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The Tumultuous life of Mano Majra in the Wake of Partition in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract

The action of the novel is mainly located around the small village called Mano Majra on the Indo-Pakistan border. The population of the village has Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Sikhs are more in number. Mano Majra, the small village of the rural India is under the grip of the forces of division following the Partition. Sikhs and Muslims who are almost equal in number form the rural community in this village. The land owners are from Sikh community, Muslim are the mainly the workers of the land. Interestingly there is only one Hindu house in Mano Majra and that belongs to the money lender, Ram Lal. Ram Lal was murdered by Malli and his gang. Unfortunately Juggat Singh and Iqbal were arrested. The ghost train from Pakistan disturbed the life of ManoMajra. The harmonious life in the village was shattered. Hukum Chand failed to do his duty, but he sent all Muslims to the refugee camp at Chuunduunagar. Juggat Singh and Nooran were lovers. At the end Malli planned to attack the train which is from Pakistan to Lahore. Juggat saved the life of Nooran and other Muslims from the holocaust.

Keywords: Mano Majra, harmonious, bloodshed, riot, Lambardar, holocaust, dacoity.

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Narrating a novel is an art. Novel tells about the fictitious event or connected sequence of events. Khushwant Singh observes the turmoil of Partition through his views. After feeling about this he started writing this novel, *Train to Pakistan.* Khushwant Singh was a renowned figure in Indian history of literature. He was one of the famous Indian writers in English. He was a free thinker and an international personality as well. He was also famous as a lawyer and a critic. He is a creative writer and historian too. Khushwant Singh was a man of principle; he never left the country of his career. Many of his stories were set against the background of Indian political movement and the location was Delhi, the author's hometown. At first he began his career as a fiction writer and very soon he played an active role in different fields as a historian, translator and columnist. As multi-faceted personality, he was involved in different professions including law, mediation, radio broadcasting and politics. He was a professional writer. *Train to Pakistan* is a historical novel that recounts the Partition of India in August 1947. Khushwant Singh gives the story from a different angle, instead of representing the Partition in terms of only the political events surrounding it. Singh brings in a human dimension with deep local focus that makes times appear to the readers in awe, horror, and believability.

The sleepy, tiny village of Mano Majra, was disturbed by Partition. Mano Majra becomes a hot spot after arrival of Ghost Train. The peace of Mano Majra was shattered by Partition. The people in the village did not realize the political and social implications of the Partition. All activities of the people were centered around the train which goes to Lahore. Thousands of Hindus, Sikhs were killed. Women were raped in front of their husbands. The dead bodies were

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carried by Ghost Train. By looking the corpses Hukum Chand, the Magistrate was helpless. The communal violence started. *Train to Pakistan* has a different opinion from most of the novels on Partition in respect of canvas and unity of time, place and action. Its action centers around the village of Mano Majra and it covers a period of not more than a month.

> The riot had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of new state Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people- Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs- were in flight. By the time of 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 oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra (Singh 2)

The novel begins with a small paragraph on unusual weather condition of Mano Majra in the month of August. It is very much hot and dry. The holocaust of communal riots continued in the country. The country was divided into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The holocaust of nature considers with the holocaust of partition. The monsoon suggests a change of circumstances of human destiny. " The nature of communal frenzy is like monsoon. Once it is on, it stays for two months or more. Its advent is greeted with joy… But after a few days the flush of enthusiasm is gone. The earth becomes a big stretch of swamp and mud" (Singh 98). Singh portrays the feeling of guilt arose from the violence by Hindus and the Muslims due to division of the country into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The riots had started first in Calcutta and then spread north and east and west. Britishers and political leaders were responsible for these communal riots. Muslims said that Hindus had planned and started killing Muslims. Hindus said that Muslims had planned and started killing Hindus. In fact both sides killed, both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. The riot had

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become rout. By the summer of 1947, the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced . Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were in flight.

> Early in September the time schedule in Mano Majra started going wrong. Trains became less punctual than ever before and many more started to run through at night. Some days it seemed as though the alarm clock had been set for the wrong hour. On others, it was as if no one had remembered to win it. Imam Baksh waited for Meet Singh to make first start. Meet Singh waited for mullah's call to prayer before getting up. People stayed in bed late without realizing that times had changed and the mail train might not run through at all. Children did not know when to be hungry, and clamoured for food all time. In the evenings, everyone was indoors before sunset and in bed before the express come by- if it did come by. Goods train had stopped running altogether, so there was no lullaby to lull them to sleep. Instead, ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra. (81)

The passenger train from Delhi disturbed the routine life of the village people. The arrival of ghost train from Pakistan carried thousand dead bodies of Hindu and Sikh refugees for their funeral at Mano Majra. It creates confusions among the village people. Everyone in the village tried to know much information. Some soldiers collect the fire wood and kerosene from the villagers and planned to bury the bodies in the village station. Villagers get tense and suspicious. After knowing the truth they are gripped with deadly silence. Imam Baksh was shocked that he forgets to do his evening prayer for first time in his life. It shows that the villagers are interested to know the truth behind the ghost train. In this regard, V.A.Shahane, commenting on the novel, says:

