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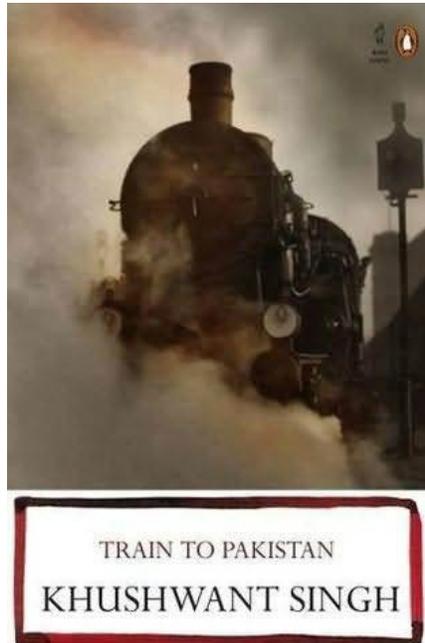
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## Historical Elements in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

Prabha Parmar, M.A., Ph.D. (English)



### Khushwant Singh and His Works

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Khushwant Singh wrote many books which include the novels *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, *Delhi*, *The Company of Women*, *Burial at Sea*, *The Portrait of A Lady*, *Paradise*, *Train to Pakistan*; the classic two- volume *A History of the Sikhs*; and a number of translations and non-fiction books on Sikh religion and culture. He also wrote his autobiography, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, which was published in 2002.

### ***Train to Pakistan***

Among Khuswant Singh's novels, *Train to Pakistan* has a special place. The novel narrates one of the most brutal episodes in the world's history, in which a million men, women and children were killed and ten million were displaced from their homes and deprived of their belongings. The novel is a narrative of the tragic events that followed the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan. This novel contains many themes like love, history, politics, shame, religion and patriotism. But the main and important theme of this novel is history and the lessons that one derive from historic tragedies.

### **History and Creative Writers**

Writers in the world are affected by historical forces. About the effects of history in English literature Walter Allen remarks:

“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 opinion.....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”. 3

### **A Historical Novelist**

Khushwant Singh is a great historical novelist. He was born in Pakistan and living in India, so he was deeply concerned with the history and culture of both the countries. About the history of historical novels, it is said – “The historical novel has always had its practitioners beginning with Mirza Moorad Beg, who's *Lalan the Beragan* or *The Battle of Panipat* appeared in 1884.” 4

### **The Beginning and Summing Up**

Khushwant Singh starts his novel *Train to Pakistan* by describing the summer of 1947 (the year when India got independence) – “The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier.”<sup>5</sup> These lines make clear one thing that the time during the partition was too much

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difficult for all Indians. Partition really affected the mind of Khushwant Singh, who was over thirty years old at the time. He wrote *Train to Pakistan* and got it published in 1956, just nine years after the devastating happenings of the Partition. Singh seems to sum up his novel through these lines – “The fact is, both sides killed, both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured and both raped.” 6

### **The Story**

The story of the novel revolves around a fictional village located along the borders of India and Pakistan, named by Singh as Mano Majra. (In Punjab in India, there is a place named Manimajra near Chandigarh, the Capital of Punjab and Haryana).

Khushwant Singh presents a vivid description of how the village was like. At the time of the Partition, blood and violence were everywhere. But this little village, which was on the bank of Sutlej River, was totally far away from hate, murder and mayhem.

### **The Railway Station in Mano Majra**

However, there was a random act of violence for money. Trader Ram Lal was killed by a dacoit, Malli, from a neighboring village. Khushwant Singh describes a railway station in Mano Majra. For many villagers, the supply trains were part of the clockwork of daily life. Singh narrates the real situation after the independence of India. He describes the agony, pain, suffering and fear of the people of India while the partition was in progress.

### **Magistrate Hukum Chand and Local Officials**

Through his character, Magistrate Hukum Chand, Khushwant describes the real situation –

... the Sikhs retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses. They wrote on the engine, ‘Gift to Pakistan’.”<sup>7</sup> But, on the other hand, Khushwant also reveals the bond of love among the Muslims and Sikhs in Mano Majra in the words of another official, Sub-inspector of Police: – “They answer that the Muslims are their brothers. I am sure they are getting money from them. 8

These are the words of Sub-inspector of Mano Majra. Sub-inspector was doubtful because at that time every Muslim and Sikh/Hindu was enemy to each other.

### **Villagers were not Aware of the Mayhem Committed in Other Places**

Khushwant Singh also shows that the villagers were unaware of what was going on because they did not have any means to access mass media and other means of communication. “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 about Jinnah”. 9

Singh’s statement also reveals that many had no knowledge of Md. Ali Jinnah and Gandhi, who played major roles in obtaining the independence of India and Pakistan.

The lusty nature of the magistrate Hukum Chand also is pointed out.

