

TRAIN TO PAKISTAN: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO HISTORY

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Abstract

History always occupies an important place in the life and culture of human beings. History is not just the records of dead facts but these dead facts have immense power to configure our present which decides the forthcoming future of a nation as well as of the individuals. Thus history establishes an enlightening bridge between present (reality) and future (imagination). The novel analyzes the historical facts in a very balanced and unprejudiced manner to prove that what happened in the history were not at all inevitable and predestined facts rather these situations were intentionally created and imposed for the achievement of vested interests of some power famished politicians. In *Train to Pakistan* Khushwant Singh has given a psychological and objective account of inhuman and nasty brutalities of people and their mental state during the unfortunate division of country. The writer endeavours to find out the root cause of this inhuman act and gives vital and legitimate reasons to convince the readers how the loathsome communal fire was set in a frontier village. Khushwant Singh excellently points out the tragic consequences of Partition and the lack of farsightedness of Indian leadership. In spite of the depiction of dark, rigid realities and severe dreadfulness the fact is that *Train to Pakistan* is a novel which heralds the divine stature of love. Thus it is the story of ever relevant moral for a multi-dimensional nation like India and its people.

History always occupies an important place in the life and culture of human beings. History is not just the records of dead facts but these dead facts have immense power to configure our present which decides the forthcoming future of a nation as well as of the individuals. Thus history establishes an enlightening bridge between present (reality) and future (imagination). Historian's approach to history candidly differs than the approach of a creative artist who deals with history with his throbbing instincts and urges to depict the history in vibrant form through his imaginative characters. The present paper intends to explore this living agenda of history in Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan*. Joan F. Adkins applauds "Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* as a novel that "deserved a high position in Indian –Anglican literature"(11). The novel analyzes the historical facts in a very balanced and unprejudiced

manner to prove that what happened in the history were not at all inevitable and predestined facts rather these situations were intentionally created and imposed for the achievement of vested interests of some power famished politicians. Prof. William Walsh goes to the extent of saying that “*Train to Pakistan* is a tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people. It goes forward in a trim, athletic way, and its unemphatic voice makes a genuinely human comment” (18). There is of course a hue of individuality in the form of anger and disappointment in the novel but that is justified because of the writer’s disillusionment with the long cherished human values as Harish remarks “...long cherished human values in the wake of inhuman bestial horrors and insane savage killings on both sides during the Partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in August 1947” (126).

History in literature is a reliable representation of socio-historic circumstances of a particular nation, society or region of a particular time through imaginary and genuine characters well versed in the air and awareness of an era. Originally the novel was entitled *Mano Majra* which suggests static, while the present title, *Train to Pakistan*, implies change. V.A.Shahane comments regarding this change of title “...the change of the title of the novel from *Mano Majra* to *Train to Pakistan* is in keeping with the theme of the novel”(68). The setting of Khushwant Singh’s novel *Train to Pakistan* is in Mano Majra ; an imaginary village situated on the border of India and Pakistan. The timing of the novel is the summer of 1947 ; the time of partition. As far as the Sikhs and Muslims of this village are concerned they were in harmony of religious concord till their ignorance of partition and the things happening in the outer world. But the revelation of partition and ensued mass killings brought such a terrible tempest of abhorrence in which all age old fellow feelings came to poignant demise. In the words of Khushwant Singh, “I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah”(21). The story begins with the murder of a local money-lender Lala Ram Lal and the village gangster Juggut Singh who is in love with a Muslim girl is doubted for this murder. With the arrival a train transporting the dead bodies of Sikhs, the whole village turns into a battlefield replete with bloodshed and violence while the magistrate and police are totally helpless to manage the violence.

The tragic partition of India which caused the largest single immigration; perhaps ten to fifteen million people crossed the borders and more than a million became the victims of communal violence carried out by frantic communalists but this tragedy could not find any worthy recognition in the world history. This indifference of the world history to this tragic partition simply shows that life in South Asia has never had any importance. The novel opens with the following lines “by the summer of 1947 when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was finally announced, ten million people- Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs were in flight by the time monsoon broke, a million of them dead and all the northern India was in arms, in terror or in hiding. The only remaining oasis of peace were a scatter of little village lost in the remote of reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra”(4).

The novel revolves around the question that how Hindus and Muslims, who have a rich heritage of past and common customs, could accept an entirely different understanding of their existence. For the British Government this partition was just a shrewd convenient administrative arrangement and a selfish political move. According to Singh “the summer before communal riots, precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta and within a few months the death toll had mounted to several thousands. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to

Hindus Muslims were to blame. The fact is both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and spread and clubbed. Both tortured and both raped”(3).

