



MANO MAJRA – A MICROCOSM OF COMMUNAL TEMPER OF RURAL INDIA IN KHUSHWAAT SINGH’S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

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Cite This Article: Dr. R. Priya, “Mano Majra – A Microcosm of Communal Temper of Rural India in Khushwaat Singh’s Train to Pakistan”, International Journal of Applied and Advanced Scientific Research, Volume 3, Issue 1, Page Number 360-361, 2018.

The ‘Rural Novel’ is a recent emerging genre, which has gained a recognizable identity as novel subspecies of the social novel in Indian English Literature. This particular branch of Indian fiction had grown slowly and steadily since 1920. Now it evolved into a rich body of literature. Now the rural novel was grown over years in bulk, variety and maturity and also invites a close scrutiny and evaluation in terms of its significance and achievement.

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is a ‘pure rural novel with a political bias, projecting a picture of the partition tragedy enacted in a village in the Punjab on the Indo – Pakistan border on the banks of the river Sutlej. It is a tragic tale of the unforeseen and sudden disruption of the village called Mano Majra in account of the communal flare – up. The novel was set up in 1947 and the frontier between India and Pakistan becomes the scene of rioting and blood – shed. But to the village of Mano Majra, where the Sikhs and Muslims have always lived peacefully together, ‘partition’ does not mean much. Life is regulated by the trains which rattle across the nearby river – bridge. Once, a train comes over the bridge, at an unusual hour, filled with massacred Muslims. Some days later, the village turns into a battle – field.

Though, *Train to Pakistan* is a realistic story of political hatred on violence, it had beautiful topographical and social structure of Mano Majra, a typical Punjabi village. This tiny village is blessed by Sutlej with its perennial flow of water. There is a small railway station near the village, and the Sutlej is spanned by a railway bridge. Mano Majra, the fictional village is predominantly Muslim and Sikh. Singh shows how they lived in a bubble, surrounded by mobs of Muslims who hate Sikhs and mobs of Sikhs who hate Muslims, while in the village they had always lived together peacefully. Villagers were in the dark about happenings of larger scope than the village outskirts, gaining much of their information through rumor and word of mouth. This made them especially susceptible to outside views. After the Muslims leave to a refugee camp from where they will eventually go to Pakistan, a group of religious agitators comes to Mano Majra and instills in the local Sikhs a hatred for Muslims and convinces a local gang to attempt mass murder as the Muslims leave on their train to Pakistan.

Presenting the topography of the village, Khushwant Singh writes:

Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the money – lender Lala Ram Lal. The rest of the village is a cluster of flat – roofed mud huts and two – walled courtyards, which front on narrow lanes that radiate from the center. Soon the lanes dwindle into footpaths and get lost in the surrounding fields. At the western end of the village there is a pond ringed round by keekar trees. (TTP, 2).

The village consists of only about seventy families and Lala Ram’s is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs owned all the land around the village and the Muslims are tenants and share the land with their owners. The Muslims sometimes visit the Sikh temples also. There are small colonies of shopkeepers and hawkers have grown up around the station to supply travelers with food, betel leaves and Sweetmeats.

The daily routine of Mano Majra is that by the time 10.30 in the morning, a passenger train from Delhi comes to the village railway station and the people started their usual work. Men are in the fields and women are busy with their routines. Children are out to gaze the cattle by the river side. At the midday, the village stops to rest. After their food, the men gather in the shade of the Peepal tree to talk and sleep. The boys ride their buffaloes into the pond and play in the mud. The girls usually play under the trees. During evening time, the passenger train from Lahore comes in to the station. After that, the cattle are driven back home. All the people eat their supper and too sleep.

The agrarian and bucolic life of the placed Mano Majra village is portrayed with at most realism and precision. The village that emerges from the novelist’s pen is not a mere body with local color but a living protagonist. Villages in India are symbols of peaceful and still – life. But as crony would have it, the still – life of the village is totally disrupted by some unforeseen incidents. One heavy Night in the August of 1947, the village is attacked by professional robbers and dacoits. The money – lender, Lala Ram Lal, is killed by them and Juggut Singh is declared as the murderer. Juggut, as we know from the story, is busy in love – making with the Muslim girl Nooran, and hence he is least interested in looting and robbing. The placidity of the village is, thus, broken by dacoits, murder and romance.

