

The four Phases in Khuswant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan*

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The partition is perhaps the saddest event of modern India. It has attracted the attention of a host of creative writers and poets. These creative writers and poets have tried to present the themes of Partition in the light of their own perspective. With *Train to Pakistan* Khuswant Singh has established himself as a distinguished Indian writer “with an individual status in modern Indo-Anglian Literature” (Sahane 344). He acquired this individuality 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” (Raizada 126).

V. A. Sahane the author, editor and critic divides the novel *Train to Pakistan* into four phases: Dacoity, Kalyuga, Mano Majra and Karma. This paper attempts to make a critical analysis of the four phases of Khuswant Singh's epoch making novel *Train to Pakistan*. According to Sahane, the novel has four sections (a) Dacoity, (b) Kalyuga, (c) Mano Majra, and (d) Karma. In the first section “Dacoity,” the novelist introduces the central theme, subtly hinting at the catastrophic circumstances both natural and social, which preclude the tragic events that follow the central event of partition. In the second section “Kaliyuga,” he points out how every, code of life is disturbed and how everything becomes topsy-turvy. Kaliyuga becomes Kali-yuga, the age of Kali, the Mother of death and destruction. In the third section, “Mano Majra,” Mr. Singh goes on to show how the peaceful atmosphere of Mano Majra, a small village at the border of India and Pakistan becomes the seat of communal suspicion, tension, hatred, and violence. In the last section, “Karma,” the writer invokes the Law of Karma, which is central to the Indian view of life, to explain the mysterious ways of

human destiny in the backdrop of the crescendo of action and feelings that rise and fall in the disturbed world of the novel.

The novel begins with a dark and grim note of violence and butchery. It has something of the kind of Shakespearean tragedy about it. Mr. Singh mentions that the summer of 1947 was an unusual summer with a different feel. “It was drier and dustier” (Singh 1), as well as “longer,” with a late monsoon which brings only the shadows of “sparse clouds” (Singh 1) without rain. He invests his description with symbolic overtones to suggest the suffering that was to follow in the wake of Partition. This unprecedented weather foreboded something ill and made the people of the village a little uneasy so much so that they began “to say that God was punishing them for their sins” (Singh 1). Some of these people believed “that they had sinned” (Singh 1).

After mentioning the unusual weather Mr. Singh goes on to give a brief description of the communal situation of the country, especially the riots of Calcutta and Noakhali, attempts of the communal forces to whet the communal frenzy in the west, and the evacuation and migration of millions of people uprooted from their land. The violence that started in Calcutta swept the country and tortured people. Khuswant Singh vividly describes the tragic scene:

Hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs who had lived for centuries on the Northwest frontier abandoned their homes and fled towards the protection of the predominantly Sikh and Hindu communities in the east. They travelled on foot,...By the summer of 1947... ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding. (Singh 1-3)

However, in the desert of communal destruction, there were some oasis of communal peace and harmony and seats of the composite culture. One of these places was the tiny border village of Mano Majra, situated about a mile south of a railroad bridge on the Sutlej. In the village of seventy families, there was only one Hindu family of Lala Ram Lal and other families belonged to Sikhs and Muslims about equal in number. There were also a few families of sweepers whose religion was uncertain. Although these communities had their separate places of worship, there was an object of common worship, a three foot slab of sandstone that stood upright a keekar tree beside the pond. It was the local deity, the deo to which all the villagers—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or

pseudo-Christian repaired secretly whenever they were in special need of blessing” (Singh 6). It was the symbol of communal harmony in the village.

The inhabitants of Mano Majra, lived in an idyllic atmosphere in the lap of bountiful nature. They still enjoyed cordial relationship which has been existing between them since so many centuries. They are hardly aware of the meaning of Partition. They didn’t know this even when the British partitioned their country and left India for ever. They didn’t even realise the impact of such things on the tenor of their life, till a train carrying dead bodies arrives from Pakistan.

In the pre-partition days the Mano Majrians enjoyed the best of the two worlds of nature and machine. The movement of trains across the Sutlej bridge situated nearby the railway station at Mano Majra regulate the rhythm of life of the village to a great extent. With the departure of the last train the life of the village is lulled to sleep and with the arrival of the mail train the life of the village starts stirring. In addition the mornings and the evenings of the village regularly reverberate with the echoes of Mullah’s cries of ‘Allah O Akbar’ and those of the Sikh priests prayers. The regularity and punctuality of the passenger trains and goods train through Mano Majra indicate the regular and smooth rhythm of the village life.

