

A Thematic Analysis of Khushwanth Singh's Novel

“Train To Pakistan”

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the thematic analysis of the historical novel titled “Train to Pakistan” written by Khushwant Singh. This novel vividly portrays the Partition of India through the lens of the border village, Mano Majra, where Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims initially lived in harmony. However, the novel takes a tragic turn due to the political events that occurred during the partition period. The paper explores several predominant themes, including partition, religious relationship and humanity amid chaos. These themes are analysed through the main characters of the novel: Juggat Singh (Jugga), Hukum Chand, Imam Baksh, Nooran and Bhai meet Singh. The study shows how these characters respond differently to the crisis, especially how Jugga's sacrifice stands out as a symbol of hope and moral courage. Overall, the paper argues that “Train to Pakistan” is not just a historical novel, but also a powerful reflection of human values, religious tolerance, and the importance of individual choices during difficult times. In conclusion, this paper explores the microcosm of the small border village Mano Majra, to highlight the larger emotional and moral impact of the Partition on everyday people and the transformation of the religious relationships.

KEYWORDS: Partition, Mano Majra, Sacrifice, Violence, Harmony, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) was a renowned figure of Indian literature. He was an author, critic, journalist, novelist, lawyer, historian and a keen observer of society. He was born in Hadali, Khushab, India (now in Pakistan). Khushwant Singh described himself as an agnostic (a person who is not sure if God exists or not) in his work “Truth, Love and a Little Malice”. He received several prestigious honours like ; Padma Bhushan(1974), Padma Vibhushan(2007) and Sahitya Akademi Fellowship by Sahitya academy of India

(2010) He made significant contributions to India's partition literature through his acclaimed works: "Train to Pakistan", "The Sikhs" and "Delhi: A Novel". Khushwant Singh combines realistic storytelling with a subtle humanism that reveals his concern for compassion, justice, and moral complexity. In addition to literary achievements, Singh was active in politics. He served as the member of Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the parliament between 1980-1986 and he was honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 1974 in recognition of his contributions to the nation. However, following the Indian Army's military operation at the Golden Temple in 1984, he returned the award as a form of protest. Later, in 2007, he was again recognized by the Indian government with the prestigious Padma Vibhushan, the country's second-highest civilian award. As a public figure, Khushwant Singh was often criticized for his support of the Congress party, particularly during Indira Gandhi's tenure. He backed the Emergency declared in 1975, earning the label of an "establishment liberal." However, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, following Indira Gandhi's assassination, deeply shook his faith in the political system. Despite this, he remained hopeful about Indian democracy and supported justice efforts through the Citizen's Justice Committee. His famous works are; Train to Pakistan (1956), I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1959), Delhi: A Novel (1990), The Company of Women (1999) and Truth, Love & a Little Malice (2002).

This paper explores the analysis of themes in the Historical novel "Train to Pakistan". The novel was published in the year 1956. Khushwant Singh wrote this book with the inspiration of his own experiences during the Partition of India. Khushwant Singh also penned the characters of the novel from his own observation of the people in Mano Majra- close to Lahore during the partition of India. The novel is written in a realistic tone and in the third person omniscient narrative style. The setting of the novel is a fictional boarder village – Mano Majra. The novel depicts the lives of ordinary people in the fictional village of Mano Majra. This novel explores how a peaceful rural community is disrupted by a political decisions and religious hatred. Train to Pakistan is particularly notable for its realistic portrayal of the violence and its focus on the human experience. Through the close analysis of the characters Jugga, Imam Baksh, Hukum Chand, Bhai Meet Singh and Nooran described in the novel, this paper analyses the predominant themes of the novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Train to Pakistan” written by Khushwant Singh gives a powerful and emotional picture of how Partition affected ordinary people, especially in rural areas. Many critics praise the book for showing the pain, confusion, and violence that took place during that time without taking sides politically. Many scholars appreciate how Singh uses real events and facts in the story because of his background as a journalist. The way he describes the village, the trains carrying dead bodies, and the rising tension between communities makes the story feel very real. Critics have said that Singh tells the story in a very straightforward and clear way, which helps readers understand the seriousness of the Partition.

However, some critics have also pointed out that the novel doesn’t focus much on women’s experiences during Partition. While female characters like Nooran are present, their voices are not as strong as in other Partition novels, such as Pinjar by Amrita Pritam. Feminist writers say that the book explores the events of the novel in the male perspective than through the female point of view, they consider it as a flaw in this book. In terms of storytelling, Khushwant Singh uses a very simple and direct style. He writes in plain language, and the story moves in a straight line from beginning to end. This makes the novel easy to follow but also very powerful. Critics admire how Singh can say so much with such few words, and how he keeps the focus on the emotional side of the story rather than just the political facts.