One day a train loaded with corpses from Pakistan crosses the railway bridge, refugees pour in and ruthless slaughter goes on. The Sikhs retaliate and the tragedy worsens. The peaceful life of the villagers recedes back when the communal Virus infects the villagers. Old roots of love are destroyed and revenge becomes the passion of the day. The novelist depicts the scenes of rioting and bloodshed with brutal realism. For instance, the following passages describe the village life torn with violence:

Muslims hear the news of gentlewomen having their veils taken off. Being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the market place. (TTP, 105).

Sikh refugees tell of, women jumping into wells and burning themselves rather than fall into the hands of Muslims. (TTP, 106).

Khushwaut Singh's objectivity is seen in his portrayal of characters like Iman Baksh, the Mullah and Meer Singh, the Sikh Priest, who is symbols of goodness, kindness and mercy. Even in the stormy days of riots they try to reconcile the rioting parties and establish peace, harmony and love. The novelist is nowhere seen being carried away by prejudice of passion. His is an absolutely objective documentation of the social life in rural India. To quote an example of his sardonic wit:

India is constipated a lot of humbug. Take religion. For the Hindu, it means little besides caste and co protection. For the Muslims, circumcision and kosher meat. For the Sikh, long hair and hatred of the Muslims. (TTP, 149).

Khushwaut Singh's ability in evoking rural atmosphere is beyond question. Though he does not make a parade of social custom, religious rituals and superstitions, we get in the novel some glimpses of the socio-religious life in the Punjab. The superstitious nature of the villagers is regaled in some scenes like "*There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins*". (TTP, 1) Though the novelist does not make a display of reelect idiom, the sporadic snapshots of outdoor and agrarian life are really superb. For example:

With the monsoon the tempo of life and death increases. Almost overnight grass begins to grow and leafless trees turn green. Snakes, centipedes and scorpions are born out of nothing. The ground is strewn with earthworms, lady birds and tiny frogs – Geckos dart about filling themselves with insects. (TTP, 81).

We get a grand in the graphic description of the flooded Sutlej on the story. Apt agrarian imagery is sporadically found in the novel. Village life is not necessarily devoid of romance. When Jugga takes Nooran down he utters: "*That is all you want, and you get it. You are just a peasant. Always wanting to sow your seed.*" (TTP,13). Describing a Punjabi peasant's poor paraphernalia, the novelist writes: "*A Punjabi peasant's baggage consists a little besides a change of clothes, a quill and a pillow, a couple of pitchers, cooking Utensils, and perhaps a grass plate and a copper tumbler or two. All those can be put on the only piece of furniture they possess – a charpoy.*" (TTP, 116).

The total environment of Mano Majra, Khushwant Singh creates in *Train to Pakistan* before the shifting of Muslim population to nearby refugee camp at Chundunnugger, is of communal peace and harmony. The partition of India, in 1947, is a shock to the inhabitants of this village. However, the Muslim officer's sarcastic reaction to the Lambardar's address to his Muslim neighbours as 'brothers' makes both Hindus and Muslims feel that they belong to two different identities. The officer inculcates the feeling among the crowd present there that the relationship between Hindus and Muslims are hostile and it cannot be the relationship of brotherhood; both Hindus and Muslims are of two separate identities. There is the wry realism of approach here that seems a part of the culture -- as the author inspects the seamy sides of his good men as well as their assertions for good and presents a fascinating picture of the devious manipulation of group thought.

Thus the entire novels throw with life. As critic observes: "*His accounts of Sikh life in the Punjab Villages – are true to life and photographic.*" Therefore Khushwaut Singh's novels and characters are convincing. It is rightly considered that *Train to Pakistan* is the finest novel in the post – Second World War Indo – Anglian fiction. Born and raised for a time in his childhood in a Punjabi village, Khushwaut Singh has produced this rural classic out of his first – hand experience of village life. Khushwaut Singh presented the village imagery with realism, lively spirit, effective irony and sardonic wit. His village in the novel, Mano Majra is not mere product of his novelistic imagination but a real, living Indian village made more alive by the deadly drama of partition.

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