There are various scholarly literatures about the partition of India and Pakistan spotlighting the political motives which ultimately led to the tragic partition. There had been vast discussion about the responsible parties and the communal ideas of various organizations. But Khushwant Singh talks about partition from the angle of brutal fact which cannot be belied down even to the present day that the act of partition ensued the largest occurrence of the uprooting of people in modern history. *Train to Pakistan* is not just a piece of literature but it also reveals before the readers the fact that our historians and social scientists were not interested at all in mentioning the horrible numbers and tragedy of the dead rather they endeavoured to secure the towering names of the historical and political personalities in their books. The predicament and suffering of a common man who underwent ceaseless disaster could find even a slight intimation in the history books which just talk about the records of apparent political transformation. It would be very apt to mention the name of Walter Allen who candidly talks about the intention of a good literature in his book *Reading a Novel* in the following words “ in the literature of an age, its conflicts, tendencies, obsessions are uncovered and made manifest to a degree which is continually astonishing; good writers are, so to speak, mediumistic to the deeper stirrings of life of their time while they are still unknown to or at any rate unsuspected by the public, politicians and current received opinions....Contemporary novels are the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it”(16).

It is an undeniable fact that the partition ensued the heartrending massacre in the modern history of India and the number of emancipated man and women from concentration camps were enough evidence to the holocaust that took place in Indian subcontinent. Any interpretation of such holocaust from the angle of the hierarchy of communities would never do justice with this human tragedy. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* do not intend to blame any single community or person or social or political leader of that time. There were various reasons behind this unfortunate happening and all of them were equally accountable for this loathsome blot on the face of humanity. Khushwant Singh thought even himself equally responsible for this bloodshed. In the words of Warren French, “Singh’s terse fable suggests a profound disillusionment with the power of law, reason and intellect in the face of elemental human passions---Singh is brilliant, sardonic observer of world undergoing convulsive changes; and his novels provide a unique insight into one of the major political catastrophes of this country”(818-20). He also expressed his bitter disappointment in an interview regarding his failure to do something for the country and to protect the humanistic values and says “the beliefs that I have 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 non-violent, that we were more concerned with matters of the spirit, while the rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things. After the experience of the autumn of 1947, I could no longer subscribe to this view. I became... an angry middle aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world I decided to try my hand at writing”(Guest of Honour talk).

The above expression of the author are enough to show that the partition cast such a horrible impact on Khushwant Singh that he could not keep himself away that traumatic experience of the partition throughout his life just like other victims of the partition. This

traumatic impact is well reflected in his description of the incidents of the novel and this description is so vivid that while reading, we feel that we are not reading a novel but actually viewing the live scene of the happenings. It is this incredible narrative skill of the writer which made Alexander Suja to remark on the narrative style of Khushwant Singh in *The Fictional World of Khushwant Singh* “Khushwant Singh gives vent to all the venom and indignation felt by him at the horrifying tragedy of brutality and savagery in the novel *Train to Pakistan*. he pours out the agonizing tale of the human tragedy and the sinister impact of the partition on the peace loving Hindu, Mualims and Sikhs of Mano Majra, realistically with scathing irony. Khushwant Singh has designed the novel to explore and expose the brutal and hypocritical image of man and simultaneously present his faith in the vaku of love, loyalty and humanity”(44).

In *Train to Pakistan* Khushwant Singh has given a psychological and objective account of inhuman and nasty brutalities of people and their mental state during the unfortunate division of country. It was not the cruel deeds but the rumour of such deeds which provoked the emotions of the people of both the communities of the village and thus Sikhs and Muslims who lived cordially in Mano Mazra were ready to play the blood Holi. Soon the whole village was divided into two groups of Muslim and Sikhs and they spread the rumour of the savage deeds of each other which ultimately add fuel to the fire of emotions to perform the heart rending slaughter. The writer endeavours to find out the root cause of this inhuman act and gives vital and legitimate reasons to convince the readers how the loathsome communal fire was set by rumours in a frontier village which was entirely unknown about the freedom of country from the cruel talons of British rule. Love and affection were the true identity of the village but this identity was totally dismantled in few moments by the rumour based revenge, bloodbath and abhorrence. An inexperienced newly formed government could not show the required courage and concern to reinstate peace and cordiality. The whole unfortunate situation becomes crystal clear in the following words of the writer “they had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. They had heard of mosque being desecrated by the slaughter of the pigs on the premises, and copies of the holy Koran being torn by infields”(141).