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> … train is a dual symbol. It symbolizes life and action. But it also stands for death and disaster. The scene of the train from Pakistan, which brings in countless corpses to Mano Majra, is awful and heartrending. The setting and appearance of the train are in tune with its funeral atmosphere (Shahane 11)

When it was discovered 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 night talking in whispers. "Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him, and thought of finding friends and allies (124). The Partition of India led to the shifting of the Hindus from Pakistan and the Muslims from India. This creates communal riot between Hindus and Muslims in some other parts of India. Muslims who stayed in Chundunnugger were evacuated and shifted to refugee camps. Some of the refugees want to take revenge of their opposite communities. Hukum Chand had a cunning plan to evacuate the Muslims from Mano Majra. It is easy by ordering sub- inspector to set free Mali and his four friends who are arrested in the murder case of Ram Lal. After releasing they have to send Mano Majra to evacuate Muslims from there. But a cruel plan made by Hukum Chand to arrest Juggat and Iqbal under suspicious and they treated as culprits. But the real culprits were released. They enquired Iqbal and they declared Iqbal Singh as a member of Muslim league and called by the police Mohammad Iqbal.

The integral life of Mano Majra and the communal harmony of the villagers were portrayed beautifully in the first chapter. In the beginning we could see the peaceful coexistence and communal harmony and brotherhood life of villagers. It shows the unity among the Hindus and Muslims. Singh beautifully portrays the integrity in diversity that in the fundamental feature of Indian culture. The routine life of Mano Majra before Independence and the disordered life

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after independence were systematically depicted by Singh. The bureaucracy is realized as the narrator says:

> The head constable's visit had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter. Muslims sat and moped in their houses. Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs 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 their 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 Quran being torn up by infidels. Quite suddenly, every Sikh in Mano Majra became stranger with an evil intent. His long hair and beard appeared barbarous, his kirpan menacingly anti-Muslim. For the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them- a refuge where there were no Sikhs.
>
> The Sikhs were sullen and angry. 'Never trust a Mussulman,' they said. The last Guru had warned them that Muslims had no loyalties. (Singh 127-128)

The negative thoughts slowly entered in the minds of the younger generation. One of them says, "Our problem is: what are we to do with all these pigs we have with us? They have been eating our salt for generations and see what they have done! We have treated them like our own brothers. They have behaved like snakes" (Singh 130). On the other hand Meet Singh representing the old generation strongly protest "What have they done to you? Have they ousted you from your lands or occupied your houses? Have they seduced your womenfolk? Tell me,

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what have they done?''(Singh 130) at this critical situation lambardar convinces both Imam Baksh and Sikhs of the necessity of evacuation.

> As far as we concerned, you and your children and your grandchildren can live here as long as you like. If anyone speaks rudely to you, your wives or your children, it will be us first and our wives and children before a single hair of your heads is touched. But Chacha, we are so few and the strangers coming from Pakistan are coming in thousands. Who will be responsible for what they do?'
>
> (Singh 134)

The division of country was not easy. It affected the roots of togetherness that was centuries old. The unity of the villagers disappeared. It developed a mournful numbness and they started weeping. Their belongingness and evacuation made them to feel sad. This feeling is reflected with the tears of young man It is like this, Uncle Imam Baksh. As long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you. We die first and then you can look after yourselves (Singh 133).

Imam Baksh, Meet Singh and several other people began to weeping and says, What have we to do with Pakistan? we are born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers (Singh 133).

Imam Baksh decides to take all Muslims to the refugee camp. Nooran refused to go to Chundunnugger. After getting consolation from Jugga's mother, she was taken away to refugee camp by the train. All Muslims in Mano Majra were evacuated by the Pakistani soldiers. This news surprised one for the lambardar and other Sikhs. But both Muslims and Sikhs were helpless. Muslim officer orders them to leave their cattles, furniture which cannot be taken in

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their trucks and asks lambardar to look after their cattle and other property. But the lambardar refused to do so and the Sikh officers scornfully says,

> You are quite right, Bhaiji, there is some danger of being misunderstood. One should never touch another's property; one should never look at another's woman. One should just let others take one's goods and sleep with one's sisters. The only way people like you will understand anything is by being sent over to Pakistan: have your sisters and mothers raped in front of you, have clothes taken off, and be sent back with a kick and spit on your behinds. (Singh 143)

The soldiers gave the responsibility of looking after the left over property of Muslims of Mano Majra to Malli and his gang. The villagers faced another ghastly scene. They have seen the floating corpses of men, women, and children on flood water. Singh gives a pathetic portrayal of this ghastly scene.

