

History as Fiction in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract

Indian independence brought in its wake one of the bloodiest tragedies in the history of India. India was divided into India and Pakistan. It resulted in twelve million people fleeing from their home. Nearly half a million got killed. Tens and thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security in the other side. The natives uprooted from their land had to leave behind their hard earned belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Human beings went against human beings in the name of religion. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs got killed in the whirlpool of religious fundamentalism. The fear on enemies will subside if one move to a distant place. One can also broker peace with enemies and get away from fear. One can make friends with enemies and overcome fear. But partition of India into two nations brought forth a different kind of trauma. A Hindu had to fear every known Muslim he befriended with; every Muslim he did not friend with; every Muslim he did not happen to see before in his life; every Hindu who may have the motive of killing a Hindu to inflame communal violence. The same was the case with a Muslim or a Sikh. This trauma of possible death by anyone around caused severe mental strain and made people act differently. This paper tries to establish that the genre fiction was used by Khushwant Singh to record the history of human suffering.

Introduction

History is a narration of the events which have happened among mankind. It deals with the accounts of the rise and fall of nations. It deals with the great changes which have affected the political and social conditions of human beings. It is based on one hundred percent facts. The writer of history must be objective. He must picture the events as they were without adding any color. But in reality, history has generally become one-sided. It is mostly controlled by governments. The writers of history are always biased towards the country they belong to. Napoleon Bonaparte once told that history was nothing but a fable agreed upon. Winston Churchill commented that history was written by victors. No reader can understand the human predicaments through history; neither can he learn any lesson for his life.

A work of fiction is created in the imagination of its author. The author invents the story and makes up the characters, the plot or storyline, the dialogue and sometimes even the setting. A fictional work does not claim to tell a true story. It immerses the readers in experiences that they may never have in real life, introduces them to types of people they may never otherwise meet and takes them to places they may never visit in any other way. Fiction can inspire, intrigue, scare and engage in new ideas. Literature is important in everyday life because it connects individuals with larger truths and ideas in a society. Literature creates a way for people to record their thoughts and experiences in a way that is accessible to others, through fictionalized accounts of the experience. In *A Defence of Poetry*, P.B. Shelley writes "A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination."(30)

When history is not told in a comprehensible manner or when it is told in such a way to distort facts or when people get to know only one side of the story or when the public is left to understand events and developments in their different ways, some conscientious writer feels the need to write the history in the form of fiction. This sort of writer feels the need for telling the truth in the correct way and help people understand the truth in the way it should be understood. Tim O'Brien says that the fiction is for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth. Albert Camus opines that fiction is the lie through which truth is told. Ralph Waldo Emerson says that fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures. These factors make the appearance of novels based on real events of national or international significance.

The urge to narrate events of national importance, its progression, the consequences and the aftermath results in the production of fiction like *Train to Pakistan*. Taslima Nasreen of Afghanistan produced *Lajja* to tell the world what went wrong and how it went wrong in her motherland. Asokamitran of Tamilnadu, India produced *18th Parallel* to tell the reasons for the forced migration of Hindus from Nizam's Hyderabad to Tamilnadu in 1947-1948. *Propaganda* by Edward Bernays deals with the tremendous impact on manipulating public opinion. It is for anyone who wants to understand how the media frames and repackages the news for public consumption.

In *Train to Pakistan* Khushwant Singh, the author tells the tragic tale of the partition of British India into India and Pakistan and the events that followed. Just on the eve of independence, India was partitioned causing great upheaval in the whole subcontinent. Independence brought in its wake one of the bloodiest carnages in the history of India. The result of this was that twelve million people had to flee away from their homes. "Hindu communities in the east. They traveled on foot, in bullock carts, crammed into lorries, clinging to the sides and roofs of trains. Along the way—at fords, at crossroads, at railroad stations— they collided with panicky swarms of Muslims fleeing to safety in the west". (2)

Nearly one million were killed. Thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a terrible experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs.