However, this atmosphere of a perfect life was disturbed by the encroachment of evil, which became instrumental in breaking the moral code of their social life. On one heavy night of August, Malli, the gangster came along with his four companions to loot Lala Ram Lal who was eventually stabbed by one of the robbers. Even though it was not a communal murder, it precluded what was in the offing. It heralded the end in Mano Majra was symbolic of not only the breach of social code but also a master playwright, the novelist goes on to introduce the idyllic love-scene followed by a sex-encounter between the Sikh-criminal Jugga or Juggut Singh and his Muslim beloved Nooran, the daughter of the local Muslim priest, as an interlude of comic relief in order to prepare readers to endure the tragic experience of the following days. The love between the two persons of different religions is symbolic in the sense that it is love division and that triumphs over violence and that through it one can overcome the evil of communalism. At this stage Khuswant Singh also adds another dimension to the communal theme by introducing Iqbal Singh a western educated immature communist, deputed by the party to create political awareness

among the ignorant peasants of the village. Eventually both Jugga and Iqbal Singh were arrested by the police, Jugga for the murder of Lala Ram Lal and Iqbal for being a Muslim Leaguers engaged in generating communal frenzy.

Meanwhile the news of atrocities committed by the Muslims in Pakistan on Hindu and Sikh communities began to pour in, disturbing people of India, especially Punjab. Even the policeman appeared concerned with what was happening on the other side of the border, as one of the police man remarked:

. . . 'it was the Muslims police taking sides which made the difference in the riots. Hindu boys of Lahore would have given the Muslims hell if it had not been for their police. They did a lot of Zulum.' 'Their army is like that, too. Baluch soldiers have been shooting people whenever they were sure there was no chance of running into Sikh or Gurkha troops.' (Singh 91-92)

In the second section, "Kalyuga," the late running trains suddenly changed the peaceful rhythm of life of Mano Majrans which in turn became instrumental in disturbing the life of the village. This disturbance was further enhanced by the arrival of the ghost trains. Singh writes:

The arrival of the ghost train in broad daylight created a commotion in Mano Majra. People stood on their roofs to see what was happening at the station. All they could see was the black top of the train stretching from one end of the platform to the other. The station building and the railings blocked the rest of the train from view. Occasionally a soldier or a policeman came out of the station and then went back again. (Singh 121)

The people of the village were dumb founded. The bloody scene of the train load corpses was too horrible to even people like Hukum Chand, the police official. It unnerved him. He suffered from mental fatigue and cold numbness. His fear suggested the terror that blew in the atmosphere. His horror could not be mitigated even by the arrival of his sweet heart Haseena. This spectacle of violence sent shock waves throughout Mano Majra.

Khuswant Singh speaks of the monsoon which increases "the tempo of life and death" (Singh 138). With the arrival of monsoon rains, Hukum Chand's mind become obsessed with the brutalities committed on the frontiers. He realized that retaliation must follow. Hence he became concerned with the safe evacuation of the Muslims of the

locality. He told his sub-inspector, that “these days one should be grateful for being alive. There is no peace anywhere. One trouble after another. . .” (Singh 141). The tragic mood of the villagers was reflected through the vagaries of the monsoon, the late arrival of which left them high and dry since it did not bring relief but more disaster.

In the third section, “Mano Majra” which was the original title of the novel, Khuswant Singh goes on to portray the village which was once a symbol of peace and harmony, as a place of horror, hate, suspicion and cowardice i.e. the village of goddess Kali. The train carrying the corpses of Hindus and Sikhs eventually disturbed the tranquillity of the village. “When it was discovered,” writes Mr. Singh, “. . . that the train had brought a full load of corpses, a heavy brooding silence descended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all the night talking in whispers.... When they woke up in the morning and saw it was raining, their first thoughts were about the train and burning corpses (Singh 164).

Meanwhile the mental condition of the Muslims of the village was also precarious. The Muslims became all the more fearful as they heard exaggerated accounts of violence against their community.

Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikh on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurthala, which they had heard and dismissed, came back to their minds. They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the marketplace. Many had eluded there 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 the infidels. (Singh 178)

With the rumours, the attitude of both the communities suffered a radical change. Muslims grew suspicious of their neighbours. The Sikhs also became sullen and angry. Suddenly their conscience began to feel the weight of history, remembering the atrocities committed by the Muslim rulers on their Gurus and their family and followers. The memories of the past and the present experience conspired to turn them against their Muslim brothers.

