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## **Conflict of Cultures and Ethnic Violence in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan***

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**Abstract:** *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Khushwant Singh's debut novel reflects the conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. This violence between Muslims and Hindus started from Calcutta (Kolkata) and became contagious to reach Mano Majra, a multi-ethnic village on the border of Pakistan. The fictional village Mano Majra has a railway station, a Gurudwara and a mosque. Before the riot all the people in the village were intact. But the riot has made them confused and confronted ethnically and culturally. There is a clear reference also to the multi-ethnicity in Mano Majra. It is reflected through acute religious fanaticism of one's own. There is another reference to communal frenzy. Muslims hate Hindus and Hindus hate Muslims. This feeling has just started from the day of partition. Freedom struggle keeps its unity but the freedom invites fragmentation. In *Train to Pakistan*, communalism may be the stepping stone and Hindu-Muslim feeling is the focal point. It can be said that *Train to Pakistan* is based upon conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. The entire story is woven round the communal riot between Hindus (including Sikhs) and Muslims.

**Keywords:** religious fanaticism, multi-ethnicity, antagonism, humanism, communalism, discrimination, fragmentation, eradication, fundamentalism.

*Train to Pakistan* (1956), Khushwant Singh's debut novel reflects the conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. It is based on the trauma and tragedy of the historic partition of India in August 1947. It is really an account of the conflict of cultures and clash of violence between two races, Muslims and Hindus, caused by an acute sense of fundamentalism. The fact is highlighted in the following words:

Muslims 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. (Singh 1956, 1)

This violence between Muslims and Hindus started from Calcutta (Kolkata) and became contagious to reach Mano Majra, a multi-ethnic village on the border of Pakistan. There was a message that the government was planning to transport Muslims from Mano Majra to Pakistan for their safety and security. Hindu-Muslim feeling became acute. Muslims massacred Hindus and Hindus massacred Muslims. Countless Hindus and Sikhs in the North West Frontier were forced to be homeless and fled to their respective community areas. They were transported by bullock carts, lorries, even on roof tops of trains. Others were forced to go by railroads. Almost a million of them were dead. All of Northern India was in arm, in terror or in hiding.

The fictional village Mano Majra has a railway station, a Gurudwara and a mosque. There is also the house of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. In the words of the author:

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. (2)

Before the riot all the people in the village were intact. But the riot has made them confused and confronted ethnically and culturally. There was mutual cultural harmony among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians who visited the village. There was a small colony of

shopkeepers and hawkers at the railway station. They were to supply traveler's foods, betel leaves, cigarettes, teas, biscuits and sweetmeats. This shows the presence of a good cultural understanding in the village.

The novelist describes another scene of religious contact. Muslim Mullah at the Mosque sings "Allah-o-Akbar" and Sikh priest in Sikh temple succeeds them. The prayer of monotonous singsong sounds dear. This context shows the cross-cultural contact and attachment to the ethnicity. There is the symptom of cultural and religious harmony in the village where people of different sects, races and religions live together.

The novelist tries basically to recapture the period when Sikh-Muslim antagonism reached its climax with the division of the Punjab. There is a tragic irony that sublimes the acute cultural difference of the speech made by the Magistrate to the S. I. of police:

"Do you know," continued the Magistrate, "the Sikhs retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corps? They write on the engine "Gift to Pakistan!" (21)

Making an attempt to describe various cultural contacts, Singh bubbles of the religious instincts of the central character Hukum Chand, the religious magistrate. He himself is culturally conflicted. He represents the conflicting views of Hindus and Muslims. Prior to it, he himself is preoccupied with world culture stepping towards humanism. Juggut Singh is another character who is well educated and a social worker. He is a symbol of multiple cultures and represents the author as an autobiographical character. Iqbal is also an educated Muslim migrated from Pakistan. The people there speak hybridized Urdu-Punjabi language. This fact shows the cultural integrity in the pre-partition India.

Any violence in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society at any time is aroused from the cultural combat. Another religious organization established in the name of nationalism and culture is the RSS organization. This organization is violently hostile to Muslim or

the anti-Hindu people. Their activities also form part of the cause of cultural conflict. There is a reference to the difference in the attitudes of the Hindus and the Muslims towards their own respective womenfolk:

We Hindus never raise our hands to strike women,  
but these Muslims have no respect for the weaker  
sex. (23)

There is a clear reference also to the multi-ethnicity in *Mano Majra*. It is reflected through acute religious fanaticism of one's own. Iqbal Mohammad relates to Islam cultural group, Iqbal Chand to Hindu Kafer and Iqbal Singh to Punjabi. Broadly speaking, Iqbal touches to three communities - Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. It is because he is a social worker who should not have discrimination of culture and ethnicity. He feels that the bloodshed and violence caused by the partition should be prohibited. So he takes several appearances in several communities.

