



**“SOCIAL AND MORAL VISION” AS PROJECTED IN
KHUSHWANT SINGH’S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN: A BRIEF
ANALYSIS**

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Abstract:

This is an attempt to project Khushwant Singh as a prolific writer with an acute power of observation to witness the genocide of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims during the partition days and give vent to expression in his writings and throws light on his far-ranging achievements which bear ample evidence to his versatility which is out and out permeated by the Punjabi social milieu. It examines rather neatly how the main theme of Khushwant Singh’s fiction revolves round the nature of man and the enigma of human destiny with a focus on the social and moral issues with particular reference to his novel Train to Pakistan.

A man of wide reading and experience, Khushwant Singh is said to have witnessed the genocide of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims during Partition days. One of the most prominent journalists of the modern era, he had watched the whole gamut very closely. Born in 1915 of Sir Shobha Singh, famous builder of Lutyens, Delhi in Haldi in Punjab, he got his early education at Modern School, New Delhi and he graduated from Government College, Lahore and got LLB Degree from King’s College, Inner Temple in 1938. Practicing Law at the Lahore High Court from 1939 to 1947, he edited Yejna, a Government of India Publication from 1956 to 1958 and worked as a visiting Lecturer at the Oxford University, London, University of Rochester, New York, Princeton University, New Jersey and Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, University of Hanoi, Honolulu, After a long teaching stint, he edited the reputed Illustrated Weekly of India, Bombay from 1969 to 1978 and National Herald from 1980 to 1983. Finally, he became Member of Parliament and led the delegation to Manila Writers Conference in 1965.

Khushwant Singh is a prolific writer who has to his credit publication of many such famous books as The History of the Sikhs, Truth, Love and Little Malice, Black Jasmine. The Voice of God, Karma, The Mark of Vishnu Mr.Kanjoo and the Great Miracle, The Riot etc., As a spicy and provocative journalist and a gripping novelist, Khushwant Singh is an Indian English writer of no mean talent but happens to be a controversial figure railing at Indian English literature. In fact, his writing career started with the publication of his Collection of short stories The Mark of Vishnu and other stories in 1950. Published by the Saturn Press, London, this work elicited good reviews from the British and the Indian Press alike. Though he was then a Press Attache at the Indian High Commission in London, his mind “was set on having a go at the profession of writing” (Singh 185). His stories began to appear in British, Canadian and American Magazines. Encouraged by the success of his stories, he published his first novel Mano Majra better known by its alternate title Train to Pakistan. It was hailed by discerning critics as a minor classic and won him the ‘Grove Press Award’.

Khushwant Singh occupies a significant place among Indo-Anglian writers. His achievements are far-ranging and they bear ample evidence to his versatility. His creative art, no doubt, stems from a search for identity and his art is deeply rooted in the soil, deriving vitality from the vigorous energy that characterizes a Punjabi. As his art and mind are out and out permeated by a genuine Punjabi consciousness, unlike the work of some other Indo-Anglian writers, his writing starts at the grassroots of the Punjabi social milieu. There are three major influences on Khushwant Singh, the man and the writer, the Punjab countryside, the urban Delhi and the larger city of London. He writes in reminiscing mood: “My roots are in the dunghill of a tiny Indian village” (Singh 212). He further adds: “I grew up in the Indo-Anglian atmosphere of New Delhi” (P212). An Awareness of Punjabi literature is as important as that of Indo-Anglian fiction for a deeper assessment of Khushwant Singh’s achievement. ‘Violence’ and ‘Sex’, says Balwant Gargi, “are the most important characteristics of modern Punjabi literature” (P3). The artist’s preoccupation with the body and the blood is one of the most significant aspects of Punjabi literature and this has in turn influenced khushwant Singh as a writer of fiction.

Khushwant Singh’s fiction reveals that he is a writer who has been deeply affected by the catastrophe of partition. The main theme of khuswant Singh’s fiction revolves round the nature of man and the enigma of human destiny. As the violence that came in the wake of partition is the very opposite of a concept of moral order, Khushwant Singh, the sensitive artist is deeply concerned with important moral issues. The harrowing incidents of 1947 had shaken the faith of all the sensitive and thinking people of India in the intrinsic nobility of man, taught by its sages and saints of yore and by Mahatma Gandhi.

