The fiction provides human accounts in a diverse, detailed character base where each person has unique point of view, pointing out that everyone is equally at fault and to blame anyone is irrelevant.

Khushwant Singh has very skillfully drafted the human emotions and he shows that how the feeling of love and humanity overpowers violence or the feeling of hatred in human being. The story of the novel concentrates on a village Mano Majra, where peace and communal harmony prevails but suddenly the winds of communalism and hate blows all over the country and affects this village also. Partition had a tremendous effect on the people of Mano Majra. It adversely affected the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The novel shows us how peace is disturbed by communalism and how the personal love of Juggut Singh for Nooran asserts itself and saves the train to Pakistan from being ambushed.

Juggut Singh who is a village badmash takes it upon himself to try to save a trainload of refugees, as well as his beloved Nooran, even at the cost of his life. The question of right versus wrong which singh pose throughout the book are many, including those of what one should do when one has the opportunity to prevent something bad, when an act of goodwill is truly worthwhile, and how much important is the consciousness of the bad.

It is really a sensitive picture of the partition that gave birth to two political boundaries i.e, India and Pakistan. The first line of “Train to Pakistan” is typical of the author’s sense of understatement and irony that thoroughly pervades the entire book:- “The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers.”(Singh, Khushwant 1)

Nature can be observed in its different moods i.e. summer, monsoon, flood, rain. Monsoon is the constant symbol in the novel that suggests the change of human destiny. The village Mano Majra is on the railway line near where it crosses the swelling Sutlej River. The inhabitants of the village are mostly Sikh farmers and their Muslim tenants who remained relatively unaffected by the violence of Partition in its initial days. Action begins with housebreaking and murder of Lala Ram Lal by a neighboring village’s dacoit, Malli. Juggut that very moment was out in the fields with his beloved, Nooran. But Juggut Singh is arrested as murder suspect by the police. He is portrayed as a local badmash of the village who loves only daughter of half blind Mulla of the village i.e. Nooran. On the other hand Iqbal a social reformer, visits village who wants to mobilize support for the socialist party of India. Whereas Hukumchand is the regional magistrate, and the most influential character in the story. He is basically a morally conflicted man who uses his powers with much corruption.

The characters who are given a lot of attention in the novel are Iqbal and Juggut Singh, and are likely meant to be contrasted. Iqbal is described as a slightly effeminate, well educated and atheist social worker from Britain who thinks politically. He was a social worker. He had come to that village as he knew that something should be done to stop the bloodshed going on as a result of partition. His party had sent him there, since this place was a vital point for refuge movements. He had a strong feeling that trouble would be disastrous. He belonged to district Jhelum and had been in foreign countries a long time. He had his own views on morality and a host of other things. Whereas Juggut is a towering, muscular and uneducated villager who places action over thought and is known for frequent arrests and gang problems. They both were arrested for the same murder they did not commit, and were placed in adjacent cells. Hukum Chand feels this step very necessary for easy evacuation of Muslims from Mano Majra. He thinks out a cunning plan according to which Malli is released, Juggut and Iqbal are arrested and a commandant of the Muslim Refugee camp is sent to evacuate the Muslims from Mano Majra. Infact the murder of Ramlal is given a communal colour. “The head constable’s visit had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a part of butter,” (Singh, Khushwant 127)

Juggut as well as Iqbal both had the potential to save the train, though it was recognized that this would cost their lives. Very soon this little village where the peace and harmony prevailed was engulfed by the fire of hatred and violence. Now the trains did not come at the usual time, they were late by hours and when they came, they were crowded with Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan or with Muslims from India. The crisis began when the horrifying train with corpses entered the village. The brutally mutilated bodies evoked the furies of the Hindus and Sikhs of Mano Majra and changed their views about the Muslims who were till then their good friends. Once negative thinking sets in, the whole thinking goes in the same way. The youth were revengeful of what has happened to the Sikhs in Pakistan. The decision of parting was not so easy. It shook the roots of togetherness that was centuries old. It created a mournful numbness and made them weep. Their tremendous sense of belongingness and the trauma of being uprooted from their soil is reflected through their words and tears. As the story proceeds it concentrates on the story of a Sikh boy and a Muslim girl whose love lasted and exceeds the destructions of war. “What we have to do with

Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers.”(Singh, Khushwant 133)

While their evacuation to a nearby refugee camp is supposed to be only temporary, it soon becomes clear that they will never return to their homes, but shortly be taken away by train to Pakistan. The villagers were surprised on this but they were helpless. Every citizen was caught up in the holocaust. No one could remain aloof. The villagers encounter another ghastly scene when they see floating corpses of men, women and children on the flood water. Soon they realize that these bodies were not drowned but murdered. Another ghost train’s arrival ignites the fire and the village becomes a battle field of conflicting loyalties.