The division between the two communities became so complete that the emotional appeal of Imam Baksh, the Muslim priest could not bridge it. A lot of arguments followed but Imam Baksh returned empty handed. So did his daughter Nooran as she could not move Jugga’s mother to

accept her as her daughter-in-law, even though she was going to be the mother of her son's child. The Muslims had to leave. Even though the Sikhs felt helpless, on the eve of the departure of their Muslim friends, they were overwhelmed with emotion. But emotions like sympathy and fellow feeling are too weak to stand as bulwark against the onslaught of communal fury. They do not make a lasting impression. No wonder by evening the people of Mano Majra forgot about the Muslims.

In the fourth section "Karma," Khuswant Singh invokes the theory of Karma, central to Indian view life, to interpret the communal situation. However, he seems inclined to think that in many cases man does not suffer his own misdeeds but for the misdeeds of others. For instance, Partition was the handiwork of a few politicians and the people who suffered had nothing to do with it. In order to build up his argument, Mr. Singh goes on to show how the situation further worsened with the arrival of the ghost trains. Such a tense situation which prevailed in Mano Majra was an ideal situation for the communal elements to operate. They exploited it to their fullest advantage, as they succeeded in inciting communal passions. Some strangers came to the Gurudwara on jeep and began to mobilize the Sikhs of the village.

In the process of his arguments their leaders mentioned the massacres at Rawalpindi, Multan, Gujrawala and Sekhpura. Sneering the cowardly government of the moneylenders, they went on to teach the lesson of revenge, demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth: "For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. For each home they loot, loot two. For each trainload of dead they send over, send two across. For each road convoy that is attacked, attack two. That will stop the killing on the other side. It will teach them that we can also play this game of killing and looting" (Singh 222).

The communal situation became so tense and complicated that the well-meaning men like Meet Singh, Lambardar and the police official Hukum Chand found themselves helpless to stem the tide of violence. Hukum Chand's idea of fighting communalism with the help of criminals like Malli and Jugga and the immature and ineffectual politicians like Iqbal Singh, was a wild goose chase. Singh while blaming the Sikhs and Muslims and the government officials for the communal frenzy, was ruthless severe on the politicians especially Nehru. He attacked them through his mouth-piece Hukum Chand. He mockingly refers to Nehru and his famous speech on the Independence Day:

‘He is a great man, this Nehru of yours. I do think he is the greatest man in the world today. And how handsome! Wasn’t that a wonderful thing to say? “Long ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure but very substantially.”

“Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, you made your tryst. So did many others on the 15th August, Independence Day.” (Singh 257- 258)

Then he went on to ruminate over the tryst with destiny made by people of his acquaintance. First of them was his colleague Prem Singh who went back to fetch his wife’s jewellery from Lahore and was killed. There was Sundari, the daughter of his orderly who also made tryst with destiny on the road to Gujranwala. She had been married only four days ago and had hardly seen even the face of her husband. As she was travelling with her husband she was pulled from the bus along with her husband and raped and killed.

In his own case, Hukum Chand had to endure the ghostly sights of train-loads of massacred people and the corpse of butchered men, women, and children. He could not provide shelter even to his sweet heart Haseena. Hukum Chand was reduced from the powerful magistrate to a pathetic figure.

However Khuswant Singh ends his naturalistic novel with the heroic note of a romantic sacrifice. The communal situation demanded courage and the spirit of self-sacrifice of the highest order. While the so-called adherents of human values, Meet Singh, Lambardar, Iqbal and Hukum Chand, could not muster enough courage to set their massive weight to confront communalism, Juggat Singh, a hardened criminal did it in his own way. The Sikh sacrificed his life for the safety of his Muslim beloved Nooran. He slashed the rope which was tied to stop the train which was carrying her to Pakistan. Ostensibly through *Train to Pakistan*, Khuswant Singh expressed his anger, disenchantment and disillusionment with the prevalent social, religious and political values during the Partition days. He was so upset by the harrowing events of 1947 that he lost faith in the values of peace and non-violence.

“*Train to Pakistan* is a tragedy written in mock-comic tone, criticising the celebration of freedom with mass murder and bestiality and ingeniously delineating the pity and horror of the two-nation theory” (Swain 123). It is “a nightmare with an exciting finish, one closes the novel with a sense of relief” (Iyengar 501).