



1947 Partition: A Boomerang Trauma as Reflected in Khushwant Singh's Novel Train to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

Introduction

Khushwant Singh emerges as the major novelist of our times concerned with articulating the national trauma in his works. I have examined his historical novel Train to Pakistan that throws light on the country's socio-political life. The writer faithfully records the reign of terror and provides a sad, telling commentary on the breakdown of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment is predominant in this novel.

The novels of Khushwant Singh contain indelible records of what the people had been in the past and what they want to be in future. They present a prophetic vision of India in the context of the complex process of national reconstruction. They contribute to the spirit of the nation

The partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan in 1947 has left a deep scar on the psyche of the people. For many of those who were first and second generation children after partition, the event lives on in their minds. The tales are told and retold of the horror and brutality of the time, of the friends and relatives who continue to live across the border and visit their ancestral homes and yearn for the past where they lived happily together. The cultural products of nationalism- poetry, prose fiction, music, and plastic arts-show this yearning very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles.

There are many writers who have dealt with national trauma as the basic theme in their novels, but Khushwant Singh studied India deeply and was successful in bringing out its real image. An attempt has been made in this research paper to examine comprehensively the novel Train to Pakistan of the above writer and focus on the literary sources that present a divided nation and describe the national trauma.

Theme that has been investigated -

The partition of India in 1947 resulted in one of the greatest upheavals in the history of mankind. Twelve million people were uprooted from their homes and hearths. Many caravans and convoys of these uprooted people were ambushed and on both sides of border the helpless thousands were butchered in the cruelest manner. Trainloads of dead bodies were sent as 'present' from one country to the other. The unprecedented violence, cruelty and degradation of human values left a deep scar on the psyche of the subcontinent and it still haunts the people as a nightmare, generating an atmosphere of distrust and hostility between communities which, except for their different modes of worship, are otherwise indistinguishable from one another.

The partition has created a deep psychological void in them;

they have a feeling not entirely unfounded, that the majority community does not trust them and that they carry the stigma of the 'sin' of partition. The majority community has failed in allaying these fears of their Muslim brethren; instead fundamentalist Hindu organizations keep on harping on the image of the Muslims as idol-breakers and desecrators of Hindu religion. There is basis in history for this kind of attitude. The Muslim contribution to human civilization in general and the Indian culture in particular is too formidable to be ignored or slighted. In the task of nation building their contribution is next to none. They do not need pampering and patronizing. Their contribution has to be recognized and they must not be branded as fundamentalists or separatists simply because some of their leaders had demanded Pakistan.

The study of the novel Train to Pakistan written on the theme of communalism has been made in the context of these socio-political, economic, religious and historical factors. Here Urvashi Butalia's comment in The Other Side of Silence is worth mentioning, "These aspects of partition-how families were divided, how friendship endured across borders, how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resources, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives, and indeed the cities and towns villages they settled in find little reflection in written history."

Independence in 1947 represented the triumph of anti-colonial nationalism. A century and a half long struggle with British brought new hopes for Indians. The long awaited freedom was followed by partition of the subcontinent. The partition of India was agreed upon by the parties involved in the Indian constitutional tussle primarily because it appeared to be the only way to solve the problems created by the collapse of disciplined politics in the country. Before independence nobody ever imagined that it would be impossible for both Hindus and Muslims to live together in India. The rift between these two communities widened as the killings continued. Muhammad Ali Jinnah demanded a separate state for Muslims. The root of communalism lies in the conflict between the old and the new, between reaction and progress, between the different kinds of change. It is a form of social unrest. The creation of Pakistan also could not end religious conflicts.

Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan (1956) is an exquisite piece of work on the boomerang traumatic issues. He focused on partition to show the loss of all values, merciless killings during the days of unrest caused by communalism. His description of brutal atrocities committed on India-Pakistan border has been characterized objectively. The partition of the country disrupted his career as a lawyer and made him

see man and life in the raw bereft of all its external embellishment. The main theme of his fiction involves consideration of the nature of man and his destiny through a juxtaposition of violence.

Boomerang Trauma in Singh's Train to Pakistan -

Khushwant Singh has chosen a well known subject matter for writing. His purpose is to break down the established conventions and to involve the experience in a series of contradictions that force the people to shift from illusion to reality. Singh's first novel *Train to Pakistan* was awarded the "Grove Press Award" for being the best work of fiction. It can be called the 'magnum opus' of Khushwant Singh. In it, he has built a narrative with historical background of Indian independence, partition and communal holocaust of great dimension. Singh's purpose behind writing it was to highlight the bestial holocaust which happened on India-Pakistan border. When on 15 August 1947 India won independence and self-government, simultaneously the country was parted into two nations. The colonies ended, but the partition brought the greatest disaster to the subcontinent. Singh calls partition a period of disillusionment. Chetan Karnani has observed: "The reason why *Train to Pakistan* is an interesting novel is to be sought in the fact that there is a brilliant depiction of religious animosity caused by the division of the country. Partition of the country brought in its wake an atmosphere of violence and bitterness."¹

Train to Pakistan reflects the cynicism and savagery committed on India-Pakistan border during the partition. "It is a nightmare," writes Srinivasa Iyengar, "..... the details accumulate to a poisonous mass and numb the sensibilities."² The novel centers on an enveloping gloom that is relieved only at the end by an act of supreme self-abnegation. It is so structured that the principal incidents mark the focal point of the argument and reflect the responses of different characters.

