

TRAIN TO PAKISTAN : AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Train to Pakistan was the first English novel to be written on the theme of partition, and it also happened to be Khushwant Singh's first book. Trains happen to be one of the most enduring images of the partition of the subcontinent. An image of overloaded trains, with people pasted on to every possible part of its body – clinging on to the windows, perched precariously on footboards, hanging between the buffers, crowding on the roofs – is what immediately comes to mind while thinking of the partition. It is an image that has been permanently imprinted on the nation's collective imagination, and has become over the decades, a convenient shorthand to refer to the partition.

Keywords :- Partition, Nation, Train, Image, Crowd

Introduction

Train to Pakistan was the first English novel to be written on the theme of partition, and it also happened to be Khushwant Singh's first book. Singh himself was trained as a lawyer and practiced in Lahore High Court till the Partition took him away from his beloved city and landed him, like hundreds and thousands of other Sikhs and Hindus at the time, in Delhi. No other novel that came often it (and three have been many), however famous or brilliant, has been able to supplant it in popularity. It is interesting to note that even novelists who have themselves written on the subject of partition have praised it highly.

Trains to Pakistan is a vignette – the depiction of a sleepily little village called Mano Majra situated on the declared border between the still-to-be formed nations of India and Pakistan, suddenly waking to unprecedented violence and horror on the eve of the partition. The action covers only a few weeks and deals mainly with the predicament of a quite innocent and completely unpolitical people caught up in the whirl wind of the partition. It is noticeable that there is a certain symmetry to the action depicted in that both at the beginning and end of the novel there are identical situations. a trainload of dead bodies (all of them Sikhs) comes from Pakistan at the beginning, and it is decided that a trainload of dead (all of them Muslims) should go over to Pakistan at the end.

In his autobiography, *Truth love & a little Malice : An Autobiography*, Khushwant Singh recalls how on the eve of the partition he had narrowly missed being murdered on his way to Lahore from Abota bad via Taxila, and how the day after he reached Lahore, he had (.....) learn't from the papers that the train by which (he) had travelled had been held up at the signal near Taxila stations and all the Sikh passengers in it dragged out and murdered.

Two things clearly emerge from these reminiscences : first that by 1956, Khushwant Singh had already written fiction that used the village as a backdrop, and second, that he had himself known of many instances of train-related killings on the Punjab border on the eve of the partition.

Before moving on to an analysis of Singh's novel and its depiction of events, it is important to pause and reflect on the symbolic significance of trains with regard to the partition in general and partition literature in particular. Trains happens to be one of the most enduring images of the partition of the subcontinent. An image of overloaded trains, with people pasted on to every possible part of its body – clinging on to the windows, perched precariously on footboards, hanging between the buffers, crowding on the roofs – is what immediately comes to mind while thinking of the partition. It is an image that has been permanently imprinted on the nations collective imagination; and has become, over the decades, a convenient shorthand to refer to the partition.

In striking contrast, in *Train to Pakistan* 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, we are also not shown the violence happening; for there is not even a reported description of the incidents in the novel. We are just informed about the end result of the violence : the trainloads of corpses that arrive at Mano Majra. Khushwant Singh explains the aftermath of the violence, that is, how the trainload of the dead are successively disposed of, how it changes everything in the village; and how another similar event is prevented from happening.

The train, in fact, has a completely different symbolic value in Singh's text inasmuch as it represents an otherwise insulated village's tenuous link with the outside world. Most importantly, the trains running to and from Mano Majra are shown to regulate the life of the village and its inhabitants. The disruption in the railway schedule after the partition functions in the novel as a sign of social chaos.

This is just the prelude to the nightmare that the villagers of Mano Majra have to undergo in the next few weeks in the wake of the partition. There is a succession of violent and unprecedented events that follow each other rapidly in the summer of 1947, leaving the villagers totally helpless and disoriented. Bhai Meet Singh, the priest of the Gurudwar, very aptly sums up what the villagers go through towards the end of the novel of all these 'events'.

It is third event, that is, the eviction of the Muslims from their own village, that is accorded a place of primary in the narrative. It is pathetic the way Chacha Imam Baksh comes to the Sikh assembly and asks their verdict on the sudden decision of the local administration to evacuate the Muslim villagers of Mano Majra in the faint hope that they will ask him and his fellow Muslims to stay.

Conclusion

Hence in a matter of hours, the world of the Muslims in Mano Majra falls apart forever. They are stripped of all their hopes, begin to realize that they are about to lose everything, and yet are powerless to do anything about this. It is unique the way this ironic building up of loss is dramatized in the novel showing the utter helplessness of ordinary people overwhelmed by historical forces that are simply beyond their control, or even their comprehension.

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