

Theme of Partition and freedom movement in Train to Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Train to Pakistan”, the first novel on the theme of partition & freedom is a brilliant and realistic story of political hatred, violence and of mass passions during those turbulent and fateful days that preceded and followed the Partition of the British India. It is based on the theme of Partition of India into India and Pakistan, and hence it narrates the pathetic tales of individuals and communities caught in the swirl of Partition. The Novel is considered one of the best novels on Partition. Khushwant Singh became popular with the publication of “Train to Pakistan”, his first novel, in 1956. This also won for him the “Grove Press India fiction Prize” for the year 1956. “Train to Pakistan” portrays the trauma of Partition that gave birth to two political boundaries - India and Pakistan. On the eve of Partition, thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a horrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Partition touched the whole country and Singh’s objective in this novel is to see the events from the point of the view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village, which is situated at the border between India and Pakistan. Originally it is entitled ‘Mano Majra’ which suggests static, while the present title “Train to Pakistan” implies change. This perhaps prompts V.A Sahane to comment that the change of the title of the novel from Mano Majra to Train to Pakistan is in keeping with the theme of the novel.

The individuality in Khushwant Singh’s writings is on account of his anger and disenchantment with the Long cherished human values in the wake of inhuman bestial horrors and insane savage killings on both sides during the Partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in August 1947. The novelist brings to the centre stage the subsequent violence on both sides of the border manifested in ruthless mass destruction as well as the evil impact of Partition on the peace-loving Hindus, Muslims & Sikhs of Mano-Majra.

In the words of Warren French, “Singh’s terse fable suggests a profound disillusionment with the power of law, reason and intellect in the face of elemental human passions Singh is brilliant, sardonic observer of world undergoing convulsive changes; and his novels provide a unique insight into one of the major political catastrophes of this country,” (French 818-20)

The holocaust that followed in the wake of the Partition of the country is considered one of the bloodiest upheavals of history that claimed invulnerable innocent lives and loss of property. The Partition of India and the

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violence it generated disillusioned Khushwant Singh enough to conclave the idea of writing a novel to express his mental agony and inner conflict. He speaks, thus, about the genesis of the novel.

The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. 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 the matter of the spirit.....

After the experience of the autumn of 1947, I would no longer subscribe to these views. I became an angry middle-aged man who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world:-

I decided to try my hand at writing.

It is through the pattern of contrast between preparation and post-partition scenario, Khushwant Singh best illustrates the tragedy of partition and indirectly suggests the short sightedness of Indian leadership who failed to foresee the consequences of division and to handle the situation even after Churchill's forecast of blood-bath. Communal discord was not a feature of Indian rural scene but it was engineered first by the British Government under the policy of divide and rule and then by the nationalist leaders, though unintentionally.

As Bipin Chandra says,

In the beginning of the 20th century what nationalist thought we had and what was propagated under it had a Hindu tinge on the major part of it”

The section “dacoity shows how calm placed and indifferent to the greatest political events in a nation's life-independence - is the life at Mano Majra. As the lambardar questions. But what will we get out of it? Educated people like you, Babu Sahib, will get the jobs the English had will we get more lands or more buffaloes? freedom becomes important for the villagers only when it brings “more land more buffaloes” otherwise it hardly appeals to them.

So, peaceful coexistence and communal harmony prevails in the village which stands as a replica of unity and integrity in diversity that is the fundamental feature of Indian culture.

Train is another important symbol in the novel that stands for the routine life of Mano Majra before Independence and disordered life after independence. Daily life at Mano Majra runs parallel with the systematic arrivals and departure of trains there. “All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains. Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge the driver invariably blows two long blasts of whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake.”

The situation is further vitiated by the arrival of the ‘ghost train’ carrying the bodies of thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan for their common funeral at Mano Majra. Everyone tries to get as much information as they can.

The partition of India led to the evacuation of the Hindus from Pakistan and the Muslims from India and border crossing of refugees. This also precipitated the

communal riots in retaliation of killing Hindus and Muslims in Pakistan and in some parts of India. The condition in Mano Majra worsens. It is divided into two halves. The Muslims are ordered to leave the village and take shelter in the refugee camp. As the Sikh families are watching the pathetic condition of Sikhs and Hindus who are murdered in other villages, they decided to take revenge on Muslims. The Sikhs are angry and wants to kill them.

The ultimate optimism of the novelist is shown in the end that shows the victory of virtue and love over/wise and hatred even in the utter chaos. The plan of sabotage the train is known to everyone but only Jugga rises to the occasion. Implicit in this reference is Khushwant Singh's fire against the power hungry leaders of national movement who could celebrate 'the baptism of freedom with blood bath. He leads credibility to his feelings by making Hukum Chand, who is a part of Government and a legacy to the colonial rule, rail against national leaders. Malgaonkar, Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal have taken to task the British rulers and short sighted national leaders afflicted with sudden blindness and loss of nerve for exploding this horrendous catastrophe.

'Train to Pakistan' is also a valuable social and political document and a highly readable fiction that keeps the reader engrossed. As Arthur Lal puts it in an introduction to his book, its intrinsic qualities as a fine novel grip the reader. The characters are vivid and highly credible, and Khushwant Singh keeps them going magnificently on two

levels: in their quotidian matrix compounded of their passions of their love and revenge, their tremendous sense of belonging to a village community and their insolence and heroism, and then again in the wide stage by the Tornado that brakes on their lives in the shape of the cataclysmic events of the partition of India in 1947.

As a piece of fiction "Train to Pakistan" is cleverly contrived and articulate of the pity and horror involved in the partition tragedy. The third person omniscient narrative technique helps the novelist dive into the mind of characters and presents his candid view with precision and objectivity on the different shades of this tragedy.

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