The voice of sanity and reason is drowned in the voice of aggression, hatred and revenge. After the Muslims leave to a refugee camp from where they will eventually go to Pakistan, a group of religious agitators comes to Mano Majra and instills in the local Sikhs a hatred of Muslims and convinces a local gang to attempt a mass murder as the Muslims leave on their train to Pakistan. Mali and his men come there to support the move of agitators and ambush the train carrying the refugees to Pakistan. The youth of the village and the refugees also join them in sending a train full of corpses to Pakistan.

“Tomorrow after sunset, when it is dark, we will stretch a rope across the first span of the bridge. It will be a foot above the height of the funnel of the engine. When the train passes under it, it will sweep off all the people sitting on the roof of the train. That will account for at least four to five hundred.”(Singh, Khushwant 161)

When this conspiracy is revealed in front of Hukum Chand, he desperately looks for the ways and means to save it. He realizes that the local situation is now out of his control. So he releases Jugga and Iqbal who had been imprisoned under the false charge of Lala Ram Lal’s murder. The sub inspector deliberately instigates Jugga against Mali by informing him that Mali has been the cause of the evacuation of the Muslims from Mano Majra and that he has plundered their properties. Jugga’s immediate concern was the safety of Nooran.

Juggut and Iqbal both had the potential to save the train, though it was clear that this can cost their lives. At this crucial point Iqbal spends pages wondering to him whether he should do something or not.

“The bullet is neutral. It hits the good and the bad, the important and the insignificant, without distinction. If there were people to see the act of self immolation, as on the cinema screen, the sacrifice might be worthwhile, a moral lesson might be conveyed.

If all that was likely to happen was that next morning your corpse would be found among thousands of others, looking just like them....”(Singh, Khushwant 178 - 179)

Iqbal becomes too entangled in his own moral crisis to act and Jugga acts on instincts after he found out about Nooran that she is also going from the same train. According to the scheduled plan, the agitators tie the rope making it as stiff as a shaft of steel and await the train’s arrival. Suddenly Jugga manages to reach the rope. He slashes the rope with the help of small kirpan.

“The leader raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He hit his mark and one of the man’s legs came off the rope and dangled in the air. The other was still twined round the rope. He slashed away in frantic haste. The engine was only a few yards off, throwing embers high up in the sky with each blast of the whistle. Somebody fired another shot. The man’s body slid off the rope, but he clung to it with his hands and chin. 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 shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train was over him, and went on to Pakistan.”(Singh, Khushwant 190)

Khushwant Singh tries to show through the novel that the concept of religion divided the villagers of Mano Majra. In the same way the nation was also divided into India and Pakistan. Politicians alone couldn’t be blamed but the religious frenzy was the cause of devastation and destruction. Religion is deep rooted in every human being’s psyche. Religion was almost above everything which was the main cause of the crisis. The lack of awareness and good education to some extent is also responsible for it. Human being should realize that our life is

more important than religion, humanity and love; these feelings should be placed above religion. Only love and humanity has the capacity to suppress violence. Jugga who was a dacoit and also illiterate, saved all the Muslims boarded on the train because in him the feeling of love was greater than any other feeling, so he wanted to save his beloved at any cost even when he knew it before that he would lose his life. The writer here also says that how the leaders had sowed the wind of communal suspicion and partition was the result, which uprooted masses of humanity mangling them and throwing them across the border in heap after heap. Pramod Kapoor remarks: "...an exercise in perpetuating the memory of those who perished and a lesson for future generations to prevent a recurrence of this tragic chapter in our history."(Kapoor, Pramod p.II)

A single ray of light can omit the darkness. Love is also like that ray of light which can spread peace amongst the people and countries. On the time of Partition there was unlimited amount of violence and destruction but when Mahatma Gandhi took upvas against violence there was a wave of peace all over the country because people loved as well as respected him as the father of nation.

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