

Reading Partition in *Train to Pakistan*

Alpana*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, CMG Government College for Women, Bhodia Khera, Fatehabad, Haryana, India

***Corresponding author**

Alpana

Article History

Received: 02.04.2018

Accepted: 14.04.2018

Published: 30.04.2018



Abstract: The slot of partition literature in the context of modern Indian literature has always been stealing the limelight. Several writers have come up with one or the other hidden tale of partition which unveiled the unfathomable series of events. This paper intends to explore the grim reality foregrounded in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. The story revolves around the inhabitants of a fictional village called Mano Majra and goes on explaining the aftermath of partition on the social brethren. The paper attempts to bring in light the plight of people of this village and show how the whole act of partition has actually led to an abysmal existence of the people affected. A critical reading of the text highlights the various tropes of Marxism, feminism and structuralism embedded in the text. A look at the various ideologies enmeshed help in reading between the lines. In a broader sense, the categorical stand of partition literature is upheld through this novel. Being a writer of modern Indian fiction, Khushwant Singh has created a story through the eyes of a narrator who paints the gory canvas.

Keywords: partition, ideologies, reality, partition literature.

INTRODUCTION

“The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped” [1].

Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*

When it comes to writing tales about partition, one comes across the intertwining of various “truths” and “histories”. It is this multiplicity about something as real and intriguing as partition which makes the entire category of partition literature the centre of scrutiny. The multiple histories present in the various stories leave a sense of awe and remorse among the readers. Being inhabitants of a world where “post-truth” rules the roost, it becomes incumbent on the readers to contemplate and give away diatribes in whichever way they like. Hence, partition becomes an event which evokes different understandings and ideologies irrespective of the coherent factual content that it carries along with it. India woke up to witness a new sun of independence where, apparently the seeds of social evils like communalism have been devoured. However, the variegated stories and diaries reflect upon an entirely different canvas. These accounts of partition have put forth a set of multiple reactions varying from lament to anger, from frustration to the celebration of triumph. In Urdu, these stories

have been called *fasadat ke fasaane* [2] or “riot literature” elaborating the cause-and-effect equation. When India gained independence at the midnight of 14 August, 1947, more than the rebirth of a nation, it was “a human tragedy of epic proportion”. It was moment when the bandwagons of secularism succumbed to the scathing attacks led by communalism. It can thus be remarked that partition could not be considered to be a mere division of larger country. It meant much more than just that. It is through the category of partition literature which threw light on the horror and the utter mayhem that followed the very event of partition. Khushwant Singh's tale of a village, Mano Majra called *Train to Pakistan*, has showcased the cobweb that simple village society got entangled into after the partition. It traces the involved multiplicity and the homogeneity which later became too difficult to bear with. Through the various characters of his novel, he has shown how partition led not only to a mere dissection but also to migration, the displacement, dislocation, uprootedness and alienation that came in the wake of power.

Train to Pakistan came out in 1956, almost a decade after the partition. This may be probably the reason why the story seems deeply embedded in the ideology of the cracking-up and the discord. The story unfolds with an eerie

approach and makes the readers predict the approaching breakdown. It begins by stating,

“The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year.”

The above mentioned lines explain the strange feeling of impending loss, anger and lament which is about to get the reader subsumed in this one major tale where the tales of different characters criss-cross until they become hard to digest. Though it is a work of literature belonging to the mid twentieth century, yet it alludes to the contemporary reception of the partition in a vivid manner. The writing style in which Singh knits the story keeps the readers intact and brings a sense of familiarity with the characters. It deftly steers towards a graffiti of different pictures from the village society of Mano Majra, a village at the bank of river Sutlej near the Indo-Pak border. The society of Mano Majra has managed to keep itself away from the pangs of communal riots which have led to “a bloody Holi” in rest of the country. It is that geographical space in the country post partition which has stood firm in its notions of inter-religious brotherhood, i.e., Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who have been living as friends and family since a long time. Such unity among Hindu (including Sikhs, in broader sense) and Muslims reminds one of the bond witnessed among the different religions during the time of first war of independence, i.e., the war of 1857. This battle against the Britishers a century ago was cherished and is still commemorated for the sense of brotherhood it shaped and foregrounded. Coming back to the village of Mano Majra, the “dull daily routine” turns sour with the murder of Lal Chand, a Hindu moneylender of the village by a group of Sikh lads led by Malli. The murder happens in the beginning of the novel which then leads to a series of strange relations, weird conversations, heart-rending partings and inhuman treatment of “the second sex”. The murder is then followed by the description of the illicit relationship between a Muslim girl, Nooran and Juggat Singh, the “badmaash” or “number ten” as he is often called by the police in the village. The sexual politics involved in their relation is another way of looking at the not-so-common attribute of an Indian village. Then comes Hukum Chand into the picture who is a magistrate and deputy commissioner of the district. He arrives to inquire the situation in the village in terms of communal riots or incidents of violence of similar kind. The conversation between Hukum Chand and the sub-inspector about the absence of anything communal in the village is a reminder of how the so-called people in power frown upon such peaceful villages. It becomes difficult to acknowledge for them that despite the