In comparison to other Partition novels like Ice-Candy-Man or Pinjar, Train to Pakistan stands out for its focus on human values and moral choices. Instead of just showing suffering, Singh shows how people had to decide between right and wrong in very difficult situations. This makes the novel not just a story about Partition, but a deeper look into human nature.

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

“Train to Pakistan” novel is divided into 4 chapters : Dacoity, Kalyug, Mano Majra and Karma. The novel is set during the summer of 1947 in Mano Majra – a border village near Indo-Pak border. The novel opens in a peaceful village where Sikhs and Muslims are living in a peaceful way, but the peace of the village is disrupted because of the arrival of the ghost train. It is a symbolic representation of the trauma during partition. The Ghost train was carrying dead bodies of Sikhs from Pakistan which created a major disrupt in the village. The people of the village had an understanding and friendly relationship irrespective of the religion, it can be viewed

through the characters Bhai Meet Singh, the priest and Imam Baksh. Jugga, the badmash also had a secret relationship with Nooran. The novel also navigates the readers through the incident of moneylender Ram Lal Singh's murder by the dacoits (Malli and his gang who was the true culprits) but falsely the badmash Jugga and the social worker Iqbal Singh was arrested and it created a ambiguity in the village. Hukum Chand being the magistrate of the village after knowing the true culprits he arrested them and he did not punish him, he punished Jugga and Iqbal and at the end of the novel he released them. The river Sutlej near the village were filled with dead bodies which created a chaos in the village and then the government responds the plan that Muslims in the near by villages should be relocated to the refugee camp in Chundunnagar. The Muslims of Mano Majra are taken to Pakistan by train. This incident created a tension in the village where a boy appears to Mano Majra and he triggers Sikhs that Muslims are the one who started to kill so in revenge, he calls a group of volunteers to attack the train which goes to Pakistan. The people who was harmonious initially has now turned violent and gathered to attack the train even though knowing that the train also has their own people (i.e.) Muslims of Mano Majra. Jugga and Iqbal came to know about this incident after their release but Iqbal had no idea to stop the massacre but Jugga who a badmash he sacrificed his life (The reason for Jugga's sacrifice is that the train also had his lover Nooran) and stopped the attack and the train went to Pakistan.

CHARACTERS

The predominant characters in the novel are;

- **Juggat Singh** – (Jugga) A local badmash turned into a hero at the end of the novel.
- **Nooran**- A Muslim girl who was in Love with Jugga.
- **Hukum Chand**- Magistrate of the village.
- **Bhai meet Singh**- Priest of the Sikh temple.
- **Imam Baksh**- Head of the Muslim Mosque.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This paper focuses mainly on the themes of partition, religious relationship and humanity amid chaos. These themes can be analysed through the characters: Jugga, Hukum Chand, Imam Baksh, Nooran and Bhai meet Singh.

- **PARTITION:**

“Train to Pakistan” novel predominantly focuses on the theme partition, the novel is set during the partition period and its main aspect is, it explores the life of Mano Majra during the partition time. In reference to the novel;

“If possible, get the Muslims to go out peacefully.”

“There must be no killing. Just peaceful evacuation.”(Pg:23)

These two lines from the text directly explain the situation of Mano Majra during the partition of Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The above lines clearly indicate that Muslims should be evacuated to Pakistan as by the Law and order and the magistrate Hukum Chand wants them to be evacuated in a safe and peaceful manner. They did not prefer bloodshed during evacuation.

The impact of partition can be seen through the lines;

“All Muslims going to Pakistan come out at once. Come! All Muslims. Out at once. ‘Slowly the Muslims began to come out of their homes, driving their cattle and their bullock carts loaded with charpais, rolls of bedding, tin trunks, kerosene oil tins, earthen pitchers and brass utensils.’(Pg 141)

“I have no arrangement to take all this luggage with bullock carts, beds, pots and pans. This convoy is not going to Pakistan by road. We are taking them to the Chundunnugger refugee camp and from there by train to Lahore. They can only take their clothes, bedding, cash and jewellery. Tell them to leave everything else here. You can look after it.”(Pg 142)

The above lines depict that Muslims are evacuating to a refugee camp in Chundunnugger and from there they are moved to Pakistan by Train. These scenes are so surreal that Muslims who lived in Mano Majra for years now they are Moving to an entire new place leaving all their properties, belongings and their relationship. These scenes create a sense of detachment from their Homeland (Mano Majra) to Host land (Pakistan).

