ISSN 2319 - 8508
AN INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY
HALF YEARLY RESEARCH JOURNAL

GALAXY LINK

Volume - XI Issue - I November - April - 2022-23

English Part - I / II

Peer Reviewed Referred
and UGC Listed Journal
Journal No. 47023

ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

IMPACT FACTOR / INDEXING
2020 - 6.495
www.sjifactor.com

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❖ PUBLISHED BY ❖

Ajanta Prakashan
Aurangabad. (M.S.)

Printed by

Ajanta Computer, Near University Gate, Jaisingpura, Aurangabad. (M.S.)

Publisehd by

Ajanta Prakashan, Near University Gate, Jaisingpura, Aurangabad. (M.S.)

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GALAXY LINK - ISSN 2319 - 8508 - Impact Factor - 6.495 (www.sjifactor.com)

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14. Portrayal of Violence and Horror during Partition in Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh's historical novel Train to Pakistan portrays the violence and horror in the tiny village Mano Majra near India -Pakistan border. It is a valuable, social and political piece of document of how the religions, caste, and moral divisions are used as a weapon to erupt violence and rift. The novel presents vivid and minute picture of violence and cruelties committed by all to emphasize that such habits are not limited to certain religious factions**.**

Keywords: partition, violence, terror, prejudice, Mano Majra, train

Khushwant Singh is the most significant writer of contemporary Indian English literature. His historical novel *Train to Pakistan* (1958) is set in the fictional tiny village Mano Majra, the only 'oasis of peace' during the summer of 1947. It is the year of the bloody Partition of India that causes horror and massive violence in both nations. After the World War II, Britishers granted its colony independence dividing it into the two nations India and Pakistan—an attempt to dispel bitter religious tensions by providing a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. As a result millions of Muslims attempt to cross the partition into Pakistan, and Hindus and Sikhs into India causing several incidents of murder, rape, killing, burning and beating. Partition generated riots, mass casualties and a colossal wave of migration. Mano Majra is a microcosm of how the religions, caste, and moral divisions are used as a weapon to erupt violence and rift. Singh suggests that pre-existing prejudice and hatred is the root cause of violence that erupted from India's partition.

One of the most striking aspects of *Train to Pakistan* is Singh's unflinching portrayal of the horrors of Partition. The novel does not shy away from depicting the brutality and inhumanity inflicted upon innocent civilians by both sides of the conflict. The graphic descriptions of massacres and the train filled with corpses serve as a powerful reminder of the depths humanity can sink to in times of turmoil. Fourteen to sixteen million people have been displaced, traveled on feet, bullock carts or by train for safety and security of their communities.

Women were mutilated, their breasts cut off, paraded down the streets and their bodies carved with religious symbol of the 'other' community.

Both Hindus and Muslims start blaming each other for the killings of Hindus and Muslims. But the fact, according to Singh is: "both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped (1). The riots spread from north and east and west mounting the death toll to several thousand within a few months. By refusing to cast blame toward any particular religious group for the violence of the partition, Singh illustrates the complexity of humanity during a time when people were simplified to their religious allegiances. He gives detailed accounts of the cruelties committed by all to emphasize that such habits are not limited to certain religious factions, but rather, are common to humanity. Yet even as Singh uses the story of India's partition as a cautionary tale of what can occur when people succumb to their baser instincts, his depiction of Jugga's destruction of the rope shows that humanity is also capable of extraordinary acts of courage and heroism in the face of hatred. His sacrifice for his beloved Nooran, a daughter of Muslim weaver and mullah, shows the best human values of love and brothehood.