The characters of *Train to Pakistan*, the location, and most of the events described are not real but the trainload of dead bodies, the problem, the trauma, the way of thinking of Muslims in India and Pakistan, the state of mind of Hindus in Pakistan and India, the temperament of Sikhs in India and Pakistan, working of the brain when being a member of a majority or minority, the temperament of police, the temperament of judiciary, the problems and trauma encountered by characters, the tears, the deaths, the murders, the sacrifices, the feeling of helplessness, the forced migration, the incitements, the pleasure derived in killing and inflicting pain, the taking of decisions based on religion, the twisting of events and facts to create a desired effect, the meaning of being a religious minority, the rapes etc are real. The human brain is endowed with the power of sifting the history from this kind of fiction. It is also a lesson about how people should and should not behave in such periods of tension and unrest.

Train to Pakistan attempts to describe what has not been described. The story is built on the most delicate side of the event. It describes how things would have happened, how people would have reacted and how the human brain worked during such events. When Khushwant Singh explained the causes of the production of *Train to Pakistan*, he said that the beliefs he had cherished all his life were shattered. He had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country. He had believed that the Indians were peace-loving and non-violent and were more concerned with matters of the spirit, while the rest of the world was involved in the pursuit of material things. After the experience of the autumn

of 1947 he could no longer subscribe to that view. He became an angry middle-aged man and wanted to express his disenchantment with the world by trying his hand at writing.

Khushwant Singh imaginatively recast his historical experience into a work of art. As Srinivasa Iyengar rightly says, “It could not have been an easy novel to write. The events, so recent, so terrible in their utter savagery and meaninglessness, must have defied assimilation in terms of art” (Indian Writing in English 502). The writing of this novel was a kind of ventilation for the author as he felt very bad about the way human beings conducted themselves against other human beings. What impresses most in this description is the author's balanced and unprejudiced account of this tragedy. He writes: “Muslim said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured, both raped.” (5)

The invention of Mano Majra, Juggut Singh, Nooran, Iqbal, Malli and Meet Singh are nothing but springboards to launch the history of partition and the history of religion induced human suffering. These are the platforms where the author displays history. The village Mano Majra is shown situated in the Indian state of the Punjab near the borderline that divides India and Pakistan. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus are shown living there helping each other, respecting each other and even having a common village deity Deo. Though the village and the setting are imaginary, the harmony among the members of the three religions and the culture of the village are not imaginary. These are the situations and the practices of almost all villages in the border area. These are very much clear from

“It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque...There are only about seventy families in Mano Majra, and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs

or Muslims, about equal in number. The Sikhs own all the land around the village; the Muslims are tenants and share the tilling with the owners....But there is one object that all Mano Majrans—even Lala Ram Lal—venerate. This is a three-foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keekar tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the *deo* to which all the villagers—Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo-Christian—repair secretly whenever they are in a special need of a blessing." (2-3)

The villagers of Mano Majra are shown least bothered about Indian politics, they are unaffected by the developments pivoting on religion. The history is also that almost all of the villages bordering Pakistan in the Indian state of the Punjab did not know whether India got freedom or there was a religion based partition. The history is that the people lived in the border villages considered members of other religions as relatives. Differences based on religion did not affect them. People used words like ‘uncle’ ‘brother’ ‘mother’ ‘sister’ etc to address each other. It helped them move closer. For example "He was known to the villagers, not as Imam Baksh or the mullah but a chacha, or 'Uncle'. (84)

Khushwant Singh pictures the friendly nature of members of Sikhs when they began to hear about religious unrest. The history of the feeling of brotherhood is clearly told through Sikh characters. One of the younger men spoke “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” (133). Uncle Imam Baksh replies ‘What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers.’ Imam Baksh broke down. Meet Singh clasped him in his arms and began to sob. Several of the people started crying quietly and blowing their noses. (133)

The amity and friendship are slowly shattered by outside sources. People driven out of Pakistan began to gather in Manomajra. It was feared that the inflowing and aggrieved people gathering in the village might retaliate against the Muslims in the village. The refugees might

view the Muslims of Mano Majra as the extension of the Muslims who drove them away from Pakistan. This was pictured in the novel. “It is for your own safety that I advise you to take shelter in the camp for a few days, and then you can come back. As far as we are concerned,’ he repeated warmly, ‘if you decide to stay on, you are most welcome to do so. We will defend you with our lives.’ (135)

The amity and friendship between the members of different religious groups in Mano Majra are shown shattered by another outside factor. Fear and mistrust are planted new by Sikh youths who come from outside. Friends seem to be enemies, long lasted trust gets collapsed after incitement and misinterpretation. Religion is one of the easy instruments to incite and make enemies of friends. This history is pictured in this novel as