Theme of partition in Train to Pakistan can also be analysed through the symbols used by Khushwant Singh in the novel. The main symbol used in the novel is ‘Train’. The village Mano Majra is always known for its Railway station. The life of the people in Mano Majra is also linked with trains where it is described in the novel as;

"Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge, the driver invariably blows two long blasts on the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake.... By the time the 10:30 morning passenger train from Delhi comes in, life in Mano Majra has settled down to its dull daily routine... .. As the midday express goes by, Mano Majra stops to rest. Men and children come home for dinner and the siesta hour..... When the evening passenger from Lahore comes in, everyone gets to work again. The cattle are rounded up and driven back home to be milked and locked in for the night. The women cook the evening meal..... When the goods train steams in, they say to each other, 'There is the goods train.' It is like saying goodnight." (Pg 4-5)

The life of Mano Majra is connected to train in such a way that, the people in the village uses the movement of trains in the railway bridge of Mano Majra to do their daily chores. The train is used as symbol of death to supports the theme of violence and partition . Khushwant Singh defines the train as 'Ghost trains' where it is used as a medium to symbolise violence of partition, where it carries the death corpses of both Muslims and Sikhs which creates a sense of ambiguity among the villagers.

- **RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIP:**

Khushwant Singh penned the characters of the novel through his real-life experience of the visiting the village in Lahore during the partition of India which gave him the characters. Mano Majra is a symbol of religious harmony. Khushwant Singh realistically portrayed the relationship between Sikhs and Muslims, this can be analysed through Imam Baksh and Bhai Meet Singh through the lines;

"The mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the morning prayer. He has a quick wash, stands facing west towards Mecca and with his fingers in his ears cries in long sonorous notes, 'Allah-o-Akbar'. The priest at the Sikh temple lies in bed till the mullah has called. Then he too gets up, draws a bucket of water from the well in the temple courtyard, pours it over himself, and intones his prayer in monotonous singsong to the sound of splashing water." (Pg 4,5)

Imam Baksh, the Mullah and Bhai Meet Singh, the priest both respect their religion equally. Their friendship symbolises the Interfaith trust. The split in the trust is because of the decision of evacuating Muslims out of the village. The Sikhs believe that this evacuation will prevent bloodsheds for the Muslims. They believed it is a safety. Khushwant Singh also draws the innocence of the Sikh villagers through the lines:

“The news that the Mano Majra Muslims were going to Pakistan came as a surprise. The lambardar had believed they would only go to the refugee camp for a few days and then return.” (Pg 142)

It explains that, Sikhs believed the evacuation is a temporary mission for the harmony of Muslims. But it was not so, the evacuation of the Muslims to refugee camp was to make them move temporarily to Pakistan. This created a sense of split among their relationships and the Sikhs turned sorrowful because of the Forced separation. But their friendship and trust which was created generations ago is destroyed because of the political decisions.

This religious relationship also created a shift from communal harmony to communal violence where the Sikh – Muslim had a good relationship before the Partition of India. They had a harmonious relationship with each other but the political decision turned them into a violent people where through the end of the novel, Khushwant Singh portrays the violence in a way that Sikhs assuming Muslims where the reason for the Violence against the Deaths of Sikhs, they planned a mission to derail the Train to Pakistan carrying Muslim refugees, the Villagers also know that the train also carried their own Muslim villagers.

- **HUMANITY AMID CHAOS:**

The theme of Humanity can be analysed through the character Jugga, he was once a badmash but at the end he turns out to be Protector of the Muslim lives. Singh shows that Humanity is deeper than religion. Jugga (Sikh) was in love with Nooran (a Muslim girl) which made him to be a scarifier. Jugga after Knowing the conspiracy made by the peer villagers against the train to Pakistan, he wanted the train to reach Pakistan. In order to do so, Jugga decided to cut the rope in the track but it failed and to save the Muslims of Mano Majra he laid his body and sacrificed his life and he protected the train. These are represented in the lines;

“The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.” (Pg 190)

The true love and the relationship made Jugga to safeguard his life for his own Muslim villagers and his lover Nooran. Jugga once a trouble maker, he evolved into a figure of selfless courage. His true love made him to take a moral stand even in the face of extreme violence and fear.

CONCLUSION

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is a powerful story that shows how the Partition of India affected ordinary people. Instead of focusing on big political events, the novel tells us what happened in a small village called Mano Majra, where people of different religions once lived together peacefully. The Partition brings fear, confusion, and pain, breaking apart families and friendships. One important theme in the novel is the Partition itself, which caused people to lose their homes, their loved ones, and their sense of safety. It was not just about drawing a border—it changed people's lives forever.

Another theme is the relationship between different religious communities, especially Sikhs and Muslims. Before Partition, they lived like family, sharing everyday life. But after the violence started, they were forced to see each other as enemies. Still, the novel shows that love and trust between people can survive even in hard times, like in the story of Jugga and Nooran. Khushwant Singh's use of humanity in the middle of chaos created a sense of touch for the readers. When the world around them falls apart, some people still choose to do what is right. Jugga's final act of saving the train shows that even one person's courage can make a big difference. In conclusion of the paper, the novel "Train to Pakistan" is not just about history—it's about people. It teaches us that even in times of hate and fear, kindness, love, and bravery still exist, and that gives us hope.

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