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A Critical Insight into Multiculturalism and Conflict in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract:

The paper aims at showing how multiculturalism supports in keeping social harmony through love, tolerance, acceptance, recognition and adjustment of different cultures. Khushwant Singh's "*Train to Pakistan*" is an example of multiculturalism in India.

In the age of globalization "multiculturalism" has become a popular term in the academic studies. The concept of integration is a benchmark for a future multiculturalism. And recognition of cultural differentiation will end in a breaking up that leads to dispersion of social groups. This paper intends to focus on the political crisis that a multi-cultural India faces in spite of its great effort to promote national integration amidst cultural mosaics.

Keywords: multiculturalism, conflict, political crisis, national integration.

A contemporary movement in the United State based upon the assumption that traditional, mainstream cultural has overlooked many of the literary contributions of ethnic and minority groups...In reference to literature, multiculturalists argue for the inclusion of ethnic and minority literature in the canon, the basic literary texts taught in schools and colleges. (Edward 270)

In a broader sense, multiculturalism may refer to diversity of race, class, culture, languages or gender within one society. It arises as an outcome of colonization. Though the practice of multiculturalism in various nations is as varied as its underlying ideologies, the literature of these various nations present the psycho-world of the minority citizens. The minority people of many a nation struggle for their human identity with the dominating mainstream majority. For example, the Dutch from Netherland started migration to Canada during the World

War II. But after they settle down in Canada they could not easily merge with Canadian society. The memories of homeland are still unforgettable. They are constantly struggling to search for an identity.

Multiculturalists have challenged the mainstream of western philosophy, literature and ideology. They react against the oppression of blacks, working-class people, gays, women as well as the imperialistic exploitation of the Third world countries. They demand "to open the canon so as to make it multicultural instead of "Eurocentric" and to make it represent adequately the concerns and writings of women and of ethnic, non-heterosexual and other groups".

Bell Hooks observes about the promises brought by multiculturalism:

For those of us on the margins (people of colour, folks from working class backgrounds, gays and lesbians and so on) who had always felt ambivalent about our presence in institutions where knowledge was shared in ways that reinscribed colonialism and domination, it was thrilling to think that the vision of justice and democracy that was at the very heart of the civil rights movement would be realized in the academy. At last, there was the possibility of a learning community a place where difference could be acknowledge, where we would finally all understand, accept and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relation of power.

India is a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural and multireligious society and she has been able to retain its unity in diversity. But in such a place where diversity prevails, the idea of separate geo-political national entities has become inevitable, the minorities being concerned for their future under the larger ethnic group. In this regard Satya P. Mohanty's remark is worth mentioning:

In societies where cultural inequality is pervasive, the identity- based struggles of subordinate cultural groups is often a necessary component of multicultural politics.

There have been great efforts from the makers of India to promote national integration amidst cultural mosaics. But it is not that there has been no threat to India's national integration. The partition of India in 1947 is the greatest setback in the history of India's integrity. It highlighted man's wolfish cruelty to man in the name of religion. Here whether existence of



several religions in India is a major factor in the growth of communalism during partition period is quite debatable. Because some critics are of the view that diversity disrupts the fabric of social life rather than maintaining the unity of a social group.

The partition of India has been attributed to the British's 'Divide and Rule' policy. The British had kept the communities apart to perpetuate their rule. As a result, in 1906 the All India Muslim League was founded. The Muslim League led by Mohd. Ali Jinnah began to spread the cry that the Muslim minority was in danger of being engulfed by the Hindu majority. It propagated the theory that Hindu and Muslim were two separate nations which could therefore, never live together. Thus "Two Nation Theory" of Jinnah resulted in the creation of Pakistan followed by the worst communal violence in the history of mankind.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is replete with conflicts arising out of the partition of 1947. In this novel we will see how communal frenzy engulfed the remote village of Mano Majra where Sikhs and Muslims had lived in peace for years. During the pre-partition days, the village is depicted as a place where diverse religions co-exist retaining their distinct physical identities. The village is inhabited by about seventy families among which there is only one Hindu family, while the others are Sikhs and Muslims about equal in number. The people of this village irrespective of their religious affiliations shows solidarity in the symbolic act of repairing 'deo' the local deity, that stands upright under a keekar tree beside the pond. Thus, 'deo' becomes the symbol of communal harmony.