Khushwant Singh made his debut as a writer more by accident than by choice. He would have perhaps continued his legal profession or diplomatic assignment in the Indian Foreign Service. But the compulsory inner urge he felt as “an angry middle aged man” (Dhawan 160) made him a writer, as he was shocked by the inhuman bestial horrors that took place during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in August 1947. His faith in man was shaken and he was thoroughly disillusioned by the contemporary situation. Khushwant Singh’s short stories bear testimony to his wit, irony, knowledge of people and the very predicament of man. The pretentiousness, hypocrisy and deception that underlie the electioneering campaigns and the vote-catching devices are effectively brought out by Khushwant Singh with telling irony in *The voice of God* which is marked for its verbal irony and the irony of situation, while *Karma* depicts the slavish psychology of educated Indians in British India. As a skilled craftsman in unmasking man’s absurdities and holding him up to ridicule, Khushwant Singh wrote *The Butterfly* which beautifully demonstrates the process of unmasking a character in sharply contrasted situations. The unmaking of a social type is achieved with grater skill in another story, *The Insurance Agent*. In *Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle*, Singh’s art of satirical portrayal is seen at its best and the use of words “Great Miracle” is packed with unrelenting satire. In analyzing stories with sociological and psychological motivations, critics point out how Khushwant Singh has brought in problems relating to means and ends. *The Great Difference* and *The Riot* may be cited as examples for sociological overtones. *The Fawn* is another touching story of animal life which incidentally brings out the double-facedness of man.

Recognition of Khushwant Singh as a novelist and artist came a bit late but he has gained in Indo-Anglian literature a secure and abiding place. The Award of the Grove Press in 1956 for his novel *Train to Pakistan* has made him internationally known. In its setting, characterization and symbolism, *Train to Pakistan* demonstrates Khushwant Singh’s vision of history. Singh has used the context of the partition for evolving such a vision. Singh employs a realistic, down-to-earth idiom, transposed from Punjabi to English. The sex, age, education, culture and social position of the individual characters mould his expressions. In *Train to Pakistan*, the dialogue between Hukum Chand and the group of dancers and singers, is typically Indian. Singh specializes in the use of Indianisms which faithfully depict the gestures, attitudes and the vernacular of Punjabi villagers. He has observed India both as an outsider and insider. His knowledge of life in the West has brought about a delicate poise between his sense of deep involvement with life in India and his scrupulous objectivity in assessing its achievement. In a brief but notable reference to Singh, Anthony Burgess says, “The most notable writer from the Punjab is undoubtedly the Sikh Khushwant Singh. We have here a formidable novelist who writes too title” (P20)

The fundamental quality of Singh’s art is ‘Comic Spirit’ which animates his fictional world in toto. For him, ‘comedy’ is a social corrective and it has a psychologically curative effect. In Singh’s fiction, the comic is linked with social and moral criticism. His interests are more sociological resulting in the portrayal of all his major characters as ‘social beings’ in the true sense of the word. As a humanist, Singh realizes and acknowledges the principle that man will supersede all monsters and establish the supremacy of the moral law. In moments of crisis, the angelic in man will triumph over the beastly element in him. This is indeed the moral triumph of man so forcefully demonstrated in *Train to Pakistan*. His criticisms and comments on life and personalities aim at reaching the humanistic ideal. The novelist is harmoniously combined with the social critic in his creative self. As a creative writer, Singh is an embodiment of the synthesis of the realist and the humanist – which is indeed the essence of his achievement.

Freedom did not come to India as Gandhi, Nehru and others had wished. The country was torn asunder and left bleeding for sometime. It was perhaps the darkest period in the history of Modern India. History had not witnessed such hatred and bigotry among men who had been living like brothers for centuries. The only parallel is the migration of the Israelites. Leonard Mosley in his *Last Days of British Raj* gives a picture of the partition riots as:

“In the nine months between August 1946 and the spring of the following year, between fourteen and sixteen million Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were forced to leave their homes and flee to safety from blood-crazed mobs. In that same period over 6,00,000 of them were killed. But no, not just killed. If they were female children, they were raped and then their breasts were chopped off. And if they were pregnant, they were disemboweled” (P9)

Those were days when trains were arriving in Lahore station packed with passengers scribbled, on the sides of the carriage: ‘A present from India’. The Muslims reacted with more brutality by sending back trainloads of butchered Sikhs and Hindus with the legend: ‘A present from Pakistan’. It is but natural that these ghastly developments find expression in our literature and in fact, the evil of partition is one of the predominant themes in Indo-Anglian novels like Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*, Attia Hussain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges*, Raj Gill’s *The Rape* and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*, out of which *Train to Pakistan* is Singh’s supreme achievement which is one of the most realistic novels of Post world war Indo-Anglian fiction. The predominant quality of this novel is its stark realism, its absolute fidelity to the truth of life, its trenchant exposition of one of the most moving and tragic events of contemporary Indian history, the Partition. The individual in Singh’s fictional world is silhouetted against this vast, panoramic

background, the great human catastrophe of the partition of India and the ghastly and inhuman events which followed it.