Train to Pakistan has its action taking place in the summer of 1947, around an obscure village of Mano Majra, situated on this side of what later became the Indo-Pak border. The village situated on the left bank of the Sutlej, forming the border of the two nations, bifurcated in 1947 on the basis of the religion of the populace. Mano Majra is a small village populated by Sikhs and Mohammedans with a single Hindu family of Ram Lal, the money lender. The village is situated by the side of the Railway track. The Railway station of Mano Majra is a roadside station where only up and down passenger trains stop. A bridge spanning the river Sutlej carries the Railway track connecting the two nations. The entire schedule of activity of the village is governed by the trains at the Railway station.

The novel depicts the brutal story of political game which results in disturbing peace, innocence and the feeling of fraternity which existed among the simple village folk of all religions for centuries in a small village. The novel is a fine description of village life and the river Sutlej, which takes a symbolic significance in the story. It provides an emotional and intellectual study of its characters under stress, namely that of Juggut Singh, Iqbal Singh and Hukum Chand. "The three aspects of modern India: youthful radical idealism linked with Marxist views (Iqbal); the animal passion and earthiness of ordinary India (Juggut); and corrupt officialdom (Hukum Chand)".³

Iqbal Singh, an educated, sophisticated social worker, when he arrives in Mano Majra and comes to know about Ramlal's murder is deeply disturbed because he does not know the real reason behind the crime, "was it communal? Is it all right for me to be here?.." (TP, p.51)

In fact, the irony of the situations lies in the fact the Iqbal Singh had come to reform people, to stop killings but people there have no intention of killing each other, in fact they are ignorant of the whole situation. The sub inspector reports to the magistrate:

In most books and stories Khushwant Singh writes about the life he knows best about Punjab and the Sikhs. The most central aspect of his work is the Sikh element. Probably he conceives Jugga in the tradition of Sikh Gurus, who stood for martyrdom specially Guru Nanak who stood for the unity of Sikhs and Muslims.

"Muslims sat and moped in their houses. Rumour of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurthala, which they had heard and dismissed, came back to their minds. They had heard of gentle women having their nails taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. Many had eluded their would be ravishers by killing themselves. They had heard of mosques being desecrated by the slaughter of pigs on the premises, and of copies of the holy Koran being torn up by infidels. Quite suddenly every Sikh in Mano Majra became a stranger with an evil intent. His long hair and beard appeared barbarous, his kirpan menacingly anti-Muslim. For the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them, a haven of refuge where there were no Sikhs." (TP, p.141)

Khushwant Singh has beautiful use of irony in depicting how religion which conveys peace and brotherhood becomes the cause of barbaric deeds. The Sikh Youth, planning violence, chants the name of God at the Gurudwara, and proclaims that he bears the world nothing but good will, but this goodwill in that charged atmosphere becomes the source of the most sinister harbinger of devastation and violence.

The partition was the result of the communal suspicion sown by the leaders. The sub-inspector was enraged about the brutal acts done in Punjab. The ignorance of the leaders was responsible for the horrible killings in Pakistan. It shows how the 'protectors' were busy in the game of throne.

During the past sixty seven years India has witnessed many horrors and tragedies which have been enacted in the attempt to gain political ends by brutal violence, murder and coercion, but partition was the greatest setback ever suffered by mankind. People loaded their moveable possessions on their carts, yoked up their bullocks and set out on a laborious trek to the other nation. Old people, children and ailing as well as the able bodied, all moved to a foreign land. Protection was often inadequate; food scarce for both man and cattle. Medical attention hardly existed. In *Train to Pakistan*, the train was the symbol of movement. Millions of people on the either side of the boundary were on the way, seeking refuges. The train implies the movement of vast communities uprooted from their base. It suggested the fate of individuals, the destinies of the two newly formed nations, consequent upon a political decision and the miseries, sufferings and torture which issued from it. Many streets in the capitals, both Delhi and Karachi were lived with flimsy shelters, where families were living, totaling hundreds of thousands of persons, some under only a piece of matting or gunny sack supported on bamboo poles. Commenting on the novel, *Train to Pakistan*, William Walsh says: "It 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."⁴

Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* depicts the tragic circumstance leading to India's partition in 1947. There is a thick layer of disenchantment and disillusionment and bewilderment in them. The vision remains realistic throughout, and the 'communal barbarism' is depicted with a great deal of irony and satire.⁵

Conclusion -

Summing up my topic I would not forget to show the plight and trauma --- physical, mental, emotional, economical, social, political of the innocent people of the Indian sub continent who have become hapless victims of communal violence and how their trauma has realistically and powerfully been reflected through the selected works of Khuswant Singh. Ironically,

these people were not directly or even indirectly responsible for the partition of India in 1947 and yet they were the worst sufferers of this blind frenzy. The partition was, without any doubt, the main cause of spreading up of communalism trauma in a naked manner in this part of the Indian sub-continent.

My attempt in this research paper has been not only to analyze political, social, historical and cultural aspects of communal problem but also to highlight the immediate repercussions of the Great Divide and the bitter fruits that both the countries, India and Pakistan, have to taste even today in the form of terrorist activities as proved through their attacks on Mumbai in 1991 or in Dec.2008, in New Delhi, Jaipur or in Pune bomb blasts on Feb. 13, 2010 or the attack on the Sri Lanka Cricket team in Pakistan in 2008 and in Mumbai, Hotel Taj as recent.

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