Train to Pakistan is a novel which dexterously mingles the fact and fiction with astounding sincerity because whatever has been described through the imaginary characters is not just a narrative told by them rather it was an incident which the writer himself with all his kith and kin observed enacted before their naked eyes. His account of the massacre and atrocities committed on either side of the border is entirely furnished by incredible inventive impartiality and objectivity. There is not even a slight tint of overstatement deviated from the real humanistic purpose of art as said by B. Bhattacharya about the ultimate objective of the art “Art must teach, but unobtrusively by its vivid interpretation of life. Art must preach, but only by virtue of its being a vehicle of truth. If that is propaganda, there is no need to eschew the word”(395). This is really a credit to the artistic talent of Khushwant Singh that he could perfectly produce a proper portrait of the partition without departing from pragmatism and genuine emotions. His every account of the novel tries its best to show how intentionally the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust was created in both the communities by the power starving people to fulfil their narrow political objectives even at the disgusting cost of the innocent lives of the people. Actually they are accountable for any communal disharmony and any disorder not just at the time of partition but even in the present scenario. Mr. P.K.Singh highly appreciates creative urge and realistic temperament of Khushwant Singh in his book *The Novels of Khushwant Singh: A critical Evaluation* “ the quality of realism in *Train to Pakistan* deserves acclaim for highlighting the real

incidents through the real people. The accurate presentation of incidents and characters exhibit Khushwant Singh's genuine faith in the humanistic ideals... it is really his own deep and ethical moral values that governs his portrayal of the real and actual"(56). Khushwant Singh's narrative of the Partition is a social one and he was not interested to talk about the politics behind Partition, because his purpose is to emphasize the prime human aspect to create an appropriate socio-national understanding ever required for the peace and prosperity of a country like India. Khushwant Singh excellently points out the tragic consequences of Partition and the lack of farsightedness of Indian leadership who failed to assess the unbearable cost of division. Communal discord can never be the soul of India but unfortunately it was very shrewdly designed first by the British Government under the policy of divide and rule and then by the nationalist leaders by their mulish approach. There is no political propaganda woven in the theme of the novel As Kai Nicholson remarks "Khushwant Singh used the novel to voice his arguments vehemently. The novelist, however, has succeeded in communicating the readers of the ghastliness and grossness and total insanity of the Two-nation Theory and the political Tragedy" (39).

Obviously Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, intends to bring to light the trauma of Partition with all its effects on whosoever lived in India and Pakistan. It also targets the biased approach of history and historians who termed the ensuing riots as inevitable in their books without putting into question mark the political happenings and political leaders of that time. They are more concerned about the compulsions of their national heroes not about the sufferings of the effected people who were forced to face this calamity. It is really the irony of the largest democratic country of the world where the people are compelled to accept the imposition of even traumatic political decisions against their cultural heritage of fellow feelings. It scrutinizes with clinical care and concentration the callous facts of bestial face of human life and emphasizes the magnitude of human love which can excel all man-made barriers and boundaries to confront and overcome such catastrophes. 'The tragic feeling is invoked in us,' writes Arthur Miller, 'when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life to secure one thing...his sense of personal dignity (Miller,1949). In spite of the depiction of dark, rigid realities and severe dreadfulness the fact is that *Train to Pakistan* is a novel which heralds the divine stature of love. Even in the midst of such cruelties and bloodshed we observe the people who boldly encounter the brutal games of destiny with fortitude. We see Jugga, a confirmed ruffian, who defeats the strong forces of evils and savagery by sacrificing himself for love. Harish Raizada aptly remarks, "The heroic spirit of man is revealed in the novel not by men who are considered religious and respectable in the public and supposed to have innate goodness but by a man like Jugga who is treated as a confirmed ruffian"(20).

To conclude it can be said that *Train to Pakistan* is not just a story based on the history of Partition; rather it is a narrative of the demise of humanity, crushing of fellow feelings and bestial face of a nation projected by vested political ends. It is the story of common man and his sufferings which totally was ignored in the books of history. It is the story of ever relevant moral for a multi- dimensional nation like India and its people as Khushwant himself said at the Press Conference after the screening of the film version of *Train to Pakistan* directed by Pamela Rooks at the International Film Festival in New Delhi (11-20 January1998) "We must not forget the partition because it is relevant today. We must remember that it did in fact happen and can happen again. That is why I keep reminding people who clamour for an independent Kashmir, Khalistan or Nagaland to remember what happened to Muslims when some of them asked for a separate Muslim state. I keep telling my fellow Sikhs that the worst enemies of Khalsa Panth are

Khalistanis, and of the Nagas those who ask for an independent Nagaland. Reminding ourselves of what happened in 1947 and realizing the possibilities of its recurring, we should resolve that we will never let it happen again” (13).

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