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The Role of Partition in Kushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

¹Kanimozhi.A, and ²Vedhachalam

^{1,2}Asst.professor in English, SSBST College ,Mailam,

^{1,2}Villupuram District

Email: ¹ kani.elit@gmail.com

Abstract

The partition of India was the process of dividing the sub-continent along sectarian lines, which took place in 1947 as India gained its independence from British empire. The northern part predominantly Muslim, became nation of Pakistan and the southern predominantly Hindu became the Republic of India, the partition however devastated both India and Pakistan as the process claimed many lives in riots, rapes, murders and looting. The two countries began their independence with ruined economics and lands without established, not only this but also about fifteen million people were displaced from their homes. The partition of India was an important event not only in the history of Indian sub- continent but in world history. Its chief reason was the communal thinking of both Hindus and Muslims. The partition was exceptionally brutal and large in scale and unleashed misery and loss of lives and property as millions of refugees fled either Pakistan or India.

Keywords: Partition, India, Pakistan, Train

1. INTRODUCTION

The partition of India and associated bloody riots inspired many creative minds in India and Pakistan to create literary and cinematic depictions of this event. **Train to Pakistan**, the first novel on the theme of Partition, is a brilliant and realistic story of political hatred, violence, and of mass passions during those turbulent and fateful days that preceded and followed the Partition of the British India. It is based on the theme of Partition of India into India and Pakistan, and hence it narrates the pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the swirl of Partition. The novel is considered one of the best novels on Partition.

Khushwant Singh became popular with the publication of **Train to Pakistan**, his first novel, in 1956. This also won for him the "GrovePress India Fiction Prize" for the year 1956. **Train to Pakistan** portrays the trauma of Partition that gave birth to two political boundaries—India and Pakistan. On the eve of Partition, thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a horrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Partition touched the whole country and Singh's objective in this novel is to see the events from the point of view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village, which is situated at the border between India and Pakistan. Originally it is entitled **Mano Majra** which suggests static, while the present title, **Train to Pakistan**, implies change. The individuality in Khushwant Singh's writings is on account of his anger and disenchantment with the "...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." (Harish 126) The novelist brings to the centre stage the subsequent violence on both sides of the border manifested in ruthless mass destruction as well as the evil impact of Partition on the peace-loving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of Mano Majra.

The chief protagonist of the novel is the village itself. The action of the novel centers around a tiny village in Punjab called Mano Majra, in the north-western region of undivided India, at the Indo-Pakistan border on the banks of the river Sutlej, which serves as the fictional setting of **Train to Pakistan**. Singh weaves a narrative around life in this village, making the village a microcosm representing a larger world. Though the village is dominated by the Sikhs, Mano Majra has, as its inhabitants, the Hindus and the Muslims too. The novelist explores the impact of Partition on the village which allegorically stands for India. He tries to discover the true Indian response by juxtaposing the people, their views and also their actions.

Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** may remain the most comprehensive description of the tragic suffering effected by the Partition. The author's depiction of the elements that guided and impelled the people of India provides not only an understanding of their view of life and their place in it, but also elicits a profound sympathy with their hopes, their aspirations, and their failures. What Khushwant Singh has written of Kartar Singh Duggal's **NaunhTey Mas** applies equally well to his own novel: "It has masterly portrayal of peasant character and a skilful handling of a theme where a pastoral peace rapidly moves to a tragic climax of communal massacres. It is refreshingly free from communal bias". (Singh, 198) Referring to the questions raised 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 January 1998), Khushwant Singh made the following comments which seem to be very pertinent even today i.e. sixty four years after the unfortunate tragedy of Partition took place:

Khushwant Singh's version of the Partition is a social one and he does not describe the politics of the Partition in much detail, because his purpose is to bring out the individual, human element and provide a social understanding. In the Partition, the major change was political; Britain's splitting of India into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. He takes the political aspect of the Partition for granted. He does not focus on the political realities and the predicament of the victims of the Partition in the form of loot, arson, rape, abduction, mutations, murders and displacement. Rather, he chooses to narrate the disturbing and agonizing impact that this event has on those who have not been the direct victims of the Partition and yet been affected deep at

the psychological and social levels. He makes it clear that many people played a part in this chaos and everyone was equally worthy of blame, all the while integrating examples of the sheer moral confusion which arises from trying to make sense of an event as momentous as the Partition. The broader implications of the novel are also emphasized:

Khushwant Singh best illustrates the tragedy of Partition and indirectly suggests the short-sightedness of Indian leadership who failed to foresee the consequences of division and to handle the situation ever after Churchill's forecast of blood-bath. Communal discord was not a future of Indian rural scene but it was engineered first by the British Government under the policy of divide and rule and then by the nationalist leaders, with attitude tinge, though unintentionally.

Khushwant Singh believes in the stark and naked realism of life unlike the photographic and artistic reality portrayed by R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. He comes closer to the French socialist realists like Balzac. Like the socialist realists, Khushwant Singh's approach is positive—not negative—in as much as he views the socialist order as an independent entity. Unlike a critical realist, his approach is definitely concrete, since he looks at the society from the inside, not from the outside. Like Balzac's characters, his Juggat Singh is a man endowed with formidable will power and individuality. The theme of the novel with all its emphasis on Partition does not become a political propaganda like Raja Rao's **Kanthapura**. If **Kanthapura** was the microcosm of the national upsurge in the country in the twenties, Mano Majra became the microcosm of vivisected India.

Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** is one of the finest and realistic novels to emerge out of the trauma of Partition. It examines with clinical intensity the harsh facts of inhuman bestialities of life and shows how human love can transcend all man-made barriers and boundaries to confront and overcome such catastrophies. If Partition brings out the brutality, inhumanity and madness of mankind, it also brings to light the acts of kindness and decency, courage and selflessness. There are many instances in the novel which are free from racial and religious prejudices. The **Train to Pakistan** and the train from Pakistan become the symbols of man's inhumanity to man, man preying upon man. But the Mano Majrans display compassion and love, kindness and fellow feeling towards the Muslims of their India's freedom is celebrated with mass murder and bestiality.

Partition has brought about utter chaos and confusion, the savagemassacres known on the history of India. In fact, the harrowing and spine-chilling events had shaken the faith of the people in the innate nobility of human beings. "Khushwant Singh's **Train to Pakistan** deserves a high position in Indo-Anglican literature. ...The author's objectivity in the treatment of theme and event, his skill and insight in the delineation of character, and his vision of humanity—the power and glory, the weakness and the defeat—all align him with the finest novelists in the English Language".

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