



TRAUMA OF PARTITION IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*: A STUDY OF CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is a vibrant document of the tragedy of the India-Pakistan partition, human cruelty, dehumanization, and the depletion of morality. This novel depicts how the trauma of partition impacts the characters' psychology and their social behaviour. This tragedy has been depicted through the fictional village Mano Majra, showing how age-old communal harmony falls prey to political interests and religious bigotry. This paper aims to show, through a close analysis of the characters, how the trauma was not limited to physical violence but shook the internal conscience of the characters. Jagga, despite being a dacoit, ultimately emerges as a symbol of humanity and love. His sacrifice shows how individual morality can rise above communal hatred. He transforms his trauma into a resolution to save his beloved, Nooran. Hukum Chand's trauma lies in the helplessness of the system and moral conflict. He is deeply disturbed by the widespread violence and the killing of innocents, which highlights the failure of the administrative system. Iqbal Singh, a foreign-returned social activist, finds his bookish knowledge hollow and useless during the violence. Imam Baksh and Meet Singh, as influential religious figures, represent the trauma of displacement and helplessness respectively. Haseena's trauma lies in the pain of being driven into prostitution due to the chaotic circumstances. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that the Partition was not merely a political event but a profound human tragedy of communal violence.

Keywords: Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*, Trauma, Partition, Characters, Communal Violence, Refugee Crisis, Mano Majra.



Khushwant Singh was born on 2 February 1915 in Hadali (now in Pakistan). His father, Sir Sobha Singh, was a famous builder from Delhi. Khushwant Singh received his early education from Modern School, Delhi, and later attended Government College, Lahore. Following this, he went to London for his higher education, where he earned his LLB from King's College London and became a Barrister-at-Law from Inner Temple. He started his career as a barrister at the Lahore High Court and later joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS). However, he soon devoted his life to literature and journalism. His famous works include *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *A History of the Sikhs* (1963), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), and *Truth, Love and a Little Malice* (2002). In recognition of his contributions, he was honoured with the prestigious Padma Bhushan in 1974 (which he later returned) and the Padma Vibhushan in 2007. He also received the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship and the Tata Literature Live! Lifetime Achievement Award (2013). He breathed his last on 20 March 2014, at the age of 99, in New Delhi.

Trauma is one of the dominant themes in English literature. As it is a very vast and deep area, there are many fields in which trauma can be found. Literature does not record only the events but also shows the psychological wounds which people generally forget, and such things are rarely recorded in history. The theme of trauma is found in Partition literature because here, the pain of being uprooted from one's roots, losing family members, relatives, and near and dear ones during communal violence is depicted. It is also seen in war literature because during the war, many lives are lost, the pain of soldiers is shown, and the theme of existentialism becomes dominant. Wilfred Owen and Ernest Hemingway, among other writers, have depicted it in their works. Bhatnagar writes:

Khushwant Singh was the first Indian novelist in English to write about the horror and holocaust of partition with great artistic concern in *Train to Pakistan*. It is not partition but what it gets associated with and what it becomes symbolic of that attracts the attention of the writer. (Bhatnagar 152)

Trauma is also seen in Holocaust literature, reflecting the atrocities committed against Jews during World War II, as they show concentration camps and dehumanization. Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* are some of the prominent texts. It can



also be seen in postcolonial literature because these countries were colonies of powerful people. It can be found in African-American and feminist literature as well; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are such texts.

In trauma theories, the first name that emerges is Cathy Caruth because she holds the view that trauma is an event which the human brain cannot understand, and it returns in the form of flashbacks. Shoshana Felman emphasizes 'testimony'—how the victims tell their story in order to lessen their pain. In English literature, trauma is not just pain; it is a way of memory and witnessing.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is also based on Partition. William Walsh writes about this novel, "*Train to Pakistan* is tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people. It goes forward in a trim, athletic way, and its unemphatic voice makes a genuinely human comment" (Walsh 18). This novel changes the registered data of history through human emotions and the blood-stained reality of the characters. This novel is a testament to the horrors of Partition due to which many lives were disturbed. The beginning of the novel sets its tone:

The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, 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. The only remaining cases of peace were a scatter of villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra. (Singh 1)

Khushwant Singh has depicted the trauma through his characters in this novel. Juggut Singh (Juggut Singh) is the perfect example in this novel who depicts the predicaments of Partition. It has been aptly stated, "Partition touched Mano Majra at two levels—at the community level and at the individual level. At the community level, it affects very badly the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The dark cloud of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims who have lived together for centuries" (Manawar 31). He is the best character. He has been depicted as an antagonist in this novel; he is a criminal in Mano Majra, six feet tall, strong, sturdy, but a dubious personality on whom the police always keep a watch. The people of Mano Majra



were not ready for any change told by the educated people. One villager says, “Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians—or the Pakistanis” (48).

