



## **KHUSHWANT SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN AS A VEHEMENT PLEA TO UPHOLD HUMAN DIGNITY ABOVE NARROW WALLS OF SECTARIAN ATTITUDES: AN APPRAISAL**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an appraisal of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* as a plea to uphold human dignity above sectarian attitudes. Using his insight in characterization and extraordinary narrative techniques, Khushwant Singh clearly spoke about positivity in life, upholding external values of human endurance, dignity, optimism, caste, religion and selfish motives in his novel *Train to Pakistan*. This paper analyses his skill in exposing the conflicts between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during the time of partition in 1947 Khushwant Singh. Thus, this paper extracts lofty ideas such as love, positivity and human dignity from Khushwant Singh and presents them in a subtle way.

**Key Words: Human Dignity, Religion, Nationalism, Freedom, Massacre, Non-Violence, Refugees.**

What is generally held is that man's inhumanity to man has been a favourite subject to the writers the world over and the Partition – novelists in Indian – English literature have succeeded in varying degrees to bring out the shock, violence, loss of human dignity and the play of bestial instincts that the partition bred. Significant among the partition novels are Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan**, Manohar Malgonkar's **A Bend in the Ganges**, Balachandra Rajan's **The Dark Dancer**, Attia Hosain's **Sunlight on a Broken Column**, Raj Gill's **The Rape**, H.S. Gill's **Ashes and Petals**, Kartar Singh Duggal's **Twice Born Twice Dead** and Chaman Nahal's **Azadi**. These novelists are either Hindus or Sikhs with the exception of Attia Hosain. All these novels portray how these two communities who had fought against the British and reached the target of achieving freedom, almost without bloodshed, stooped to detestable inhuman activities against each other and bathed in the blood of their own fellow countrymen.

Among these novelists, Khushwant Singh has shown remarkable insight in his characterization and narrative technique. Even though he has taken particular care in treating the theme of communal violence in its varying degrees, he is found probing deep into this phenomenon covertly and trying to trace the roots of this national cancer. He does neatly project a positive view of life, upholding the eternal values of human endurance, dignity and optimism, winning over narrow consideration of caste, religion and selfish motives. The ancient religions of the world do all ascertain the need for leading a worthy life, guided by the principles of spiritualism, perseverance, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. The seers and sages whatever be their religion teach men to rise above narrow self-oriented concerns and accept the vitality of life in all respects. What is disheartening to note is that in spite of all the teachings of the great seers and sages, communal violence and disharmony resulting in large scale massacres and acts of vandalism have disrupted the peaceful coexistence of Indians through the centuries. A strong hold of mutual distrust and hatred was found existing between the Muslims and the Hindus. The Hindu majority looked upon the Muslims as mainly invaders and settlers. The Muslim rulers, especially those who came after Akbar the great, paid little attention to religious amity and hence the gap had widened over the centuries. "The Hindus had acquired an edge over the Muslims in services, trade and industry owing to their superior English education and their competence to adapt themselves to the new situation" (Hunter 176).

Despite the strong cultural and ethnic codes that bound these two communities together, their separate religions had little in common. The Islam propagated a monotheistic faith whereas polytheism was the accepted faith of the Hindus. The Islam looked down upon idol worship which formed an integral part of the daily life of a devout Hindu. To the Hindu, the cow was a sacred animal and he could not even dream of taking away its life. The Muslims on the other hand had no such considerations and often indulged in the slaughter of cows which earned them the wrath and indignation of the Hindu majority.



Inter caste marriages were scoffed at by both communities and often were the causes of bloody communal riots. The establishment of separate electorate worsened the prevailing mutual distrust and hatred of the two communities. Nationalist Muslims like Nawab Sadiq Ali Khan were quick to discern the dangers involved in such a move. He minced no words in criticizing this unholy act of dividing a nation on religious grounds:

“The principle of class and religious representation is the most mischievous feature of the (reforms) scheme. It is not good for the Mohammedans to be taught that their political interests are different from those of the Hindus. From Mohammedan point, too, the principle is fraught with mischief” (Gopal 104).

