

A Socio-Historic Study of The Holocaust of Partition in Khushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan*

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Abstract:

*The Partition of the Indian subcontinent into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in the year 1947 was a historical tragedy of unprecedented proportions which bore an indelible and irrepressible impact on Indian English writers, especially the novelists who produced a substantial body of partition-fiction (also widely referred to as 'Partition Literature') which deals with an array of themes and issues related to the mayhem of partition and its aftermath in contemporary India. The holocaust of partition in India was so traumatic and poignant that Jawaharlal Nehru termed it a 'man-made Greek tragedy'. The most devastating and excruciating upshot of Indian Independence destroyed the secular fabric of India, and more markedly, the visceral communal hatred and brutal violence it engendered cost the lives of millions of people. This paper examines the themes of Partition in India in the writings of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956). This paper attempts to critically analyze the phenomenon of partition not as a mere representation or recordation of a cataclysmic historical event but as a social, political and religious discourse which has irrevocably altered the destiny of a nation.*

Keywords: Partition, social-realism, trauma, refugees, cultural divide

The arresting and thought-provoking opening lines of the great Victorian novelist Charles Dickens, “it was the best of times ... it was the worst of times, it was the spring of hope, it was the season of despair” (*A Tale of Two Cities*) remarkably sum up the irony of Partition in India. The moment brought joy on the one hand, because India broke the shackles of British colonial tyranny, and sorrow on the other owing to the British’s fatal mistake of dividing the nation along communal lines that wrought the bloodiest genocide in the annals of India national history. The two-nation theory created a deep communal and cultural divide between Muslims and non-Muslims within India and an unbridgeable gap between India and Pakistan and the rift continues unabated even after 75 years of the attainment of freedom by both the nations. The tragic drama of partition that led to the creation of India and Pakistan as two separate nation-states has been honestly and realistically mirrored in Indian English literature.

Khushwant Singh’s novel *Train to Pakistan* gives a graphic and naked description of the horrors of Partition enacted on the Indo-Pakistan border region. The novel depicts conflict among people of different religions – Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. Singh’s unapologetic realistic narrative makes a pitiless dissection of history as it unveiled during the turbulent and fateful days of partition and remains completely disinterested and unbiased in his commentary of the ghastly human tragedy that drove the masses into a vortex of communal fire fuelled by political hatred. Originally named *Mano Majra* in the American edition, Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* was the first work of fiction ever to be written and published (1956) on the theme of partition in India. Widely regarded as a ground-breaking work of fiction in Indian partition literature, *Train to Pakistan* garnered international recognition and won the Grove India Fiction Prize.

Khushwant Singh employs social-realism as a critical lens to investigate the social, moral and religious norms and conventions of Indian society which reveal the subterranean tensions and conflicts working insidiously beneath the surface of unity and harmonious co-existence among the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities in the village Mano Majra. Singh, through his photographic description of the village, relays the fateful and tragic event of partition to the readers. An archetypal Indian village, Mano Majra becomes the focal point of the novel’s narration and represents the microcosm of India during this period. Singh himself being a first-hand witness to the cataclysmic eruption of violence and bloodletting marked by atrocities of the most heinous kind and barbaric cruelties people inflicted on one another, deeply mourns the death of humanity saying:

“The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man but the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country... I had believed that we Indians were peace loving and nonviolent that we were concerned with matters of the spirit while rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things. After the experience of autumn 1947, I become... an angry middle-aged

man, who wanted to show his disenchantment with the world...”
(Dhawan 12-13)

In the novel, Singh succeeds at evoking the pain and trauma of physical and cultural displacement of refugees from both nations and the ineradicable impact of the bestial horrors on the psyche of the victims and survivors condemned to spend the rest of their lives with deeply unsettling and disquieting feelings of anger, alienation, bitterness and loss of identity. The sleepy, tranquil village on the north-western frontier of India was relatively untouched by the horrors of partition unleashing elsewhere in different parts of the country. The Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims lived together with the spirit of an easy camaraderie until all hell breaks loose with the arrival of a train-load of corpses from Pakistan. Singh strikingly delineates the inconsistency and depravity of human nature through a critical engagement with the novel's characters. Juggut Singh, referred to as 'budmash' by the villagers, is a notorious dacoit discarded by the society as a debauch and an anti-social element. Ironically, it is Juggut Singh who eventually emerges as the hero of the novel. Hukum Chand, the Magistrate and deputy commissioner of Mano Majra turns a mute spectator to the mass killing of refugees and turns a blind eye to the horrifying happenings around him despite being forewarned about the situation. The Muslims of Mano Majra are forced to leave the land of their birth in view of the impending danger posed by the droves of migrant Sikhs arriving from Pakistan. Bhai Meet Singh, the Sikh priest and the guardian of the Sikh temple in Mano Majra becomes overwhelmed with grief at the very thought of separation from his beloved Muslim friends. Meet Singh and Imam Baksh, the mullah of the mosque in the village embrace each other and weep inconsolably unable to bear the sorrow of separation. Through this episode, Khushwant Singh brings out the sublimity of secularism and the pristine innocence and guilelessness of the villagers whose hearts were untouched by the venom of communalism. Banta Singh, the local headman ('lambardar') of the village echoes similar sentiments towards his Muslim brothers; however, he is genuinely concerned about the safety of the Muslims in the village who might have to suffer a ruthless onslaught by the Sikh refugees entering the village. Extending hospitality to the refugees was not an act of hospitality for the Sikh peasants but a sacred act of duty embedded into their cultural ethos. The character of Meet Singh is drawn in the veritable reflection of the author himself who passionately advocates humanitarianism as against the narrow and hidebound rituals of religions that divided man from man. Meet Singh is representative of the age-old philosophy of the India's Sanathana Dharma which treats all human beings as equal in the eyes of God. He tells Iqbal Singh, the communist social worker, "Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here next door is a Muslim Mosque, when I pray to my Guru, uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah" (13). However, a few Sikh extremists embark on a vicious campaign of fanning communal passions in the village by spreading rumours about the ruthless murders and rapes of Sikh men, women and children by Muslims in Pakistan. They also enlist a group of likeminded religious fanatics who volunteer to execute the sinister plan of sabotaging the train carrying Muslims to Pakistan.

While Hukum Chand, the Magistrate, Iqbal, the political idealist along with the police and other Government machinery remain true to their colors as morally decrepit individuals

who lapse into their innate cowardice, Jugga, a character drawn in deep shades of grey and compounded of both good and evil, seeks the blessings of his guru even as he embarks on the audacious and fatal mission of subverting the genocidal plotting of the Sikh terrorists. Though he is depicted in the novel as an unlikable character involved in a lustful physical affair with Nooran, the daughter of the mullah, Juggat Singh emerges as the apostle of love and sacrifice who, despite his lowly, illiterate and brutish standing in the society, towers above communal strife and upholds sanity, dignity and meaning of human life.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* serves as a critical commentary on the condition of humanity and the social, moral and political imperative to learn from history the blunders of partition and through his socio-realist depiction of the various facets of partition, warns us against the slightest degree of complacency which will result in a deadly replication and replication of the tragic past. In the preface to the novel, Singh writes: "The only conclusion that we can draw from the experience of the partition in 1947 is that such things must never happen again. And the only way to prevent their recurrence is to promote closer integration of people of different races, religions and castes living in the subcontinent" (*Train to Pakistan* 155). In conclusion, Singh through his novel, makes a clarion call for upholding the humanistic values of life and provides an unvarnished picture of the tragic history of India's Partition through a socio-historic exploration of the phenomenon.

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