Mano Majra, a religiously diverse border town, is blissfully unaware of the tumult surrounding it despite its proximity to a railway bridge that connects India with Pakistan. When the magistrate and deputy commissioner Hukum Chand, referred to as 'a nar admi' (17) asks the sub inspector what is "the situation" in Mano Majra, the latter says that all is well here and no refugee has come yet. He is not sure if anyone "even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan (24)." He thinks that some of the villagers know who Mahatma Gandhi is, but he doubts that anyone is aware of Muhammad Ali Jinnah—the founder of Pakistan. This blissful ignorance quickly changes into wrathful violence when a trainload of dead Sikhs arrives from Pakistan at the Mano Majra railway station. Singh shows how this tragic event, coupled with a pre-existing prejudice, spurs a dangerous cycle of hostility and violence.

The first sign that things are changing in the village is when the train schedule goes awry, causing passenger trains to arrive exceptionally late. For Mano Majra, which uses the arrival and departure of the trains to determine its daily schedule, this disrupts the sense of normalcy in the village. The second sign is the arrival of the "ghost train" from Pakistan, which plants the first seed of suspicion in the villagers' mind. Finally, Sikh officers show up and ask the villagers to give all the wood and kerosene they can spare. The villagers are kept in the dark about why the soldiers need these materials, but later they smell the stench of burning wood and kerosene mixed with that of charred flesh. The secrecy of the Sikh officers and others in authority on the

burning of the dead bodies of Hindus and Sikhs instills the villagers with the sense that something is very wrong and that they are under possible threat.

In the first part entitled "Dacoity," the incidence of brutal murder of the only Hindu moneylender or 'banian' Ram Lal in Mano Majra creates havoc among the villagers. The head constable asks if anyone has spoken to "a young Mussulman babu called Mohammed Iqbal who was a member of the Muslim League." Even the villagers find it strange that the police think that an educated, middle-class man Mohammed Iqbal would be a suspect in a dacoity, and begin to suspect at the Muslims as they have sent Iqbal as a spy. The head constable's questions succeed in dividing Mano Majra "into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter," revealing how easily people can be manipulated to mistrust those whom they call friends.

The village is exposed to further violence after the monsoon, when the rainwater causes the Sutlej River to rise. When the villagers witness several people floating in the water, they see stab wounds and the mutilated breasts of women, making it clear that these people had been massacred. The sight of these bodies, coupled with the knowledge that hundreds of Sikhs and Muslims were murdered in Pakistan before being sent into India on the "ghost train," spurs the Sikhs into violent action, convincing many to partake in the plot to kill Muslim refugees going to Pakistan.

The group of Sikhs is angry and sullen when they had cremated trainload of massacred Sikhs in Mano Majra. Sikh refugees in anguish say about the zulum (atrocities) on Hindu in Pakistan:

Never trust a Mussulman. The last guru had warned them that Muslims had no loyalties…. Many Sikhs were put to sword for refusing to accept Islam; their temples had been desecrated by the slaughter of kin; the holy Granth had been torn to bits. Women were jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who didn't commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered. (128)

The examples cited by the novelist are enough to show the horror and terror during the partition. Sunari, a daughter of Hukum Chand's orderly, marries Mansaram, a peon in Gujranwala. On their way to Gujranwala in a bus, her husband was stripped off naked to see whether he is circumcised or not and other gave her a cut off penis to her. The mob made love to her in the road. Sundar Singh, an armyman with a row of medals in battles, was in a train along with his wife and three children on his way to Sindh. The train was hold for four days at the station. He was not allowed to get off the train. They were not given water to drink and food to eat. He gave his urine to drink. In repentance, he pulls out his revolver and shoots them all and

attempts to commit suicide. These examples show how innocent people meet tragic fate for no fault of their own.

Singh portrays vividly the disruption caused by the influx of refugees fleeing for shelter and security in other regions. The Mano Majra village, once harmonious and tranquil, is transformed into a microcosm of the larger tragedy unfolding across the nation. Through meticulous attention to detail, the author captures the fear, uncertainty, and mistrust that permeate daily life in the midst of communal violence. The early picture of the village is of friendship and philanthropy. But the same villagers become violent and support the plan of massacre when they were irritated and instigated by the leader of the Sikh.

