

BROTHERS IN ARMS IN 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN'

Monisha Saxena

Asstt. Prof., Deptt. of English
D.A.V. (P.G.) College, Dehra Dun.

Abstract

*Published in 1956, it is a historic novel by Khushwant Singh. It recounts India's partition in 1947. Instead of depicting this disaster only in political terms, Singh delves into the local affairs, providing a human diversion which brings to this event, a sense of reality, horror and believability. In a relatively short book, the reader gets to know a lot of characters in detail. Examination of varied groups of people increases the cultural and social understanding of that time and place. It also shows that the blame could not be placed on any one group. All were responsible. " Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured" (Train **To Pakistan** 1). Mano Majra, the fictional village on the Indo-Pak border in which the story takes place, is predominantly Muslim and Sikh. Singh shows how they lived in a bubble, surrounded by mob of Muslims who hated Sikhs and vice-versa. In the village, all of them had lived together peacefully. The villagers were in the dark about happenings of larger scope beyond the village outskirts.*

Keywords: *Khushwant, Muslims, fictional village.....*

BROTHERS IN ARMS IN 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN'

- Monisha Saxena

Train to Pakistan is a historical novel by Khushwant Singh, published in 1956. It recounts India's partition in 1947. Instead of depicting this disaster only in political terms, Singh delves into the local affairs, providing a human diversion which brings to this event, a sense of reality, horror and believability. In a relatively short book, the reader gets to know a lot of characters in detail. Examination of varied groups of people increases the cultural and social understanding of that time and place. It also shows that the blame could not be placed on any one group. All were responsible. " Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured" (*Train To Pakistan* 1). Mano Majra, the fictional village on the Indo-Pak border in which the story takes place, is predominantly Muslim and Sikh. Singh shows how they lived in a bubble, surrounded by mob of Muslims who hated Sikhs and vice-versa. In the village, all of them had lived together peacefully. The villagers were in the dark about happenings of larger scope beyond the village outskirts.

Upon learning that the government was planning to transport Muslims from Mano Majra to Pakistan the next day for safety purposes, one Muslim said, "What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived among Sikhs as brothers" (126) . After the Muslims leave for a refugee camp from where they were eventually to leave for Pakistan, a group of religious agitators came to Mano Majra and instilled in the local Sikhs, a hatred for Muslims. They convinced the local gang to commit mass murder as the Muslims left on their train to Pakistan. If

groups of people are examined on a closer level, a more detailed social structure emerges. Government officers were corrupt and manipulative. They could arrest anyone they chose for any reason, more often for their own benefit. They did just enough in terms of dealing with disputes so that nobody could say that they did not do anything. The law enforcement was completely at the whim of the local government. This meant that in practice, there was no law. Also, a few educated people trickled in and out of villages, trying to instill in people, democratic, communist or other western ideologies. The common people were confused by their unorthodoxy. When one such educated man was speaking to a villager about freedom, the rustic explained, “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” (48).

To better understand the situation surrounding the partition of India, Singh provides information about the religions involved. The book sheds light on the various religious practices of both Sikhs and Muslims. The daily lives of both communities is described, for instance, the practice of prayer of Muslims. “The mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the Morning Prayer. He has a quick wash, stands facing west towards Mecca and with his fingers in his ears, cries in long sonorous notes, Allah- o- Akbar” (4). The writer points out the practices of Sikhs as well. “The priest at the Sikh temple lies in bed till the mullah has called. Then he too gets up, draws a bucket of water from the well in the temple courtyard, pours it over himself, and intones his prayer in monotonous singsong to the sound of splashing water” (5). The novelist makes us understand human actions, pointing out that everyone was responsible for the 1947 fiasco. Singh makes a background moral commentary which bubbles up through the main characters in their thoughts and actions. Hukum Chand is the DM and one of the main characters in the story. He suffers from a moral setback as he has abused his power over the years. Hence, the writer prefers to cast him often with an unclean physical appearance which

synchronises with the overwhelming nature of his sins. He is frequently trying to wash himself of them, like Pontius Pilate, after Christ was condemned. His ethical issues are shown in his repeated encounters with two geckos, which represent Muslims and Hindus in conflict. When they start fighting, they fall right next to him and he panics. The guilt pangs of not helping even when he has enough power to do so, literally crush him.