“‘Is there anyone beloved of the Guru here? Anyone who wants to sacrifice his life for the Sikh community? Anyone with courage?’ He hurled each sentence like a challenge”. (158) “Some villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer. Each time anyone raised his hand the youth said ‘Bravo,’ and asked him to come and sit apart. More than fifty agreed to join in the escapade.” (160)

During the time of partition, the perpetrators of crime brought back old and forgotten matters to incite. General ill feelings against particular religions were kindled or used as launchers to incite. This History is given in the chapter Mano Majra “‘Never trust a Mussulman,’ they said. The last Guru had warned them that Muslims had no loyalties....And what had they done to the Sikhs? Executed two of their Gurus, assassinated another and butchered his infant children; hundreds of thousands had been put to the sword for no other offense than refusing to accept Islam;”(128)

The emotions of people were roused by the rumors spread by both the communities about the barbaric deeds of each other, was described by the author through the mounting tension between Sikh and Muslims who had hitherto lived in amity in Mano Majra. As the

village got divided into two halves, Muslims and Sikhs gathered in separate groups and talked of inhuman savagery of each other. Muslims brooded over the rumors of atrocities done by Sikhs: "They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. They had heard of mosques being desecrated by the slaughter of pigs on the premises, and copies of the holy Koran being torn by infidels." (142) Sikhs on the other hand feel. "Never trust a Musalman". 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.

The communal groups promote the interests of their members and in doing so they are hostile to the interests of other groups. The communal groups try to provoke other groups through their fundamentalist speeches and actions that lead to violence and lawlessness in society. The fear complex could be fully aroused by propagating that their religious interests and their religion itself were in danger. Sikhs tell "... Muslims were never ones to respect women. Sikh refugees had told of women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims." (133) And Muslims tell

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 copies of the Holy Quran being torn up by infidels. Quite suddenly, every Sikh in Mano Majra became a stranger with 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. (127-128)

Khushwant Singh comments on the Hindus and the Muslims in their involvement in the partition riots. Thus though unity prevails in the village Mano Majra, communalism had descended on the village. Partition had brought about division to the lives of people in Mano Majra. Sikhs become aggressive when their self-respect is challenged. They say:

For each Hindu or Sikh, they kill, kill two Mussulmans. For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. For each home, they loot, loot two. For each trainload of the dead, they send over, send two across. For each road convoy that is attacked, attack two. That will stop the killings on the other side. It will teach them that we can also play this game of killing and looting. (129)

Khushwant Singh tells those religious sentiments if incited can attack even friends. Though this incitement shown was not history but fiction, incitements more or less of this kind would have been used to incite tension. “The curse of this country. You quote the Guru about women; why don’t you tell us what he said about the Mussulmans? “Only befriend the Turk when all other communities are dead.” (158) People are very much vulnerable to sentiments and incitements based on religion can make their blood boil. “Some villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer. Each time anyone raised his hand the youth said ‘Bravo,’ and asked him to come and sit apart. More than fifty agreed to join in the escapade”. (160)

Police could not stop mass killing or outrage was very evident in the following lines. A sub-inspector explains that the police force could not be effective against mobs at that time of religious unrest. When the mob outnumbered police, the police could only stand and stare. "There are mobs of twenty to thirty thousand armed villagers thirsting for blood. I have fifty

policemen with me and not one of them would fire a shot at a Sikh". (166) Though police and the military were trying to control the situation, so many got killed. If one wonders how that would have happened, Khushwant Singh has his answer. This could not have been an exaggeration. This was a possible incident.

The Bhai told me of a truck full of Baluch soldiers who were going from Amritsar to Lahore. When they were getting near the Pakistan border, the soldiers began to stick bayonets into Sikhs going along the road. The driver would slow down near a cyclist or a pedestrian, the soldiers on the footboard would stab him in the back and then the driver would accelerate away fast. They killed many people like this and were feeling happier and happier as they got nearer Pakistan. They were within a mile of the border and were travelling at great speed. What do you think happened then?(71-72)

Train to Pakistan is history told in the form of a novel. Though it cannot be officially accepted as history, for conscientious readers it is the history of the turmoil of human beings during the partition of India into India and Pakistan.

Works Cited

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