Meet Singh is another character who is very much against the Christian morality. They have exchanges of their wives and they dance and drink in the clubs. These are very much against Hindu and Muslim codes of conduct. With varied forms of lifestyle, food habits, social customs and religious stands of different races the village is full of confusions and confrontations. So just after the partition it is difficult to hold communal harmony. Killing, stealing, robbing and raping of women have become common incidents. The entire village is socially disrupted, religiously disjointed and culturally dislocated.

There is another reference to communal frenzy. Muslims hate Hindus and Hindus hate Muslims. This feeling has just started from the day of partition. Another sense of strong ethnic conflict is felt in the difference of feeling between the Sikh and the Gurkha. One horrendous scene of butchery and massacring is presented by the novelist:

The other day four Sikh Sardars in a jeep drove  
alongside a mile long column of Muslim refugees  
walking on the road. Without warning they opened  
fire with their sten guns. Four sten guns! God  
alone knows how many they killed. (73)

There is also a reference to religious fanaticism of the Muslims and the Sikh. This is sounded in the invocation to God, “Yah Allah. Wah Guru, Wah Guru” (84). Meet Singh addresses Wah Guru, Wah Guru in his invocation while Imam addresses Yah Allah, Yah Allah. But no one interferes with another. This is the reflection of cultural contact which is also the basis for cultural combat.

In the chapter “Mano Majra”, the climax of the story, it is revealed that the train has reached with full of corpses. To see this, the people present in the station feel hopeless and helpless. And this dreadful scene is described as:

When it was discovered that the train had brought a full load of corpses, a heavy brooding silence descended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up night talking in whispers. (124)

Hindus and Sikhs are fleeing from their homes in Pakistan to shelter in Mano Majra. Now a train load of Sikhs massacred by Muslims has been cremated in Mano Majra. This is the clear example of cultural confrontation. When the train arrived at the Mano Majra station, the Sikhs asked one of the villagers to fetch the Lambardar. Within a few minutes the village is echoed:

All Muslims going to Pakistan come out at once.  
Come! All Muslims. Out at once. (141)

The above incident shows that the people belonging to all communities are terribly afraid of each other’s culture. When the Muslims come out of their homes with their luggage to go to Pakistan, the rest of the people in the village come out to see them off. Their parting becomes painful to both the communities. Though they are ethnically different now, but still their common culture before Partition haunts their minds. Their understanding was so good that one was moved by the other’s misery. The novelist gives a vivid picture of their sweet relationship:

The Sikhs watched them till they were out of sight.  
They wiped the tears off faces and turned back to  
their homes with heavy hearts. (145)

Freedom struggle keeps its unity but the freedom invites fragmentation. Most of the emotions of ethnic conflict and cultural differences dealt with in this novel have been expressed in the novelist's volumes of *A History of the Sikhs* (1963). The concluding part of the novel captioned KARMA, presents a realistic picture of communal riot and its result. Both Sikh soldiers and Muslim Pathan soldiers loiter on the platform engaging themselves in the official purposes.

In her book *The Twice-Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of Indian Novels in English* (1972), Meenakshi Mukherjee expresses that sentimentalism is an important factor in communal riot. This arouses violence. Simultaneously political interference is another factor leading to communal disruption. This is glaring example in Bhisham Shani's *Tamas* (1975) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1989).

In *Train to Pakistan* communalism may be the stepping stone and Hindu-Muslim feeling is the focal point. Sikhism is absolutely hostile to Muslim. There is frequent reference to antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims. Both the communities of Sikhs and Muslims go on looting, thieving, robbing and murdering each other. Both the races are at daggers drawn.

To conclude, it can be said that *Train to Pakistan* is based upon conflict of cultures and ethnic violence. The entire story is woven round the communal riot between Hindus (including Sikhs) and Muslims. The novelist has elaborately discussed the difference in the concepts of religion in general and Sikh, Muslim, Hinduistic belief and Christianity in particular. Basically the story is developed on the communal clash between Sikh and Muslim in the wake of partition. The novelist shows the passing pictures of dividing India and its effect in grim reality. Setting all these cultural conflicts and ethnic violence as glaring examples of devastating mankind and the world, Khushwant Singh

probably wants to suggest eradication of such evil things at the cost of love and understanding within humanity.

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