### **Impact of Persons from Places Far Beyond Mano Majra**

Singh does not restrict himself to Mano Majra but goes beyond to describe the over-populated major cities of India, Bombay, through his character Iqbal Singh, a social reformer, who is a visiting Communist in disguise and who wants to mobilize support for the Socialist Party of India – “Iqbal thought of his first reaction on reaching Bombay. Milling crowds – millions of them – on the quayside, in the streets, on railway platforms; even at night the pavements were full of people”. 10

Some villagers came to Iqbal Singh and he told them that independence is good for all of them. But they would not agree with him; they wanted to know why the English people left the country. Iqbal gave them the meaning of freedom. He explained – “They left because they have to. We had hundreds of thousands of young men trained to fight in the war.....They did not shoot any of the Indians who joined the Indian National army set up by Japanese, because they thought the whole country would turn against them”. 11 But villagers argued – “‘No’, the Muslim said. ‘Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians- or the Pakistanis’”. 12

These words were very commonly used by the poor and the needy in villages and small towns in India at that time. Many novels in regional languages of India that were published immediately after the Independence carry such notions. These lines from *Train to Pakistan* force us compare the past with the present in both the countries.

Juggut Singh was arrested as a suspect who might have killed the trader. He is portrayed as local *badmaash* (rowdy, thief, cheat) of the village. Juggut Singh loves Nooran, the only daughter of half-blind mulla of the village.

Jugga and Iqbal were arrested. Jugga was tortured and he gave information about Malli and his companions. They were also arrested. Iqbal told the police – “I am not a villager. I come from Delhi. I was sent to organize peasants, but the government does not like the people to be organized.”13 Iqbal asked them for the reason why they arrested him. But Sub-inspector told him that they hadn’t framed any charge against him. They only arrested him on suspicion. Although Iqbal’s full name was Iqbal Singh, the sub-inspector called him as Iqbal Mohammed or Mohammed Iqbal and blamed him as a Muslim – “‘you are a Muslim. You go to Pakistan’ ...

‘That is a bloody lie’, exploded Iqbal. ‘What is more, you know it is a bloody lie. You just want to cover up your stupidity by trumping up a false case.’<sup>14</sup> But the sub-inspector was far less concerned about this murder than preventing angry Hindu and Sikh refugees and locals from killing Muslims trying to flee to Pakistan. So the sub-inspector arrested them under a false charge and he let Malli and his gang go free and put them in charge of the village Mano Majra, where they committed the murder,

### **Ghost Train**

Ghost Train is an important part of the novel. Ghost train means the train which came from Pakistan full of the dead-bodies of Hindus and Sikhs – “One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the days of peace. No one sat on the roof. No one clung between the bogies. No one was balanced on the footboards. But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Three Major Characters**

Khushwant Singh narrates the story of Partition through three major characters – Hukum Chand, Jugga and Iqbal Singh, who react to communal violence with a distinct attitude of resignation and self-preservation.

The people of Mano Majra wanted to defend their neighbors but after a long debate between Hindus/Sikhs and Muslims, the Muslims boarded a train to Pakistan because both groups knew they would not be able to save them from the vengeance of the Hindu/ Sikh refugees. The focus of the author now turns to the truth of that time during which some people were forced to involve themselves in this violence.

All of us have heard the stories of the horror of Partition. But after reading this novel, we are overwhelmed with the feeling of anger. People who did not want to be involved were forced to involve themselves. In the novel Khushwant Singh describes the same situation by narrating the episode of the group with a leader, who was only a boy (a Sikh Boy). He entered the Gurdwara and asked people, who were there – “‘What sort of Sikhs are you?’ asked the boy, glowering menacingly. He elaborated his question: ‘Potent or Impotent?’... ‘Do you know how many trainloads of dead Sikhs and Hindus have come over? Do you know of the massacres in Rawalpindi and Multan, Gujranwala and Sheikhupura? What are you doing about it?’”<sup>16</sup>

When the innocent Sikh villagers asked him what could they do? He told them to kill the Muslims. But someone replied that, for punishing the killers, police and government were there. He told them that they (government and police) would do nothing. He suggested to the villagers – “For each Hindu or Sikh they kill, kill two Mussulmans. For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. For each home they loot, loot two. For each trainload of dead they send over, send

two across. For each road convoy that is attacked, attack two. That will stop the killing on the other side.”<sup>17</sup> This was the thinking of the people at the time of Partition and that’s why they started to kill each other.

The influence of that Sikh young leader was too deep that the Mano-Majra’s Sikhs began thinking about the Muslims -“Never trust a Mussulman, they said. The last Guru had warned them that Muslims had no loyalties. He was right. All through the Muslim period of Indian history, sons had imprisoned or killed their own fathers and brothers had blinded brothers to get the throne. And what had they done to the Sikhs?”<sup>18</sup>

Through these lines the villagers were forced to recall the medieval history of India, in which several Muslim kings killed their own real relatives for the throne and kingdom. In these lines they were also forced to recall the murder of Sikh Guru and his family by a Muslim king. After that, the villagers decided to kill all the passengers of the train which was going to Pakistan.