His trauma begins at the time when his love for Nooran and his social identity start scorching in the communal fire of Partition. He faces psychological trauma when he is arrested for murdering Ram Lal, which he never did. There was communal violence in the village and Juggut Singh was feeling helpless behind the bars of the jail. “... the violence that erupted at the time of the partition is represented in a very unusual way. There is no detailed description in the novel of the train journey undertaken by the refugees-in terms of neither the practical difficulties faced nor the dangers involved” (Roy 36). Juggut Singh knows that he is a criminal but he is not a murderer, but his distorted social image puts him under tension. He has the fear that he will lose his Muslim beloved, Nooran. During Partition, love for a person of a different religion was very risky and Juggut Singh also feels the danger behind his love affair. He knows that he can lose his life as well. His love for Nooran remains the main reason for his tension and trauma because he knows well that if riots break out, then Nooran’s life will be in problem. In the novel, Juggut Singh says, “If you are going to do something good, the Guru will help you; if you are going to do something bad, the Guru will stand in your way. If you persist in doing it, he will punish you till you repent, and then forgive you” (183).

When Juggut Singh comes to his village from jail, he finds a total transformation. He finds that hatred and violence have replaced peace. He notices that militant Sikh youths have incited the village Sikhs to attack the train going to Pakistan, in which their neighbours and old Muslim friends are travelling. This situation is very terrible because the people of his community are inciting him to take revenge in the name of religion. He finds a totally new face of society. He finds the society, which always neglected him, is now inspiring him to become a 'warrior' and commit murder. Juggut Singh now has two ways: either he can become part of the crowd and demonstrate his masculinity and religion, or move on the way his heart allows. Khuswant Singh writes about communal violence:

Muslims said that Hindus had planned and started the killings. On the other hand, the Hindus, put the blame on the



Muslims. The fact is that both sides killed. People belonging to both sides were shot and stabbed, speared and clubbed, tortured, raped. (9)

In this novel, the train has been used as a symbol of trauma and tragedy; it is not a mode of conveyance but a vehicle of death. When Juggut Singh comes to know that the train which is to be attacked also carries his beloved Nooran, his trauma reaches its climax. Now Juggut Singh's personal fear overpowers communal hatred. He comes to know that violence will do no justice to people. He takes a bold decision to stand against the people of his religion in order to save Nooran's life. It is the biggest psychological trauma to stand against those whom he calls his own and to become a traitor in the eyes of his own people.

The last scene of cutting the rope is the climax of the novel. When he is cutting the ropes of the bridge with his sword, his own people fire bullets at him from below. He loses his life, and it cannot be called a religious sacrifice; it can be called a sacrifice for love and human emotion. When Juggut Singh comes to know from his mother that Nooran is going to the refugee camp and is carrying Juggut Singh's child in her womb, he feels very bad. When he comes to know that the Sikhs will attack the train when it passes through Mano Majra railway bridge, Juggut Singh went on the bridge and cuts the rope stretched to sweep off the people sitting on the roof when the train passes through the bridge. The gang leader fires at him and he fell down, "There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went to Pakistan" (190). Juggut Singh wanted to break the endless chain of hatred. His death makes others feel the gravity of the act they were doing. Juggut Singh was a Sikh but he saves the lives of Muslims. He sends a message that only love is the solution to many problems. His journey from being a criminal to a martyr is one of the best examples.

Iqbal Singh is a Western-educated social activist who comes to Mano Majra to bring political changes. His trauma shows the gap between 'modernity' and 'ground reality'. He has logical solutions to every problem, but when the real violence begins, all his theories remain futile. His trauma is that he cannot match the courage of common people (like Juggut Singh). He keeps thinking even during the communal violence, and his foreign education fails to bring any



solution. He is arrested by the police on the suspicion of being a Muslim agent. He thinks of himself as secular and does not link himself to any religion, but he has to resort to his identity (on the basis of circumcision or the sacred thread) in order to save himself; it is the biggest insult and a psychological trauma for anyone. When he comes to know that the train is to be attacked, he does not dare to act like Juggut Singh; rather, he pretends to sleep after drinking. His trauma lies in his cowardly nature, which he tries to hide behind his philosophical arguments.

