



Depiction of Post-Partition Violence in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract— After the end of World War II, the British colonial grip loosened, and many independent countries emerged. In August 1947, two countries got their independence: India and Pakistan, which were created on the basis of the religious majority in each part. The following days saw one of the biggest migrations of human history as Many Muslims from India tried to migrate to newborn Pakistan and vice versa. The whole subcontinent fell under fire, and violence erupted in many places. Stories of murder, rape, beating, forced conversion, kidnapping, and property grabbing emerged in various corners, especially in the frontier zones. As a survivor of partition ensued violence, Khushwant Singh describes the mayhem he witnessed, in a fictional term in his novel *Train to Pakistan*. He modelled *Mano Majra*, a small peaceful village in the Punjab frontier, as a miniature of the society and showed how the poisonous communal hatred had engulfed the whole place, where people were living in peaceful harmony for thousands of years, and made it a fireball. This paper is going to explore Singh's picturization of Violence and atrocities in post-partition India through the fictional village *Mano Majra*.

Keywords— Violence, Migration, Women, Murder, Rape, Atrocity

INTRODUCTION

Train to Pakistan is a novel by Khushwant Singh, published in 1956, focusing on the partition experience. It is one of the earliest works on the Indian partition and is hailed in many corners as one of the best fictional works on this subject. The story is focused on a fictional village named *Mano Majra*, a representative of thousands of quiet villages in India. In the stroke of a few days, the village, with a long shared communal history of hundreds of years, finds itself located on the border of newly created India and Pakistan. The entire population becomes polarised on religious lines. The brotherly comradeship between the villagers is gone, and they are ready to eradicate the "other" group. It is a fictional case story of the horror and divides inflicted on the general people because of a bad cut. The paper is going to explore how the novel *Train to Pakistan*, as a fictional narrative, depicts the widespread violence that consumed the entire subcontinent in the post-partition days.

Autobiographical Elements:

Khushwant Singh himself had the experience of narrowly escaping getting murdered at Taxila while travelling to Lahore from Abbottabad right before the partition declaration. This event is vividly described in Khushwant Singh's autobiography *Truth, Love & A Little Malice: An Autobiography*. The author's own first-hand knowledge and experience influenced the novel's proceedings. He said,

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 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. (Cited in Patole 2)

Srinivasa Iyengar comments about the *Train to Pakistan*: "It could not have been an easy novel to write. The events, so recent, so terrible in their utter savagery and meaninglessness, must have defied assimilation in terms of art" (502). Though the violent events do not happen on stage, readers are informed of the events or can see the aftermath through the pages of the novel. Singh's picturization is vivid and strikes the readers to the very core about the horrific events that took place during post-partition day's mayhem. Khushwant Singh, who had already worked as a Lawyer at Lahore court, Information and Mass Communication Officer in the Indian Foreign Service and in UNESCO, and also as a Journalist and Editor in Newspapers, combined his own first-hand experience and journalistic insights with the event that took place during that period in fiction to evoke piety among the readers:

There was a man holding his intestines, with an expression in his eyes which said: 'Look what I have got!' There were women and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror, their mouths still open as if their shrieks had just then become voiceless. Some of them did not have a scratch on their bodies. There were bodies crammed against the far end wall of the compartment, looking in terror at the empty windows through which must have come shots, spears and spikes. There were lavatories jammed with corpses of young men who had muscled their way to comparative safety. And all the nauseating smell of putrefying flesh, faeces and urine. (Singh 85)

Graphic Picturization in *Train to Pakistan*:

The powerful groups often adopt violence against minorities and the less powerful to spread terror. Violence is often used as a weapon in a cool and calculative manner to enforce control over lands and to gain monetary benefits. Life in Mano Majra has changed with the appearance of the policemen in the village who demanded wood and kerosene oil for a fair price. The officers refuse to answer the questions from the villagers, and villagers' curious waiting is not served until-

The northern horizon, which had turned a bluish-grey, showed orange again. The orange turned into copper and then into a luminous russet. Red tongues of flame leapt into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then of

wood. And then— a faint acrid smell of searing flesh. (Singh 84)

The novel describes several massacres happening in different places, which became day-to-day incidents during those days. The huge scale of the atrocities makes Hukum Chand express his horror: "Harey Ram, Harey Ram. Fifteen hundred innocent people! What else is a Kalyug?" (96-97). The second group of refugees brought their stories of sufferings with them. All of them were witnesses of murders and rape in Pakistan, and the trainload of Sikh dead bodies put the minority Muslims of the village in an uneasy position.

Sikh refugees had told of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than falling into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered. Now a train load of Sikhs massacred by Muslims had been cremated in Mano Majra. Hindus and Sikhs were fleeing from their homes in Pakistan and having to find shelter in Mano Majra. (121)

The description by Khushwant Singh is never one-sided. He portrays the emotion and insecurity of the Muslims as well. They are informed about the massacres of Muslims in "Patiala, Ambala and Kapurtala" (120), which has created an air of uncertainty even in Mano Majra:

They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the marketplace. 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 Quran being torn up by infidels. (120)

Harish Raizada is apt about the dramatic picturization of the novel as, "Khuswant Singh's treatment of brutal atrocities committed on either side of the border is characterized by artistic objectivity. He exaggerates nothing, he leaves nothing" (162). The violent picture of mutilated dead bodies appears over and over again to remind the readers of the horror that took place during that ill-fated time. For example, the graphic description of dead bodies floating in the river pictured in *Train to Pakistan* is as follows:

Some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, and many women's breasts were slashed. They floated down the sunlit river, bobbing up and down. Overhead hung the kites and vultures. (Singh 143-144)

The second train has arrived full of dead bodies,

and the villagers have been expecting to see the police come to their houses for oil and wood for cremation purposes. But, instead of that, "a bulldozer arrived from somewhere", suggesting that these dead people were Muslims (145).