The formation of the Muslim League and the separatist attitude of the Muslim minorities enraged the Hindu majority. Gandhiji was fully conscious of the mutual distrust that had come to exist between the two communities. He was also conscious of the fact that there was no immediate cure for this malady. He writes thus:

“I know that there is much, too much distrust of one another as yet. Many Hindus distrust Mussalman’s honesty. They argue that without the British, Mussalmans of India will aid Mussalman powers to build a Mussalman Empire in India. Mussalmans, on the other hand, fear that the Hindus, being an overwhelming majority, will smother them” (P 92).

Gandhi advised the Muslims to take the course of non-cooperation with the sound hope that both the warring communities would come together. It is to the credit of Gandhi that for the first time in the history of India he could kindle the flame of nationalism in the embittered hearts of Indians. For a time, the different sections and religious groups forgot their natural distrust and intolerance and worked together for a common goal - viz - the independence of India. But, that this friendship and amity was only at the peripheral level was soon proved by the incidents at the wake of independence. The prospect of a partition and the sure possibility of leaving one’s birth place embittered large sections of Hindus and Muslims and even those who had so far abstained from nurturing religious sentiments in their hearts were forced to think on communal lines. This resulted in sudden mutual distrust and ill-feeling. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who struggled to the last moment to avoid a partition of the nation had to be a mute witness to the official procedures that rendered the division of the subcontinent on communal lines. The partition of the nation was brought about most abruptly and without any thought of the possible repercussions.

The first major breakthrough in Khushwant Singh’s literary career came with the publication of **Train to Pakistan** (1956), the book which won for him the coveted Grove Press India Fiction Prize for the year. The traumatic experience of partition had shaken him to the roots. The harrowing incidents of 1947 had administered a rude shock on the faith of all the sensitive and thinking people of India and abroad. The incident triggered questions about the intrinsic nobility of man taught through ages, by our sages and saints including Mahatma Gandhi, during various stages of our country’s cultural revolution. Khushwant Singh thus gives vent to his mental agony:

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 become ... an angry middle aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world.... I decided to try my hand at writing.

**Train to Pakistan** is both a grim and pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the whirl of partition. ‘The train’ signifies the continuity and dynamism of life. It is a vehicle that brings forth together as opposed to alienation. It is a symbol of hope and peace for the refugees. The refugees are dependent on the train, as it is their only way of hope to a promised land. Likewise, life in Mano Majra is somehow inextricably associated with the passage of trains. It is a veritable almanac and time guide for the people of Mano Majra in normal times. It is curious to note that the first disruption to the peaceful life and communal harmony in the village is the arrival of the ‘ghost train’. Hence, as Vassant A. Shahane observes, the train in the novel “is a dual symbol. On the one hand it symbolizes life and action; it stands for death and disaster on the other” (P 69). The story centers round the destinies of the people of Mano Majra, a border village, with a river fringing it and Railway Bridge spanning the



river. Though the frontier between India and Pakistan turns a scene of rioting and bloodshed, everything is quiet and normal in Mano Majra. Partition does not mean much to them:

“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” (Train to Pakistan 20).

The arrival of the ‘ghost train’ at Mano Majra from Pakistan carrying the dead bodies of Hindus and Sikhs creates a commotion. It triggers off mutual suspicion and distrust between the Sikhs and Muslims of the village. Muslims are evacuated to a refugee camp. Religious fanatics from outside plan a large scale massacre on the train to Pakistan, the train that is to carry the Muslim refugees of the village. The timely action of Juggat saves the train and the passengers from near disaster, but he himself killed in the attempt. Mano Majra consists of about seventy families and Lala Ram Lal’s is the only Hindu family. Its Sikhs and Muslims are equal in number. The Sikhs own the land and the Muslims are tenants and farm workers. There are also a few families of sweepers whose religion is uncertain. The general atmosphere prevailing in the village before the arrival of the ‘ghost train’ is idyllic in so far as there are no religious disputes or communal tension. The peepul tree in the village is a sure symbol of the religious amity and brotherhood that binds the villagers together. They are ignorant of the newly gained freedom or of the division of the country on communal basis. Thus, an ignorant Muslim peasant asks Iqbal:

“Tell us something. What is happening in the world? What is all this about Pakistan and Hindustan?” We live in this little village and know nothing”, the lambarder puts in Babuji, tell us, why did the English leave?” (TP 42).