> There were also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies; little children sleeping on their bellies with their arms clutching the water and their tiny buttocks dipping in and out. The sky was soon full of kites and vultures. They flew down and landed on the floating carcasses. They pecked till the corpses themselves rolled over and shooed them off with hands which rose stiffly into the air and splashed back into the water. (Singh 150)

The threatening life of Mano Majra was continued by the arrival of another ghost train in the station. In fact the Partition changed India into a blood- bath. Khushwant Singh portrays the sufferings of Mano Majra people in a realistic way. In the view of Khushwant Singh the pre-Partition scenario was depicted in a beautiful way. He illustrates the tragedy of Partition and

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suggests the carelessness of Indian leadership and they failed to foresee the consequences of division and to handle the situation even after blood bath.

The story becomes a metaphor for the unfortunate situation. At the beginning of the novel the inhabitants of Mano Majra are upset by the news of communal violence in Bengal and Punjab. The general notion is that God is punishing people for their sin. However in spite of disturbances elsewhere Mano Majra maintained its harmony for some time. The brutal summer of 1947, suggests the shape of things to unfold in Mano Majra and other part of the country.

There is shocking transformation in the village. :…. A heavy brooding silence decended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all night talking in whispers. Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him, and thought of finding friends and allies" (Singh 126). Mano Majra's situation is completely reversed. The harmony is lost and people live in mutual suspicion and hatred. There is an exodus from hitherto peaceful hamlet and the result is a ghastly tragedy. The houses of Muslims are ransacked and robbed. The irony of the situation is that Malli, the notorious criminal gets the control of the property of those who have fled from the village. The second part Kalyug describes the horrifying scenes of mass death of hundreds of death bodies. The regulated life of the village becomes shattered by this situation. The life of Mano Majra becomes unusual and uncertain. Everything at Mano Majra goes away from their view. In the third chapter, Mano Majra, the novelist describes the emotional society. The railway station has no train. They sitting on the roof and watching the train. The villagers know that Juggat and Iqbal have nothing to do with the dacoity. Rumours like gentle women raped in the market place and holy Quran being torn up by the infidels make Muslims to hate Hindus, the Sikhs also heard of women were jumping into well and burning themselves rather

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than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were parade naked in public and then murdered. So all Muslim people they are ready to go to the refugee camp.

> They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. Many had eluded they 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 infidels. (Singh 127)

They left their belongings under the custodian of Malli and the gang and they left the village. The fourth part Karma describes the raising Sutlej River and they have heard the death voices from the river. It becomes clear that the people butchered and thrown into the raising Sutlej river. Then they have heard the train sound. It has no light, not even the headlight. The engine does not whistle. The villagers understand that the train has come from Pakistan. A bulldozer came and made a trench and the dead bodies were covered. The Sikh people conducted special prayer for the peace for the departed soul. All the people gathered in Gurdwara and recite prayer. Malli and his gang join with the infidels and they made a cruel plan to take revenge of Muslim people. The young man explains the plan that they would stretch a rope across the first span of bridge about a foot above the funnel of the engine. In order to kill the Muslim people those who will be sitting in the roof of the train. Meet Singh was very much worried. The Lambardar asked others to go to station and to report to the police. Hokum Chand comes to know of the holocaust, he knows things go beyond his control. He advised inspector, Well inspector, let them kill, let everyone kill. It shows the lethargic activity of Magistrate. The magistrate released Juggat and Iqbal because there is no evidence for their crime. So they set free. Juggat came to village and knew about the plan of Malli and his gang. Jugga wants to stop

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the holocaust. So he reached the station and with the help of the knife he cuts the rope. But unfortunately Juggat fell down and died. He saved the life of all Muslims and his lover Nooran . V.A Shahane rightly observes:

> The art of Khushwant Singh is revealed in not merely probing deep into the real but in transporting the actual into symbol and image. His art of realistic portrayal cannot be described merely as an exercise in the book-keeping of existence: in fact, it is a creative Endeavour of transcending the actual, asserting the value of dignity of the individual, and finally, of expressing the tragic splendor of a man's sacrifice for a woman. (Shahane 8)

There is a vivid delineating of the Mano Majra village, its harmonious atmosphere and its sufferings were sketched out by the author. Khushwant Singh was a witness for the violence occurred after Partition. He gives a beautiful description of the tiny village and its turmoil period. Hadali was Singh's birth place. It was in Pakistan. Being his native, he has spent the first half of his life in Pakistan. He has found tremendous amount of passion into the scene of parting, and had produced this fictional village Mano Majra. He included his personal feelings with autobiographical touch. In fact it is a period of tumultuous. The sequence of historical events, the narrative techniques and episodic arrangement in the novel are well planned and are placed in a chronological order. We find coherence in the novel. Apart from this Khushwant Singh imparted symbolic significance and he added romance in each episode. On the whole the novel creates a feeling of satisfaction to the readers.

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