Violence against women:

Violence against women is often done to break the spirit and self-esteem of the opponents during a war. It is also a vehicle to stress the opponent group's inability and weakness as they have been unable to resist the crime. War babies are often neglected in society as they are viewed as a symbol of shame for their mothers and the community. Susan Brownmiller writes about the inevitability of rape during the war as a means of imposing dominance "Rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims" (32).

Urvashi Butalia gives a historical account of ninety Sikh women in the village of Thola Khalsa, belonging to Rawalpindi district, who committed suicide by jumping into a well; and another example of 26 women getting killed by family members or the leader of the community to protect the honour of their community by evading forced conversion, rape or marriage (14). These incidents were not very rare in the border villages at that time. An official estimate of 25000-29000 Sikh and Hindu women and another 12000-19000 Muslim women were subject to brutal torture, rape, forced marriage, conversion, and abduction; though the local sources claimed the numbers were a few times higher (14).

Commissions were made to return the women who were abducted or forcefully converted in 1951. The tragedy was that these Commissions didn't give women any chance to have their own say and returned the recovered women to their previous homeland. In the space of three years, many of these women made a new home on the other side of the border. Many already had a husband and children and were unwilling to move. There were incidents that violated women were not accepted by their own families. Still, for the sake of saving face value, the very states which failed to save them from the disaster made them return without considering their opinion (Butalia 18).

Historian William Golant said, "Rumours and atrocity stories spread through the country...Violence between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs brought the province near to civil war... As the time for the departure of the British authorities drew near, incidents of violent crime were daily events in the larger cities while in the countryside, such displays of communal war were obscured by their remoteness" (250-251). Women are regarded as second-class citizens in a patriarchal colonial society where

their heroism and valour are recognised only through their self-sacrifice and suicide in the face of dishonour. This view is voiced in Hukum Chand: "Our Hindu women are so pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them" (Singh 21). Thus, women's honour is only recognised through their bodies rather than their other attributes. Dishonouring women was a common tactic during the hollow partition days, which was seen as the symbolic shaming of the whole community.

Influences behind Atrocities:

The role of many field-level administrators was questionable during those days. They gave information and logistic support to the criminals or remained silent when the violence was in line with their communal interests. The inspector in the book says, "I believe our RSS boys beat up Muslim gangs in all cities. The Sikhs are not doing their share. They have lost their manliness. They just talk big. Here we are on the border with Muslims living in the Sikh villages as if nothing has happened" (19-20).

The gap between the policymakers and policy implementers is another cause of the disaster. Most of the political protagonists during the partition process were from an aristocratic background with European education. Nehru's secular version of the state was hard to comprehend for the local leaders in the remote areas who became blind for revenge. Some were motivated by greed to grasp the properties that the minorities were leaving behind. In the early chaotic days of India and Pakistan, the states could not fully manifest their ideologies and command in the border areas. People mostly heard the local politicians, troublemakers, and fanatics to whom getting revenge was the prime motto, and the unarmed civilians were the soft targets.

...the distance and dissonance between elite, secular nationalist politics, and the alienated, resentful actions in the state apparatus entrusted to translate that secular national vision into reality-actors voicing popular communalist rhetoric as for whom local, ethnic, class and caste affiliations were often more compelling than the imagined nation. (Daiya)

In the TV show *Game of Thorne*, the character Littlefinger famously uttered the phrase "Chaos is a Ladder" ("Walk of Punishment" 48:38). The chaotic situation always benefits the opportunists, and in the novel, Mali and his gang are there to rise to the occasion. Violence was not only the aftermath of the partition but was also a tool to enforce the partition and force minorities to accept their permanent displacement. Not only the stories of murders but the gruesomeness of the massacre sent a message to the minorities that they must leave or accept

brutal punishment if they choose otherwise.

The Mano Majran folks are influenced by the outsiders in committing violence: “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 the dead, they send over, send two across. For each road convoy that is attacked, attack two” (149). The newcomers ask questions about their potency to emotionally blackmail them into violence. Though the Lambaradar, a war veteran, ensure that they would participate if war breaks out, but it is not enough for the blood-thirsty mobsters and they have felt empowered since they know that the law and order agencies would not interfere. They have succeeded in turning a peaceful and simple village into an angry mob who become ready to slaughter their kin. Though it was known that the train that will pass the next day would carry the Muslims from Mano Majra, but for the agitators, it does not bear any significance “I don’t know who the Muslims on the train are; I do not care. It is enough for me to know that they are Muslims. They will not cross this river alive” and most villagers are so persuaded by them that they become ready to butcher the same people with whom they lived for generations in a peaceful cohabitation and for whose departure they have “only recently wept” (151-152).

CONCLUSION

If independence was the prize, then the partition was the price that had to be paid by the regular people of the subcontinent. *Train to Pakistan* depicts the situation that the communities had to go through when a people is divided by a hastily drawn border which made a big chunk of people ‘other’ in a land they have been living for generations. In the end, Jugga has to ensure the safety of the people through his self-sacrifice. Thus the author finishes the novel with the message that within all-consuming mayhem, disaster can be avoided if people view situations in an altruistic way and act upon love and responsibility.

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