



PORTRAYAL OF (SATIRICAL) CHARACTERS IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*

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ABSTRACT

*In Indian English literature, Khushwant Singh remains forever in the hearts of the people as an excellent historian, outstanding novelist, a straightforward political commentator, lively translator, a fantastic observer and social critic. Singh, a short story writer par excellence is arguably one of the most eminent authors occupying a distinguished position in the history of Indo Anglian literature. In his writing (from *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* published in 1951 to *The Sunset Club* published in 2010) spanning for more than 60 years, Singh has been an indefatigable and versatile writer. He has to his credit various achievements – as a short story writer, novelist, historian, translator, journalist, social critic, diplomat and essayist. He has published six novels, six short story collections and several collections of essays on different aspects of life and on the people of India. In addition, he has written a number of articles for newspapers, magazines and journals. Besides this he has published two volumes on Sikh history which is regarded as one of his best works. Singh, a most prolific and flourishing writer, has at the same time also been a controversial figure for one or the other reason.*

INTRODUCTION

Singh's first work of fiction *Train to Pakistan* concentrates on two important themes. It deals with the village Mano Majra and the events which describe the partition of India into India and Pakistan; and its effects on the village situated in the Punjab. Mano Majra is the protagonist of the story and no other character is given such importance as the village. The plot of the novel begins and closes at Mano Majra the centre of the novel. Singh also includes a love story in the novel. There is love affair between Jugga a Sikh dacoit and a protagonist of the novel and Nooran a Muslim girl of the village, the daughter of Imam Baksh, the Mullah of Mano Majra. The love theme and the theme of partition work as metaphors with reference to each other. In the climax of the novel there is a triumph of love as Jugga sacrifices his own life to save his lover Nooran who is among the hundreds of Muslims evacuated and who are travelling by train from India to Pakistan.

There are three important characters in the novel through whom Singh lampoons the individuals in particular and bureaucrats, priests and social workers in general. Haydn Moore Williams commenting on the satire used in the novel *Train to Pakistan* says:

“With effective satirical irony Singh shows the failure of various key characters to solve the appalling dilemma presented by the partition crisis.”ⁱ

First of all there is a character called, Hukum Chand, the Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner of the District, who is a corrupt administrator and a typical bureaucrat. While commenting on the duplicity of his character, S. K. Dubey says:

Hukum Chand’s character is representative of the bureaucracy which functions in a manner aimed at saving its own skin in any critical situation whatever the immediate problem of the people, their hopes and despair, and also it has its own method of dealing with sensitive issues, not losing any in-between opportunities to enjoy life in its own way of uplifting the spirit and in the process drowning all norms of morality and reasoning.ⁱⁱ

Hukum Chand as a Magistrate has to protect the rights and the moral and human values; but he indulges in crooked and wicked activities. He hires Haseena, a sixteen year old girl, a prostitute who is just as old as his daughter to meet his sensual pleasures. To quote the words of Ranjan Kumar:

Hukum Chund loves both wine and women. He gets excited to see a young woman singer in his house. There is a satirical dig at magistrate’s character-how he is lost in wine unmindful of his duties.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reiterating the corrupt and promiscuous nature of Hukum Chand, Haydn Moore Williams says:

The Magistrate Hukum Chand is clever, but he is also corrupt and very lecherous (as is the Sikh budmash Jugga if it comes to that). Recoiling from the awfulness of the dead Muslim corpses, he buys the favours of a little prostitute and goes to bed to fornicate and get drunk.^{iv}

Through the character of Hukum Chand Khushwant Singh satirizes a number of bureaucrats who hide their lecherous, corrupt and false nature behind the guise of political power and position. Commenting on this nature of Hukum



Chand, D. Prempati says that “with the whole of the Punjab drowned in flames, Hukum Chand must have almost every night a sweet sixteen to respond to his impotence.”^v

Singh also ironically laughs at the elite class of administrators and protectors of justice who use their power and strength for doing all kinds of immoral activities in the disguise of power. There is humour and irony when Meet Singh says a few words about Hukum Chand to Iqbal:

*Hukum Chand is a nar admi. He started as a foot constable and see where he is now! He always kept the sahibs pleased and they gave him one promotion after another. The last one gave him his own place and made him deputy. Yes, Iqbal Singh Hukum Chand is a nar admi- and clever. He is true to his friends always gets things done for them. He has had dozens of relatives given good jobs. He is one of the hundred. Nothing counterfeit about Hukum Chand.”
(Train to Pakistan P.56.)*

However, in the final parts of the novel the reader sees him to be a changed man in his attitude towards Muslims and particularly Hassena, a sixteen year old prostitute. He releases Jugga, the protagonist hero from jail and shows his humanistic behaviour in saving hundreds of Muslims.