much hue and cry that partition created between the people of different sects, a village like Mano Majra is still continuing with the unperturbed air. Keeping aside his religious self, Hukum Chand obliquely engages himself in a paedophilic act with Haseen, part of the coterie which comes to entertain the magistrate. In this interaction as well, Khushwant Singh describes the oppressive behaviour of men towards the women. The way they take relish in subordinating them, socially as well as sexually. When Hukum Chand’s perverted persona comes into light, the image of a powerful man starts revealing its true colours, different but obscene, unusual but disturbing. Frequently, the unpleasant is often swept under the rug but eventually, it is unveiled. Such is the trajectory that Hukum Chand’s life follows in *Train to Pakistan*. From a man of cigarettes and lustful desires, the train full of corpses he witnessed near the end of the story leaves him baffled to the core of his heart. The girl, Haseen, who was earlier an object of lust has now become a means of solace and peace. This is one of the incidents where the preconceived notions and conventional conduct falls prey to the massive incident of partition.

Besides the whereabouts of the local people, the author plays his cards with adroitness by bringing into the village an “outsider” named Iqbal Singh. In the entire novel, it is the role of Iqbal Singh which raises the right tone of the text and brings out the hidden grim reality of the society. According to the local lexicon, he is “educated” and not just literate. He is in possession of an air of English-ness and often becomes the centre of close observation in the village. Through the character of Iqbal Singh, Khushwant Singh has created a spokesperson who vehemently passes comments certain aspects of the society such as administration and apparently the most important, religion. As the novel approaches its end, it appears that Khushwant Singh voices his own viewpoint on partition through Iqbal Singh. The cynicism present in his statements, the indifference he expresses before the policemen and the long haul of thoughts gushing through his mind near the end reflect the way an educated sensible man would behave when thrown in such chaotic circumstances. According to him, “The bullet is neutral. It hits the good and the bad, the important and the insignificant, without distinction.” To every situation going beyond control, it is the voice of Iqbal which casts the cathartic effect lest the story becomes too violent and heart-rending. He remarks, “Ethics, which should be the kernel of a religious code, have been carefully removed.” Hence, his character can be deemed as one sane voice which helps the readers to understand what exactly went wrong, when and where.

Despite the multitude of personalities involved in knitting of this story of Mano Majra, one thread that binds each one of them is obviously, the partition. In a larger scenario, one larger nation cracked open into two smaller ones but Khushwant Singh takes its readers to a village where the sub-inspector doubts whether the residents really are aware of the partition. So this raises the question of how do readers place it in the larger canon of riot literature. What is remarkable about this story is not just the repercussions but the way the ideology behind partition actually runs through the life of each of the characters. Every person in one way or the other is witnessing a “partition” in his or her life. The murder of a Hindu moneylender by some Sikh spoilt brats is an example of the religious exclusiveness prevailing in the minds of the people. Juggat Singh’s sexual longing for a Muslim girl emerges as a taboo despite the Hindu-Muslim brotherhood existing in the mainstream village politics. The blunt way in which Jugga treats Nooran is the microcosmic picture of violence inflicted in the macrocosmic outer world. When humanity and sanity surrender, the lustful strangulating hold of a masculine brazen hold becomes unbearable for the woman. This liaison too comes out as one of the several ways in which the people devoid of any partition-knowledge have been victimised and scarred for life. In this case, Nooran reveals that she is carrying Juggat’s baby in her womb, the man who is chided by everyone in the village. This is exactly how partition had created an abysmal rift among the people of diverse affiliations or identities. The way a group of young men in the end, incites the villagers to pick up the arms against Muslims is an example of Marxist ideology where the demand is fulfilled with consent. It is similar to what Louis Althusser defines as the function of ideological state apparatus. The subordination soon transforms itself into oppression in the form of the villagers who nod to kill the people aboard the *train to Pakistan*. The stirring up of the violence in the minds of the otherwise harmonious villagers shows how the structure of the larger nation has been outlined in this not-so-prominent village.

Train to Pakistan is reminder of the fact that even though “to err is human”, human is inherently humane and kind-hearted. The end of the novel reveals the sanity of Jugga who has been outcast by the entire village. What makes his character noteworthy is the way he carries no qualms about what other people say. Eventually, it is Juggat who manages to let the train to Pakistan pass unharmed and acquires redemption. He gives up his life to save the fellow Muslims, including people like Iman Baksh and Nooran, who had always been there for the people of Mano Majra

through thick and thin. The ending attempts to mend the broken heart and fill the fissures caused due to hatred ,yet foregrounds the fact that everything comes with a price. The death of Juggat Singh is a message of how sanity gave way to insanity and fortunately, it did not go in vain. Being a part of conflict literature, *Train to Pakistan* raises the fire of true companionship which was deep buried somewhere below the cold layers of violent verbal and physical exchange , prominent during the partition. Nehru remarked, “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. At the stroke of the midnight hour, India will awake to life and freedom.” It seems this tryst was eventually envisaged to some extent through Khushwant Singh’s Juggat Singh.

REFERENCES

1. Singh K. A Train to Pakistan (Mano Majra); 1956.
2. Jalil R. What is “Partition Literature?” The Friday Times, Vol. XXIV, No.10; 2012.