



ETHNIC VIOLENCE AND MASS MIGRATION: A STUDY ON “TRAIN TO PAKISTAN” BY KUSHWANT SINGH

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Abstract:

Conflict of culture and ethnic violence, now a days, became a major theme in the novels of the day. With the influence of multicultural society, it rose to the level of peak and emerged as root cause of many problems prevailing in the society. Khushwant Singh’s “Train to Pakistan” has no exception in this case. My paper titled: Ethnic Violence and mass migration: A study on “Train to Pakistan” focuses on how the conflict of the culture and ethnic violence creates a disturbance in the life of an individual which ultimately reflect on the society. This debut novel reflects the conflict between Hindu and Muslim culture by the time of partition of India. There is a clear reference also to the multicultural ethnicity in Mano Majra and others in the novels. One can also find communal frenzy where there is a hatred of Hindu and Muslim.

Key Words: Conflict – Ethnic Violence – Multicultural Society, Debut Novel, Violence, Partition, Communal Frenzy

“Partition is at the heart not only of the great regional conflicts but it is also an important component or factor in the whole series of religious-cum-political conflicts reaching down to the present time”

India is a multi lingual and multi cultural country. Irrespective of its languages, all literary narratives are an eloquent witness to an unspeakable and inarticulate able history. Evoking the suffering of innocent whose pain is more universal and ultimately a vehicle of more honest reconciliation than then political discourse, they provide a framework for developing an alternative discourse on inter community relations. No event in the history of sub-continent has been so written about as partition, and the books keep coming. Some writers have described partition as “India’s Holocaust” because this region is among some sensitive parts of the world where territory and demography have been the bone of contention.

After the British were withdrawn its rule and every thing from India, there was a hectic problem of administration and security in maintaining law and order in the country. Particularly a place like Pakistan, it was highly critical and crucial. Due to partition, in the summer of 1947, ten million people crossed what was known as "the partition." Due to religious and ethnic hatred, two million people were killed during the skirmishes and mob violence that occurred in the chaos. Local authorities were just taking over from the British and had no ability to control the populace. The disaster and violence became the subject matter for many writers after independence. They explained their experiences and feelings about the riots and violence in their writings. One among them is Kushwant Singh’s “Train to Pakistan (1956)”. This debut novel reflects the conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. The violence between Muslims and Hindus started from Calcutta (Kolkata) and became contagious to reach Mano Majra, a multi-ethnic village on the border of Pakistan. The fictional village Mano Majra has a railway station, a Gurudwara and a mosque. Before the riot all the people in the village were intact. But the riot has made them confused and confronted ethnically and culturally. There is a clear reference also to the multi-ethnicity in Mano Majra. It is reflected through acute religious fanaticism of one’s own. There is another reference to communal frenzy. Muslims hate Hindus and Hindus hate Muslims. This feeling has just started from the day of partition. Freedom struggle keeps its unity but the freedom invites fragmentation. In Train to Pakistan, communalism may be the stepping stone and Hindu-Muslim feeling is the focal point. It can be said that Train to Pakistan is based upon conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. The entire story is woven round the communal riot between Hindus and Muslims.

"It is our fate. It is written on our foreheads and on the lines of our hands.

I always want to do something. ... When there is no work, my hands

still itch to do something. So I do something, and it is always wrong." Chap. 1, p. 61

It is not out of context to explain the theme of the novel. Mano Majra is a small town divided between Sikhs and Muslims; until Lala Ram Lal is killed, there is a prominent Hindu family in town as well. There is no deep tension between these differing religious groups, an impressive social achievement particularly in a time with such deep religious tension. Religious tension was radically exaggerated during the partition period, however, and this put a massive strain on religious peace and tolerance in Mano Majra towards the end of the book. For centuries, India was ruled by the British Empire. But India bargained for its independence from Britain by agreeing to help it fight the Axis Powers in World War II. After the war was over, the British left in

1947 and divided the country into two, secular/Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. However, despite the fact that many Muslims lived in India and many Hindus lived in Pakistan, most Hindus lived in India and Muslims in Pakistan. Train to Pakistan takes place in the fictional town of Mano Majra, which was near the partition. Many border towns like Mano Majra contained great religious diversity, with Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs living side by side. But the British took no account of these towns, and so great violence erupted within them. In contrast, the author shows Mano Majra as maintaining its order, given its relative isolation. However, Mano Majra possessed a train station that would eventually make it a center of conflict.

The story begins with the robbery and murder of Lala Ram Lal, the only Hindu family in town. The murderers were a gang led by Malli, who were looking for their old fellow gang member and leader Jugga Singh, a Sikh hoodlum of great height, build and with a bad reputation. During the event of "dacoit", however, "Jugga" was making love with his girlfriend, Nooran, the daughter of the town's Mullah (the interreligious love was strictly forbidden). At the same time of the dacoit, Iqbal Singh, a well-educated, effeminate atheist, though ethnic Sikh, arrived in town to organize the peasants for the People's Party of India.

Malli and his gang try to pin the crime on Jugga, which results in the arrests of both Iqbal and Jugga due to local suspicions. They are arrested due to the orders of Hukum Chand, the regional magistrate, in part because of his suspicions of both characters for independent reasons. While they are in prison, however, conflict starts to rise in Mano Majra when a train full of Muslim corpses is brought to town and burned by soldiers. Not long after, a group of soldiers comes by to evacuate the Muslim half of town (the other half is Sikh) to Pakistan which leads Nooran to depart while Jugga is in jail in the regional capital of Chundunnugger.

After the Muslims are evacuated, a local band of Sikhs comes to Mano Majra to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment and sabotage the train that was taking the Muslims to Pakistan. Chand, normally corrupted but racked with guilt over his own sins, releases both Iqbal and Jugga to stop the killing, and despite Iqbal's self-image as a social reformer and Jugga's self-image as a thug, Iqbal drinks himself into a stupor while Jugga gives his life destroying the rope the Sikh soldiers had set up to throw Muslims on top of the train off to their deaths.

On the whole we can say that Singh, conforming to the official Indian perspective on Partition, has presented Partition in Train to Pakistan as artificial, unnatural, illogical and undesirable. Khushwant Singh associates the Partition with evil and destruction. He stresses upon the peaceful harmony that existed between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs before Partition. He also shows that there were difficulties and challenges involved in the Hindu-Muslim synthesis. The novel shares a lot of details while retaining their individuality as well. Instead of depicting the events in political terms, the novelist provided human dimensions which bring to the event a sense of reality, horror and believability.

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