In *Train to Pakistan*, the 'train' is a symbol of movement and the use of the word 'train' has other contextual associations also. The train signifies groups or multitudes of people who are heading for various destinations. On the eve of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, millions of people from either side of the dividing boundary were on the way seeking refuge and security. Millions of non-Muslims from Pakistan longed for a passage to India, a land of hope and peace, whereas millions of Muslims from India sought the road to Pakistan, the land of Islamic faith and promise. Thus, the train implies the movement of vast communities torn from their roots and areas of traditional growth to a new 'Jerusalem'. It indicates the harrowing processes of this change, the awful and ghastly experience of human beings involved in a historical, impersonal, and dehumanized process. The train suggests the fate of individuals, the destinies of the two newly formed nations, consequent upon a political decision and the nations, miseries, sufferings and privations which issue from it. Secondly, the train is also a symbol of the machine age, an era dominated by science and technology. The realization is paramount that the modern mechanistic, materialistic age has caused severe destruction of humanistic values. The age of machines has led to constantly increasing degrees of dehumanization. Man, divorced from nature and God, feels rootless and alienated. The association of Mano Majra, a village on the Indian side in the Punjab, with the train is indirectly a confrontation between the innocent, ignorant farmer and the impersonal machine age. Thus, the train is a dual symbol: it symbolizes life and action but it also stands for death and disaster. The setting and appearance of the train are in tune with its funeral atmosphere. A normal train has a bright headlight, whereas this extraordinary train from Pakistan had no headlight. It thus becomes a symbol of darkness and death. There are no lights in the compartments of the train; the engine did not whistle; it is like a ghost one can recall the strange atmosphere of the train to the Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

Khushwant Singh, Surprisingly holds a humble view of his novel *Train to Pakistan*. He says, "I don't really think it is a very good novel because I think it is a documentary of the partition of India, an extremely tragic event which hurt me very much. I had no animosity against either the Muslims or the Pakistanis but I felt that I should do something to express that point of view" (P43)

Khushwant Singh was a witness to the holocaust that followed in the wake of the partition of the country. The traumatic experience made Singh restive and in order to give vent to his feelings, he took to writing and hence *Train to Pakistan*. "The partition theme", writes Singh, "was born out of a sense of guilt that I had done nothing to save the lives of innocent people and behaved like a coward" (Dhawan 185). The novel *Train to Pakistan* is indeed about the sense of guilt weighing heavily on the conscience of the community as well as of the individuals.

Khushwant Singh's treatment of brutal atrocities committed on either side of the border is characterized by artistic objectivity. He exaggerates nothing and he leaves nothing. At the very beginning of the novel, he sets the tone for his dispassionate account of the concrete details of the holocaust:

"Muslims said that 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, Both raped" (TP1) As the village gets divided into two halves, Muslims and Sikhs gather in groups and talk, of inhuman savagery of each other. Muslims brood over the rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs:

"They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils 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" (TP 120)

Sikhs, on the other hand feel "Never trust a Musulman (P121). "Sikh refugees had told of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public and then murdered" (P121).

Describing the condition of the village and its people on the eve of the departure of Muslims there, the author himself writes: "Not many people slept in Mano Majra that night. They went from house to house-talking, crying, swearing love and friendship, assuring each other that this would soon be over" (P132).

What one learns from reading the novel is how the common men behaved in a more balanced and sane manner than the Government officers who fanned the fire instead of finding ways to extinguish it. A Sikh officer says to Meet Singh who is sympathetic towards Muslims:

"The only way people like you will understand anything is by being sent over to Pakistan: have your sisters and mothers raped in front of you, have your clothes taken off and be sent back with a kick and spit on your behind".

What has to be understood by all is Khushwant Singh's fiction which reveals that he is a writer who has been deeply affected by catastrophe. Singh said that 'the partition of India was a period of disillusionment'. The main theme of his fiction focuses on the nature of man and the engine of human destiny through a juxtaposition of violence with a concept of moral order.

To conclude, the novel *Train to Pakistan* graphically depicts the sudden, steep decline in all human values and negation of life that came during partition. The novel, no doubt, a brilliant exploration of the theme of partition not only narrating a touching tale of the times of the partition but also presenting some unforgettable scenes and sights of the great historic event. Through Dalipjit, the novelist has shown the ravaging consequences of partition. The Hindu-Muslim hatred, loot, arson, killing, rape, abduction, mass exodus, the psychological impact of the event on the victims, the social changes, loss of human values, changes in socio-economic system, the expression of frustration in the victims and the fate that both sides killed and looted and found equally guilty of each other—all these find their fullest expression in the novel. The novelist fervently appears for forgiveness and appears to echo Shakespeare's message in *The Tempest* that virtue lies in forgiveness, and not in vengeance. He pleads that cycle of change must be liquidated through love, sympathy, kindness, understanding, restraint and forgiveness. By making Jugga, the hero of this novel, Khushwant Singh essentially ties the novel to the soil of the Punjab and to a typical son of the soil with all traits of personality compounded of admiration and indignation, love and hate, sympathy and apathy, fondness and dislike. Towards the close of the novel, the novelist, through the protagonist, cynically observes: "The Muslims killed the Hindus and the Hindus massacred the Muslims in a bid to live and not to die" (TP296).

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