Besides communal harmony can also be seen in the way the villagers act. One day when a Sikh in Mano Majra goes to the Gurudwara to perform some religious ceremony as a devout Sikh and another day the same man receives "verses from the Quran" written by the village mullah "to wear as charms" and to "swallow as medicine". Before daybreak, the mail train bound for Lahore rushes by the village, as it rumbles past the bridge on the Sutlej, the driver blows two long blasts of whistles. Hearing the sound of the train, the mullah 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 sonorous tones, "Allah-o-Akbar". The priest in the Gurudwara, who remains in bed till the mullah has called, gets up, draws a bucket of water from the well, pours it over himself and intones prayers. It looks as though the Sikh priest could not do without the mullah offering his prayers. Moreover, the Gurudwara is invariably the place, where the Muslims

and the Sikhs meet and discuss common problems of the village. The religious space, the triangular common and the shade of the peepul tree, shelter all without discrimination. In this regard V.A. Shahane remarks:

Religious diversities are thus overcome by the center of supernatural and divine power, and forces of division alternate with Life in Mano Majra is regulated by the passing of train across the bridge.

Though the frontier between India and Pakistan turns into a horrifying scene of riot, everything is quite and calm in Mano Majra. Villagers are quite ignorant of India's attainment of long sought freedom. The masses are shown to be simply unconvinced about the formation of Pakistan or about a man called Jinnah.

Thus in spite of the ethnic diversity, peace and unity prevail in their lives until communal conflict and violence generated by partition engulf the minds of the villagers.

The peaceful life of the village is disturbed one day when the only Hindu family is raided by some decoits in one dark night killing Ram Lal the Hindu monkey-lender. The police's action in investigating the murder germinates distrust between the two communities by bringing in the Muslim's hand in the murder. The situation is further deteriorated with the arrival of a train from Pakistan carrying corpses of Hindu and Sikh refugees. As a result of the tensions across the country many Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan thronged in the village and with them carried the news of arsons, rape and killings. Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims began to spread. Quite suddenly every Sikh in Mano Majra becomes a stranger with an evil intent. For the first time, the name of Pakistan comes to mean something to them---a refuge where there were no Sikhs. The Sikhs on the other too suspect the intentions of Muslims. They remembered how they executed two of their Gurus and how many Sikhs were killed for no offence than refusing to accept Islam. They remembered their temples desecrated by the slaughter of kin; the Holy Ganth had been torn to bits. Moreover the tension is aggravated by the discovery of corpses of men, women, children and animals floating down the river Sutlej. Yet the feeling and spirit of mutual welfare and brotherhood endured. When the news of evacuation comes, it creates a mournful numbness and made them weep. Their tremendous sense of belongingness and the trauma of being uprooted from their soil are reflected through their words



and tears. One of the young men assured Muslims: “As long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you. We first die then you.” But as the circumstances compelled them to leave the village, all the villagers are plunged into gloom. On the eve of the departure of Muslims, they went from house to house-talking, crying, swearing love and friendship, assuring each other that this would soon be over. Life, they said, would be as it always had been.

But another aspect of partition is revealed as the Muslims are evacuated from the village. Some young Sikhs burning in anger at events taking place in Pakistan, come to the village. The leader talks of the atrocities inflicted on Sikhs by Muslims. On their instigations quite a few of the Mano Majra Sikhs who weep at the departure of Mano Majra Muslims volunteer to aid and abet the destruction of train, carrying Muslims to Pakistan, stealthily at night. They reach the conclusion that the only way to stop violence in Pakistan is to return violence for violence. The magistrate and police are totally unable to control the communal violence that threatens to erupt. They decide to entrust the task to Juggut Singh and Iqbal Singh whom they have arrested on the charge of dacoity and murder of Lala Ram Lal. The magistrate believes that these two persons will be able to influence the people and save the Muslim from being slaughtered. Because Iqbal is a social activist and Juggut Singh is in love with a Muslim girl called Nooran. But when they come to know of the proposed plan to attack train Iqbal, being inert and inadequate, refrains from the scene of action while Juggut, a passionate man of action, concerns for the safety of Nooran. When he learns of the conspiracy and comes to know that the train is carrying his beloved Nooran and other Muslims of Mano Majra he averts the accident by slashing the rope meant for killing the Muslims but he is himself killed in the attempt. Thus Juggut though condemned by the villagers as budmash no. 10 succeeds in safeguarding the lives of Muslims, which the so called guardians of law fail to accomplish. He becomes an embodiment of love for humanity. In this regard Anup Beniwal reiterates:

