

Element of Violence in Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh

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Abstract – In Train to Pakistan, Khushwant Singh seeks to dramatize various nuances of violence unleashed by partition within the conceptual framework of sin and sacrifice. This is apparent from the way the whole narrative is constructed. In the very beginning of the novel, the author visualizes communal riots in terms of sin that is grounded in the disruption of the normal order. The moral-emotional charge inherent in the description tends to place this violence within a discourse that draws its language from both sacrifice and feud. It even touches the emotional chords in the readers. In contrast to the repulsive hooliganism of the Muslim marauders, it generates pathos.

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This disruption is symbolized, both through nature and through human activity:

The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel.... It was hotter than usual ... No one could remember when monsoon had been so late...People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins.

Some of them had good reason to feel that they had sinned. The summer before the communal riots... had broken out ...Both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. (TTP, 9)

And towards the end of the novel, this violence is contained by the sacrifice of Jugga. Enclosed within this framework of disorder and order, the novelist, at one level, pitchforks the question of violence within the domain of the philosophical anti-violence, in-built into Punjabi cultural ethos. He concedes that violence is an integral aspect of this society, but is careful to distinguish between the violence that degenerates and the violence that rejuvenates. While the communal violence falls within the former category, the self-sacrifice of Jugga, an act of violence in itself, belongs to the latter. The first is abhorred, the second is elevated onto the sublime.

The narrative in Train to Pakistan evolves through a string of violent episodes. The action starts with the murder of Lala Ram Lal. The suspected complicity of Jugga in the murder evokes sharp reactions from the villagers. Embedded in these outbursts is the moral code that governs the Mano-Majrian discourse on violence:

What has happened? ...Ask me what has not happened! ...So we know who did it. This is not the

first murder he has committed.... His father and grandfather were also dacoits... But they never robbed their own village folk... Juggut Singh has disgraced his family. (TTP, 54)

The unprovoked murder of a fellow villager, even if at the hands of a badmash that Jugga is, is a breach of the code. It is violative of the self-endowing cultural identity--that of the nar admi--and hence an act of degenerative violence. Therefore, it cannot be legitimized within its cultural codes. It is demonic. It is sin. The narrative puts the communal violence on the same pedestal. The language employed to describe the communal carnage is that of the demonic. The train carrying the corpses creates an atmosphere of unease and ghastliness:

One day the train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the day of peace...But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality ... The arrival of the ghost train created a commotion in Mano Majra. (TTP, 93-94)

The commotion soon leads to a "melancholic atmosphere" (TTP, 96). The mood is that of bewilderment that arises out of the sense of incomprehensibility of violence. If the violence of Jugga falls outside the cultural code, his crime can at least be attributed to "his blood" (TTP, 55), but not so the violence symbolised by the train. Mano Majrians respond to it through "deathly silence" (TTP,100): People had little to say, and those who did spoke slowly, like prophets ... There was a long silence and people shuffled uneasily on their haunches. Some yawned, closing their mouths with

land invocations to God: “Ya Allah: Wah Guru, Wah Guru.” (TTP, 96)

This silence does not portend understanding, but doom, a time out of joints. The invocation to God becomes a mere mechanical act without meaning, and eventually redundant: “That evening, for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh’s sonorous cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim the glory of God.” (TTP, 100-101)

The situation in Mano Majra epitomises the communal catastrophe of Pakistan, while the reactions of various characters in the novel to the happenings around them typify kinds of moral abnegation and compromise perennial in man and not peculiar solely to the India of 1947. In Mano Majra the Sikh and Muslim communities had lived together with brotherly accord for centuries before the nation-wide separatist hatred “divided” Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as knife cuts through a pat of butter” (TTP, 107). Until the train loads of corpses arrived at the station, the villagers were not even aware that the British had left and the country had been partitioned. However they had no immunity from the mob psychology of communal fear and prejudice which surrounded them. Each community began looking in the mirror of the other’s reflected distortions, and paralleling each other’s obsessions. Thus Muslims prey upon:

Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims 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 their would-be ravishers by killing themselves. (TTP, 107-08)

On the other hand, Sikh refugees had told of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered. (TTP, 108)

Similarly, each community feeds its frenzy on parallel stories of desecration of their holy places.

Khushwant Singh is careful to maintain a balanced view, pointing out that evil of violence was in the nature of man and that the socio-religious concept of ‘community’ served abstract functions like moral exoneration or condemnation. Singh makes it quite clear that on the score of massacres no side was less guilty than another. Thus, while the two communities in Mano Majra pledge their mutual distrust, Jugga and the Muslim girl Nooran pledge their love. While at the lowest end of the moral scale are the parasites of partition who massacre for pleasure and plunder (people like Malli and his dacoits who at the beginning of Train to Pakistan murder the moneylender of Mano Majra and at the end plan to reap a harvest of Muslim death). At the

opposite end of the scale; of course, is Malli’s enemy Jugga, without whom Khushwant Singh’s view would lack a morally-redeeming aspect.

Though brutal violence provides the basis of the story, the restraint with which Singh approaches this subject, particularly at narrative points when excessive or premature description would be at the expense of real-life expectancies, is commendable. Thus Singh so manipulates the point of view that a gradual and refracted revelation of the atrocities is necessary to coincide with the villagers growing suspicious; psychologically the main interest is in the impact the violence makes on their minds and also on Hukum Chand. Moreover, sinister suspense is as much part of the horror as the evidence of butchered corpses and is certainly a key aspect of the psychology of partition violence.

The ultimate breakdown of significance inherent in communal violence is brought to the fore in the closing episodes of the novel. The author achieves this through a scathing irony that evolves through an oppositional drift in the purpose of the communal action and the intent of the language used to describe it. The way the “somewhat effeminate” (TTP, 169) Sikh youth, playing on emotional vulnerability of the peasants, succeeds in manipulating sacred space and sermon in the service of the sectarian, becomes symptomatic of the perversion of the norm and the dissolution of the Manichean categories of good and evil. The Mano Majra code of *nar admi*, instead of saving the Muslim fellow villagers, becomes an instrument of their destruction. The outlaws become heroes and the faithful are marginalized. The whole episode, thus, represents partition violence as a moment of perverse madness, a frenzy that, though couched in the language of feud and sacrifice, essentially thrived in its deliberate distortion.

The author then puts this deviance in broader relief by capping the whole narrative with the self-sacrifice of Jugga. The contrast is obvious. Mob hysteria is replaced by the sober introspection. The deed matches the conviction inherent in the Sikh faith. In Jugga, both the sacrificier and the object of sacrifice become one, giving legitimacy to the act for the larger good of humanity and hence the regeneration of cultural and individual selfhood.

Raj Gill’s perception of the partition violence is different from that of Khushwant Singh’s. If for Khushwant Singh, this violence was an unnatural deviance, for Raj Gill it was the natural expression of the people caught in the “psychic web” (TR, 24) of distrust, suspicion and fear spanned by political opportunism in the name of independence: “The people thought differently. Widespread riots were the voice of the people”.

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