Imam Baksh and Meet Singh are the protectors of Mano Majra's 'Ganga-Jamuni' culture. Imam Baksh is the Mulla of the village mosque and Bhai Meet Singh is the Granthi of the Gurdwara. Their trauma is the most heartbreaking because the novel narrates the story of the 'betrayal of trust'. Imam Baksh's trauma is related to his helplessness and displacement. The Muslims of the village are told to leave and go to the refugee camps. At that time, Imam Baksh feels so helpless because his entire world is being uprooted. His trauma is that he is being removed as a 'stranger' from the soil where his ancestors are buried. This novel is the story of a man who is being displaced due to his religion. It is not an outcry of one man but of lakhs of displaced individuals. Their trauma is not only of losing their property and money but also of losing their identity and soil. Khushwant Singh by his wonderful narration transforms "the horrendous raw theme into a fine fiction that is steeped in human compassion and love" (Kumar 38-39).

Meet Singh's trauma is of his helplessness because, being a religious teacher, his primary duty is to spread peace and harmony in society. His trauma begins when the outsider Sikh youth use the Gurdwara to spread hatred and violence. He tries to prevent the mob, but his moral voice is neglected. This is the spiritual crisis of a religious man where religion is used for killing instead of love and affection. Kavita Daiya writes in her book *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Post Colonial India* that "the humanistic exploration of violence-its representation, naming, remembrance and reproduction-is essential if we are to uncover the sites and strategies to challenge the discourses that initiate it and then propagate it" (30).

Haseena Kaur is another important character of this novel who is considered just as a commodity. She is a young Muslim girl



whose poverty and circumstances have driven her into the quagmire of prostitution. Her character is a symbol of politics done on women's bodies. Her trauma can be seen on two levels: firstly, she is ostracized on social grounds and secondly, she is considered just like a commodity due to violence among communal tensions. For Hukum Chand, she is a body whom he uses for his mental peace and physical requirements. When she boards the train, she does not know that death is waiting for her at the next turn. She sings in front of Hukum Chand and remains ignorant of the fact that the outside society is thirsty for her blood because she belongs to a Muslim community. Her trauma represents all those thousands of anonymous women who had no role in the Partition, yet became its prey. It is aptly stated:

It is the touching tale of a village, Mano Majra, struck down by the hate and the violence that came with the division of the subcontinent when a train-load of massacred men, women and children arrive in the village. It reveals with pitiless precision a picture of the bestial horrors enacted on the Indo-Pakistan border during the days of 1947. The predominant features of the novel are its stark realism, its absolute fidelity to the truth, and above all, its trenchant exposure of the partition horrors. (Rao & Rani 32–33)

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is a moving portrayal of the India-Pakistan partition. It is not merely a story of political division, but of those people whose world was reduced to ashes overnight in the fire of hatred. The novelist depicts how the centuries-old fraternity between Hindus and Muslims turned into animosity; they suddenly became bloodthirsty for one another, and the condition of the common people in both countries became miserable. In India, Muslims were being killed as they tried to flee to Pakistan: "...for the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them—a haven of refuge where there were no Sikhs" (141). Likewise, in Pakistan, the condition of Hindu and Sikh women was at its worst. Hindus would say, "Our Hindu women are like that: so pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them. We Hindus never raise our hands to strike women, but these Muslims have no respect for a weaker sex" (23). Their stories of sacrifice has been depicted in the following words, "The Sikh refugees had told them of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather



than falling into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered" (142).

Thus, the novel shows how the partition erased human emotions. The novelist depicts the deep-seated fear in people's minds. The barbarism against women and the helplessness of children show that the innocent paid the highest price for partition. "Train to Pakistan" conveys the message that the partition was not just a division of land, but also a division of souls. Khushwant Singh has depicted Hindu-Muslim fanaticism with fearless honesty. He has shown how moves made on the chessboard of politics turned the lives of millions of innocent people into hell. Ultimately, this novel is a saga of the trauma experienced by many displaced and hapless souls.

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