The Mano Majrans are mute victims of the inhuman activities perpetrated on them by indifferent bureaucrats like Hukum Chand and the sub-Inspector of police. The conversation between these two clearly reveals the corruption and nepotism that had crept into the echelons of governmental organisation. Both of them nurture communal feelings at heart and have no compassion left for the hapless refugees. They have little sympathy left for the unfortunate sufferers. Neither are they prepared to stretch a helping hand to those in distress what little they could do is but out of fear of the authority and to safeguard their own personal interest. The supreme sacrifice of Juggat in the end stands in direct contrast to the indifference and inaction of the bureaucrats. The novelist purposefully highlights the solidarity of the village folk that, in times of peace transcended narrow communal considerations. Even though Meet Singh cannot boast of any formal educational background, he appears in the novel as the Messiah of peace, non-violence and universal brotherhood. He does represent the tension – free and hatred – free life of the Mano Majrans when he says:

“Everyone is welcome to his religion.  
Here next door is a Muslim Mosque.  
When I pray to my Guru, uncle Imam  
Bakshi calls to Allah ... “ (P 35).

A true Sikh, who holds the words of the Gurus in high esteem, Meet Singh throughout the novel tries with all his might to keep ill-feelings and mutual hatred under check. He tries in vain to pacify the fiery revolutionary Sikh youth who exhorts the Sikhs of Mano Majra to take arms against their Muslim brothers. Meet Singh stands the only beacon of light in an otherwise dark world of mutual distrust and communal hatred. Khushwant Singh takes a dig at the so-called armchair socialists through the portrayal of Iqbal. The youth, with all his English education and dreams of establishing a socialist society aiming at economic equality is quite blind to the realities is around him. When he finds everyone steeped in murder, he finds himself incompetent to be able to realize his party’s dreams. He regrets:

“What could be – one little man – do in this enormous impersonal land of four hundred million? Could you stop the killing? Obviously not. Everyone – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Congressite, Leaguer, Akali or Communist – was deep in it” (P 45).



He fails to fathom the communal implications of the partition and the psychology of the mob. The revolutionary socialist is taken aback at the news of the murder of Ram Lal, the village money lender. The villagers of Mano get the first taste of communal hatred from the insolent behaviour of the Sikh soldier who comes to the village for collecting wood and kerosene. His treatment of Imam Beksh's salutation is the clear indication of the troubles lying in store for them. In the very evening, the stench of the burning flesh stupefies them;

"The village was stilled in a dead 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" (P 73).

The scene unfolds horrible dramas of communal violence – the sinking of human values in the mire of communal frenzy. Khushwant Singh intended the novel as a realistic delineation of the partition that he himself had come to witness. The shameful incidents of those days completely shattered his belief in the innate goodness of man. For the first time in his life, he came face to face with the beastliness, cruelties and the evil inherent in human beings. He wrote:

"It was time one exploded this myth of the innate goodness in man. There is innate evil in man ... And so I just wrote about it".

Like Thomas Hardy, Khushwant Singh invests the common man of the soil with tragic grandeur to show, as Bonamy Dobree says. "The dignity of man for all his helpless littleness in the face of the universe, for all his nullity under the blotting hand of time" (P 328). The ending of the novel is a sure enough indicator towards the artistic and the ideological strains in the novelist, in different degrees of cohesion. M.K.Bhatnagar has rightly observed that most of the Indian writers of political novels seem to be aware of the fact that the way in which "a novelist draws the curtain suggests the tenuous agreement between the artist and the ideologue ... the manner wherein a finale is brought about would be an index of the success attained in the artistic rendering of the vision" (P 172). Viewed in this perspective, the final sacrifice of Juggat, 'the badmash' towards averting a calamity on the face of inaction by religious, governmental and political personnel, acquires greater relevance. It is a vehement plea by the author to uphold human dignity above narrow walls of sectarian attitudes for Khushwant Singh strongly believed that "whatever its limitations, whatever its frustrations, love is the greatest", the most exhilarating experience of life". To conclude, Train to Pakistan stresses the continuity of life in spite of harrowing experiences.

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