“Hukum Chand felt as if he has touched the lizards and they had made his hands dirty. He rubbed his hands on the hem of his shirt . It was not the kind of dirt that could be wiped off or washed clean” (24). Alcoholism is another tool that Hukum uses to clean his conscience. He feels the burden of his wrong doings by day and is relieved of them at night when he is intoxicated. In this state, he feels totally justified in entering into a liaison with a teenage prostitute, who is around the same age as his late daughter. A victim of moral inertia, he realizes his bad actions but is unable to indulge in good ones. The two other main characters are given a lot of importance are Iqbal Singh and Juggut Singh. The former is well educated and an atheist. He has been a social worker in Britain and his views are politically inclined. Juggut is a typical villager with a towering physique and a muscular built. Being uneducated, he gives precedence to action over thought and has been arrested several times. Incidentally, both of them are imprisoned for a murder which they have not committed and placed in adjacent cells. When they both are released from jail, they learn that a gang was planning to attack the train carrying the Muslim passengers from their village to Pakistan. Each of these characters had the potential to save the train, though at the cost of their lives.

Juggut realizes that his beloved, Nooran, is also travelling on the same train. Acting on instinct, he springs into action and gives up his life for that cause. Iqbal is shown to be a man of thoughts and words only. He keeps on wondering whether he

should act or not. Like Hukum Chand, he too suffers from a moral lethargy which prevents him from acting at the right time. The writer tries to reveal the mixed creed of India. The rustics do less of talking while the intelligentsia is lacking in action. Intriguing questions of right versus wrong are posed to the reader off and on. The readers are compelled to ponder as to what one should do or might do to prevent a wrong doing and how worthwhile is an act of goodwill. The novel is also replete with several gruesome and spine chilling accounts of torture, rape and bloodshed to impress upon the readers, the necessity of knowing the bad and the ugly apart from streaks of the good, for that was what partition was all about. Khushwant does not drag politics into the book. The reason is that he wishes to showcase the individual and human element and offer a social understanding of the complicated web of affairs at this time.

According to Dilip Bobb in a review in The Times of India, the book is of seminal importance. The division of our country has been the bloodiest and the most traumatic in which, millions of refugees crossed over from both sides of the border while about a million were butchered in the wink of an eye of history. It was a horrific tragedy that violently moulded sane and ordinary people into uncivilized barbarians. Urvashi Butalia also contends that properties, cultures and families were destroyed, abandoned or divided. New national frontiers that were often contentious were drawn over older cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities.

Partition has been widely read and understood as a political holocaust perpetuated by the British. The country was split into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan. This development assumed frightening dimensions as social and religious sects rearranged themselves to clash with the rival community. The country became a scene of perfect, perhaps unprecedented moral chaos in which everyone played their part. In other words, every sect or group was to blame. Singh seeks to integrate this

entire confusion into his novel. Mano Majra is a composite of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh population – a village on the Pakistan border. The peaceful and harmonious co-existence of multi-religious groups is mercilessly destroyed by drawing the borderline between two nations. The centuries old cohabitation is consumed in the violence, frenzy and raging passions that follow independence. Singh gives vent to multiple voices in his work to afford distinct and varied perspectives on partition and co-existence. The characters Hukum, Iqbal and Juggut themselves project , three different sides of partition. Being a magistrate, Hukum depicts the perspective of a government official besides that of a Hindu. Juggut, a Sikh by religion, is a miscreant and finally acts for love's sake. Iqbal represents all three identities. His religion remains an enigma till the very end. His name is commonly shared by all three communities – the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs alike. Since his name serves as a shared symbol, it is used both to his advantage and disadvantage by the magistrate. Iqbal didn't have to " say what Iqbal he was. He could be a Muslim, Iqbal Muhammad, a Hindu, Iqbal Chand or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh" (1) .