When Hukum Chand hears about this plan he calls the sub-inspector and orders him-“Do you really believe an educated Muslim would dare to come to these parts in times like these? Do you think any party would be so foolish as to send a Muslim to preach peace to Sikh peasants’ thirsting for Muslim blood, Inspector Sahib? Where is your imagination?”<sup>19</sup> He orders the release of Iqbal and Jugga in the hope that one of them may be able to stop the impending massacre.

Iqbal wants to do something to prove himself but when he reaches the Gurudwara, people ask him- “You are Sikh, Iqbal Singhji?” Inquired one of the man ... ‘Was it in England you cut your hair?’ asked the same person.”<sup>20</sup> Iqbal considers trying to implore his fellow Sikhs but decides against it because they may strip him of his clothes, and think he is a Muslim, and then he would simply die on the tracks like any actual Muslim, having made no impact, no push towards communism. Instead, he drinks himself to sleep.

Khushwant Singh here draws a very bleak picture of the members of educated classes in India, who go to great lengths to preach socialism and communism, but, it is alleged, they may be interested only in preserving their own interests.

Jugga finds out that his Muslim lover and the mother of his would be child (although he doesn’t know) is on the train. He becomes sad and wants to do something. Manu Majra’s Sikhs / Muslims draw a rope above the train that will decapitate all its rooftop passengers, and the villagers wait in the bushes to slaughter the rest of the passengers when the train stops to find out what has happened.

### **Sundari and Her Husband**

Meanwhile Khushwant Singh adds another episode with Sundari and her husband. Sundari was the daughter of Hukum Chand's Orderly. She had been just married to Mansa Ram. Their marriage is not yet consummated. Both of them were in a bus. Suddenly the bus stopped. There were boulders placed across the road. Singh describes the scene:

Sikhs were just hacked to death. The clean-shaven were stripped. Those that were circumcised were forgiven. Those that were not, were circumcised. Not just the foreskin: the whole thing was cut off. She who had not really had a good look at Mansa Ram was shown her husband completely naked. They held him by the arms and legs and one man cut off his penis and gave it to her. The mob made love to her. She did not have to take off any of her bangles. They were all smashed as she lay in the road, being taken by one man and another and another.

Singh shows horrors of crime committed at that time. Although this description is written with imagination, yet these types of incidents took place in the history of India after 15th August 1947.

Jugga feels love toward all his fellow villagers, who accused him of killing Ram Lala. He climbs the rope and falls to his death, saving the train to Pakistan and his lover also.

## Conclusion

*Train to Pakistan* is not only the story of love between Jugga and Nooran but it is also a story that depicts the brutalities suffered by the people, generated as a result of Partition. The novel brings out the fact how well-meaning people can be manipulated to act unjustly by injecting hatred and fear into their hearts. There is a contrast between Jugga and Iqbal Singh. Both want to help avoid tragedy, but education was no guarantee that the educated would really plunge themselves in risky rescue efforts. The local officials are realistically portrayed. What is said of the local officials at the time of the Partition may be true even today.

Although grounded in real history, in some sense the tragedy of Partition is only a front for the presentation of an eternal story of human affairs. What happened and what was avoided in the tiny border village of Mano Mijra truly could happen anywhere in the world. In that sense, Khushwant's *Train to Pakistan* is not only a classic, but it is a work of epic proportions.

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March 16, 2011 by Brandy Vencel. [dropcap]Y[/dropcap]esterdayâ€™s post elicited a comment that I want to address here in a separate post, because it tore at my heart so much, and because my answer is so lengthy. Here it is! Step four might be: Teach them something interesting. Do you have a hobby? Can you sew? Thank you, Brandy. I need to let this soak in deep! Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Reply Kristen @ Dem Golden Apples March 17, 2011 at 2:02 am. This is wonderful, Brandy! 2011. An Overview of Saudi EFL Learners' Self-assessment of Vocabulary Learning Strategies. R Guduru. Language in India 14 (5), 2014. 4. 2014. Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow Volume 11: 9 September 2011. R Guduru, PDELT Scholar. The system can't perform the operation now. The ones marked \* may be different from the article in the profile. Add co-authorsCo-authors. Upload PDF. M Maniam. Language in India 11 (12), 2011. 6. 2011. The Influence of Netspeak on Students' Writing. SR Thangaraj, M Maniam. Journal of Education and Learning 9 (1), 45-52, 2015. 5. 2015. Mother Tongue Syntactical Influence in a ESL Class. Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow Volume 19: 6 June 2019 ISSN â€¦, 2019. 2019. Learning and Transfer Strategies in the Paradigm of Second Language Context.