Not all of the inhabitants of Mano Majra succumb to hatred. The local Bhai Meet Singh, is not a particularly gifted priest, but he uses his position of respect to appeal to people's sense of decency. His efforts to remind his fellow Sikhs that their Muslim neighbors should not be blamed for the behavior of Muslims across the border prove to be futile in tempering the violent impulses stirred up by visiting Sikh soldiers. Indeed, one evening Mano Majra receives a visit from a group of Sikh soldiers with rifles slung on their shoulders, one of whom—a boy leader—entices the crowd to engage in revenge killings in response to the massacres of Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. He urges the male villagers to kill "two Musulmans" for "each Hindu and Sikh [the Muslims] kill." Meet Singh highlights the lack of sense this makes; the Muslims of Mano Majra have nothing to do with the violence in Pakistan. The priest reminds the crowd that it is more important to regard Muslims individually than to condemn an entire group, but his measured appeals to rationality prove futile as he is outdone by the boy leader's appeal to the crowd's thirst for revenge.

Bhai Meet Singh and lambardar Banta Singh are against the evacuation of Muslim to the refugee camp. Meet Singh even assures Imam Baksh that, "as long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you. We die first and you can look after yourselves" (133). Imam breaks down and Bhai clasps him in his arms. Even lambardar assures them that he will a single hair of your heads is touched. Since the village is now surrounded by mob of thousand refugees, all armed with guns and spears, he advises them to go to the refugee camp while the trouble is on. They will look after cattle till you come back. On that day Sikhs and Muslims fell into each other's arms and wept like children. This incidence in the novel shows the pains of displacement during the panic era of partition. As Chacha says, 'what have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here so our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers' (133).

The novel revolves around the profound impact of the political upheaval on ordinary individuals. Khushwant Singh skillfully portrays the complex interplay between religion,

identity, and nationhood through his multilayered characters. The protagonists, Jugga and Nooran, belong to different communities but are united by their love for each other. Their relationship, however, is put to the ultimate test as the fault lines of religious conflict threaten to tear them apart. However, love of Hukum Chand for Haseena Begum, a Muslim girl of 14-15, is based on physical attraction rather than a true love that of Jugga.

Towards the end of the novel, the boy leader plots with Sikh villagers to kill hundreds of Muslim refugees who will be sitting on the roof of a Pakistan-bound train. Meet Singh advises his fellow Sikhs on proper moral action, but he does not interfere too much out of fear of also becoming a victim of retributive violence. However, the Bhai's words do inspire Juggut, a former robber well-known for violence, to take redemptive action. Juggut visits Meet Singh and asks the priest to read him a prayer. He then asks if the prayer is good, and the priest assures him that the Guru's word is always good and can help those who do good. If people perform evil, the Guru's words will work against them. Juggut goes on to "do good" by sacrificing his own life in order to save the train full of Muslim refugees. Through this, the author suggests that language alone cannot either stop or spur violence but, like the head constable's manipulative suggestions to the villagers, language can be a catalyst that prompts people to act on already existing desires.

Moreover, Singh skillfully employs narrative techniques such as foreshadowing and flashback to create a sense of foreboding and suspense throughout the novel. By alternating between past and present events, he not only provides insight into the characters' motivations but also reveals the larger historical context that led to the Partition. *Train to Pakistan* primarily focuses on the impact of Partition on individuals; it also touches upon wider socio-political issues. The novel highlights the complicity of the British colonial authorities in exacerbating communal tensions and their ultimate abandonment of the region. Through his nuanced portrayal of the British characters, Singh sheds light on the manipulative divide-and-rule policies employed by the colonial powers. Hence, one can conclude that *Train to Pakistan* is a valuable, social and political piece of document prepared and presented forth by Singh. It is an excellent piece of work depicting the violence and horror during the time of partition.

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