The book shows the innate desire of Indians to co-exist peacefully with followers of different faiths . Meet Singh is presented as the peace loving caretaker of the Gurudwara. He claims that all were welcome to his religion. He says, "Here next door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah" (1). Amidst conflicting aims and stakes, Singh tries to capture the inherent integration of shared symbols and love that is India. He is able to make dialogue possible in this fictional village. Different characters, who voice social, religious and political differences, are actually, multiple perspectives to the same problem, each enjoying its unique status. His characters converse and confer yet, maintain their individual voice. This lends to their personalities a distinctness of its own. Singh does not allow his own viewpoint to overshadow that of his characters. Though the different religious groups worship God as a common divine and universal entity, each deity also

maintains its own identity. The united chant of 'Ya Allah Wah Guru' by the multi-religious groups expresses their desire to invoke a common divine entity. The possibilities and the potential of dialogue are inherent within this chant which in turn, becomes a symbol of communication. The call to prayer of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs also helps to build a bridge connecting these faiths to one another. The close affinity between the gurudwara and mosque are testimony to the deep spirit of co-existence that has marked India since centuries.

Rather than triggering differences, these places of worship have enabled separate communities to engage in a discourse and to exist on a common plane of humanity. However, 1947 is a disheveling factor. These religious symbols now perpetuate disharmony, separatism, fanaticism and disintegration. The reason is that the common man loses his sanity and faith which had kept him in balance for such a long time. The forces of partition are too overwhelming and take all the sanity of peace loving citizens in their stride. The same places of worship which afforded spiritual sustenance to the devout at one time, now deteriorate into execution houses for other communities. This hatred is further fuelled by outsiders who play crucial roles in inciting villagers against fellow-men. The religious relics of the other sect, which till now were just seen as different, now become malicious symbols beyond tolerance. Amidst such raging antagonism, art is the only ray of hope. Hukum Chand's involvement with a Muslim singer, introduces him to the humane side of the issue. He realizes that love and art were beyond the periphery of communal hatred. Haseena makes a categorical remark, "Singers are neither Hindu nor Muslim" (1) ie., they defy all borders.

The novel also manifests how a line dividing two nations, shatters completely the shared feeling of existence. It is also an outcry of the people who have lived together for ages, to co-exist once again outside the confines of all borders. By and

large, the people do not wish to kill in the name of religion or partition. The culprits, who have brought developments and relations to a boil, were the real unpardonable offenders and ought to be prosecuted. Religious demographics did not effect the partition. Religious fanaticism did. Instead of synthesis and fusion, religion was distorted to appear as a means of strife and nurture differences. Faith lay shorn of all ethical values. Forces of religious fanaticism rode rough shod over the core quality of peace inherent in religion. Dogma prevailed and secularism was routed. Singh shows the connectors among the rioting groups do prevail at times like, the singers, the call for prayer and same names within different communities. Khushwant's voice represents all others in the novel while maintaining its separate identity and plea for dialogue. Whereas a United India promoted the feeling of goodwill, security and community living, politics led to division – of land, hearts, loyalties, resources and above all, an integrated way of living. Neighbours spilled the blood of long-standing allies and friends of other communities. The different currents in the novel help the writer to project that “each ideology can hold more salience in particular circumstances” (2).

In conclusion, it can be said that the religious similarities and differences in India have contributed to an all – inclusiveness, without giving predominance to anyone. Hence, the heterogeneous village, Mano Majra aptly represents the great tradition that had once been - called India. Juggat's act of saving hundreds of Muslims on the bridge in order to save his beloved Nooran, a Muslim, shows Singh's attempt to capture the presence of dialogue in hybrid love. This fact is further strengthened by the truth that she is carrying his child. While cutting the rope across the bridge, Juggat chants a mantra which is unknown. This act of his, saves hundreds of lives which otherwise would have been sacrificed to the sabotage. Another character who is impelled by the power of love is Hukum Chand. He masterminds this plan to save human lives and of course, the Muslim prostitute, his object of love. These incidents

sufficiently cover the underlying spirit of interaction and integration which could never be throttled completely even by a politically engendered mass homicide called Partition.

Works Cited:

Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1988. Print.

Bobb, Dilip. Book Review. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, India Today.

Hodson, H.V. *The Great Divide : Britain, India and Pakistan*. London: Hutchinson, 1969. Print.

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1998. Print.

Singh, Armik. Ed., *The Partition in Retrospect*. New Delhi: Anamika, 2000. Print.

Higher Education &
Research Society