Through the enactment of this incident, he suggest a continuation of the unbreakable bridge across religious diversities even in the midst of violence.

Thus though unity prevails in the village Mano Majra, the narrow outlook of communalism has descended on the village. Partition had brought about estrangement to the lives of people who dreams of a united India.

Khushwant Singh observes remarkable impartiality towards the communities Hindu and Muslims-towards their involvement in the partition riots. He justly portrays the reality of the situation by laying the blame of the horrible tragedy upon the two communities: "The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped."

The novelist while depicting the partition trauma also seems to portray Punjabi ethos and identity. The Sikh people's loyalty towards their fellow beings come before anything else. "For them truth, honour, financial integrity are all placed lower down the scale of values than being true to one's salt, to one's friends and fellow villagers. For friends you could lie in court or cheat, and no one would blame you." All the characters like Meet Singh, Lambardar, Imam Chacha, Nooran, Juggut Singh, Mali and his gangs are thoroughly rooted in Punjabi peasant culture. Religion forms an integral part of their life. In this regard Anup Beniwal remarks:

The author in a nutshell seems to advocate the existence of a composite Punjabi identity which is more powerful than and subsumes within it the Sikhs and Muslim dichotomy.

The novelist has the affirmative assumption of a birth of a harmonious human society of India overriding religious, linguistic and caste divisions. But in spite of the novelist's affirmation communal conflicts never go away from the soil of India. It will remain intact as long as religion and community based political parties exploit religious and communal sentiments to gain their political leverage.

Mano Manjra, the focal point of *Train to Pakistan* is typical of the rural Punjabi life. Sikhs and the Muslims of the village live happily till the day of partition. They represent a communal harmony; Identity, sense of belongingness, sense of locality and sense of history are some of the aspects of Multiculturalism. The novelist while depicting the tragedy of partition also seems to portray Punjabi ethos and identity. The Sikh people's trustworthiness towards their fellow beings come before anything else.

Khushwant Singh observes towards the two communities, Hindu and Muslims towards their involvement in the partition riots. He portrays the reality of the situation and horrible tragedy of the two communities. Thus though unity prevails in the village Mano Majra, the outlook of communalism has descended on the village. Partition had brought about division to the lives of people who dreams of a united India. In spite of the assurance given by the Sikhs, the



Muslims decide to leave the Village to Pakistan. Sikh becomes aggressive when their self-respect is challenged.

This novel is more than a powerful story of crimes and horrors that followed partition. The train is very suggestive symbol emphasizing the importance of love, peace, unity, discipline and liberty. Thus in spite of the ethnic diversity, peace and unity exist in their lives until communal conflict and violence generated by partition surround the minds of the villagers. Ethnic consciousness enables people and harmony. Ethnic identity gives importance to justice and equality. A person who is ethnic conscious does not believe in social discrimination on the basis of caste, race, religion, language and so on. Ethnic consciousness expects people of various faiths and religion to co-exist and live in peace and harmony. Iqbal is a social worker found religion hollow and lack of ethnic values.

The end of the novel has become very poignant and dramatic. Novelist has not highlighted any of his characters; he has narrated an episodes and incidents that is plot. At the time of the departure of Muslims, they went from house to house talking, crying, swearing love and friendship, assuring each other that this would soon be over. Another aspect of partition is revealed as the Muslims were evacuated from the village. The leader talks of the atrocities caused on Sikhs by Muslims. Thus Novelist portrays the ethnic identity and harmony in Indian society being interrupted by communal conflict.

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