The second character through whom Singh laughs at the educated, westernized and sophisticated Indians is Iqbal who is a social worker deputed by his party (People’s Party) to look after the things and bring awareness among the masses of Mano Majra. Iqbal is a westernized character (WOG) like Sir Mohan Lal in “Karma” and Santosh Sen in “A Bride for the Sahib”. Iqbal’s sophisticated accent, fastidious style, air mattress, a dressing gown, a tin of sardines and bottle of whisky all show his Babu traits or westernized qualities. His name also is ambivalent: “He could be Muslim, Iqbal Mohammed. He could be a Hindu, Iqbal Chand, or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh.” (Train to Pakistan p.35) Iqbal is a social worker who comes to Mano Majra after the murder of Lala Ram Lal, a money lender of the village Mano Majra. Police know that he has come after the murder. But in spite of that the police put him behind the bars and in the process of investigation they strip him to know whether he is Muslim. These kinds of attitude of the police show the mockery of the working of the police and administration of India. As Shahane rightly says,

“Iqbal’s arrest, effected through competent Excellency exposes the foul working of the police force in the Punjab.”^{vi}



Iqbal is a communist. Communism speaks about the equality of people and it tells people to work for the sufferings of the poor and needy. But in this particular novel *Train to Pakistan* Iqbal fails to help the needy and the persecuted, and his studies on Communism remain theoretical instead of being used as practical experience. He has the desire to become a great political leader but he is not willing to bear any kind of trouble. It is important to remember the words of Haydn Moore Williams, who says:

All men are brothers. This is the Communist cry - - but it was also the motto of the Sikhs in their emergence as martial community. The paradox of this defeats Iqbal; and in the event he is inadequate and inert. He is even prepared to allow a massacre of the Muslim trainload if it will help in the ultimate class struggle and the victory of Communism. Even worse than this Machiavellianism is the cowardice; he is one of those "milquetoast" intellectuals pilloried in Singh's pages -- who can do nothing except theories.^{vii}

Iqbal is a socialist. He has come to the village Mano Majra to unite the people and save them from bloodshed and other troubles. When he comes to know about the plan of the fundamentalist Sikhs to blast the train carrying Muslims from Hindu India, he fails to do anything and leaves them to their fate by his usual habit of drinking and falling asleep. Harish Raizada says:

From the very start, he is found too worried about his own safety and health. He has been sent by his People's Party of India to forge unity between Sikhs and Muslims and check them from violence, but the moment he learns of murder in Mano Majra he, gets frightened.^{viii}

He preaches one thing and practices the other which is ironical. V.A. Shahane aptly says:

The central quality of Iqbal is that he does not belong anywhere and what is worse, he pathetically desires to contribute to the mass upsurge of India's rural communities. He is indeed a trishanku, a being without fixity, dangling in vacuum incapable of belonging anywhere.^{ix}

Through the character of Iqbal, Khushwant Singh seems to laugh at the political leaders and the so called representatives of people in the Parliament and Constituent Assemblies who speak big words and do nothing for the sake of people as in the story, "The Voice of God."

The ultimate satire in *Train to Pakistan* is that, Jugga, the third and the most important character and the protagonist of the novel who is notorious and known to be a 'budmash



number ten' (*Dus Numberi*) and a dacoit, saves the Muslims from tragedy by sacrificing his own life for the sake of his beloved Nooran. It is not Hukum Chand, or the Deputy Commissioner, nor Iqbal the socialist, nor the religious priest Meet Singh but the so called "budmash" and criminal Jugga who stands up in the time of trouble and saves hundreds of Muslims from death.

Thus, through the characters of Hukum Chand, Iqbal and Juggua Khushwant Singh makes satirical and ironical attack at the corrupt, foolish, cowardly, incapable, and hypocritical and sex hungry attitudes of those who hide their vicious behaviour under the disguise of spirituality, and virtuousness with the help of their access to power, and money.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Ranjan Kumar. *Khushwant Singh as a Novelist*. New Delhi: Satyam Publishing House, 2010, pp.111.
- ^{iv} Haydn Moore Williams. "The Doomed Hero in the Novels of Khushwant Singh and Manohar Malgonkar", *Khushwant Singh The Man and the Writer* Ed. R.K.Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001, p. 53.
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viii Harish Raizada. “Train to Pakistan: A study in Crisis of Values.” R.K.Dhawan *Khushwant Singh The Man and the Writer*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001, p. 126.

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