

Village as Protagonist in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh's magnum opus *Train to Pakistan* is a well-documented tale of the massive geographical and socio-cultural changes that took place during the Partition of the Indian sub-continent. The nitty gritty of this event has been captured by wonderfully portrayed complex characters. This brings us to the question of pinpointing at the Protagonist of this work. Here, village poses a challenge to accept any other as the protagonist. It is village not only serves as the backdrop of the novel but also as an inescapable character that unfolds the landscape, linguistic, cultural and crisis specificity.

Key Words

Characters, Communal Harmony, Crisis, Partition, Protagonist, Setting

Introduction

The Partition of the Indian sub-continent led to mass migration of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. It led to enormous geographical and socio-cultural changes. There were upheavals, massacres, and political and economic re-organisation at every level. This event has been capture and well-documented by Khushwant Singh in his Historical novel *Train to Pakistan*, first published in 1956. Singh's magnum opus provides us with an Indian perception of this traumatic experience. He states,

I think it is a documentary novel of the partition, an extremely tragic event which hurt me very much. I had no animosity against either the Muslims or the Pakistanis, but I felt that I should do something to express that point of view. (Shahane 352)

The work goes beyond the mere description of political events surrounding the theme of Partition. In addition to the depiction of the communal antagonism and bestial horrors that characterized partition, he provides a human dimension to it by blending humour, agony, violence and sex. To deal with the problem of protagonist in this work, let us first reflect upon the question who a protagonist is.

The Problem of Protagonist in *Train to Pakistan*

The term 'Protagonist' comes from the Greek words: 'Protos' (first) and 'Agonistes' (actor). The protagonist is the first or the leading character in a work. The protagonist is the centre of concern of other characters and thereby shapes and influences the lives of other characters.

Train to Pakistan deals with the response of the characters to the new situation created during the fateful days of Partition. In the process, quite a few characters, agents and forces appear to be protagonists. Here is a list of such agents:

- Hukum Chand
- Iqbal
- Juggut Singh
- Community
- Village

Important Characters

A] Hukum Chand

Hukum Chand, the regional magistrate, is a major figure on the dramatic stage of the novel. He at first appears as a typical Indian representative of bureaucracy in British-governed India. He belongs to the upper level of Punjabi district administration. He is a type as well as an individual, a person as well as a bureaucrat, and in various ways, an evolving character.

He narrates in true bureaucratic style how he heard reports of convoys of dead Sikhs and Hindus passing through Amritsar and how Sikhs retaliated by attacking a train load of Muslim refugees bound for Pakistan. He is a seasoned, experienced and balanced bureaucrat who does not get sentimentally involved in the situation. He says:

We must maintain law and order...No, Inspector Sahib, whatever our views-and God alone knows what I would have done to these Pakistanis if I were not a Government servant-we must not let there be any killing or destruction of property. (32)

In spite of his concern, Hukum Chand remains quite inactive when the real disharmony erupts. He is also often described having a dirty physical appearance, symbolic of his unclean actions stemming from his unclean actions and corruption. His inner conflict and ethical issues are symbolised by his encounter with two geckoes which symbolically represent Muslims and Hindus, on the verge of fighting each other. When they do fight, they fall right next to him, and he panics. His guilt resulting out of not providing any help in the situation jumps onto him.

Hukum Chand felt as if he had touched the lizards and they had made his hands dirty. He rubbed his hands on the hem of his shirt. It was not the sort of dirt which could be wiped off or washed clean. (35)

The magistrate's confrontation with Haseena has an exotic touch. It exposes several aspects of Hukum Chand as a man and magistrate. He, as magistrate, expects to be entertained in a manner reminiscent of Punjabi feudal tradition. Liquor, music and girls form part of this entertainment ritual. However, he seeks solace and refuge in a teenage girl, Haseena, a prostitute. He sleeps with her as a child seeking motherly love and protection. Alcoholism is another tool used by him to clean his conscience. He wants to wash away his guilt in the flow of alcohol.

His response to the situation of crisis is very cold and indifferent. He just releases Iqbal Singh and Jugga from the prison expecting that they would do something while he himself remains aloof. Here he becomes extremely unimpressive. Thus, he lacks the essential courage and the nobility of soul of a hero and hence, cannot be called the protagonist.

B] Iqbal

Iqbal is a Babu, a city dweller, who has received the stamp of western culture and education. He dwells on his stay abroad and on his experiences of European societies in his talks with Meet Singh at the Sikh Gurudwara, where he stays. His mind has been influenced by ideas of Proletarian Revolution.

The implications of Iqbal's name are enveloped in an ambivalence; he could be a Muslim, Iqbal Mohammed. He could be a Hindu, Iqbal Chand. He could also be a Sikh, Iqbal Singh. The religious ambivalence implied in his name is only an aspect of the basic rootlessness of his personality. Iqbal, the upper middle class socialist and a relentless critic of unimaginative bureaucracy, is bewildered by the news of Ramlal's murder. Meet Singh asks him,

Why, Babu Sahib, you have to come to stop killing and you are upset by one murder! (51)

He is a rebel, sentimentally attracted to Socialist thinking, but he is primarily concerned with personal leadership. 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 committees. When the time comes for his action, he does nothing. Sikhs decide to inflict brutalities on the Muslims travelling in the train. But Iqbal withdraws and remains inactive. Iqbal keeps on wondering to himself whether he should do something:

The bullet is neutral. It hits the good and the bad, the important and the insignificant, without distinction. If there were people to see the act of self-immolation...the sacrifice might be worth while: a moral lesson might be conveyed...the point of sacrifice...is the purpose. For the purpose, it is not enough that a thing is intrinsically good: it must be known to be good. It is not enough to know within one's self that one is in the right (194).

He miserably fails his role as a social reformer. Thus, though Iqbal is an important character in the novel, he fails to impress as a protagonist. Premapati remarks:

the weakest link in the structure of *Train to Pakistan* is Iqbal ...Iqbal represents Khushwant Singh's extra-literary dimension, and to the extent he remained adventitious to the text he was no better than a dispensable commodity, an interpolation dictated by non-textual considerations. (Premapati 113)

Jugga

The mode of introducing Juggut Singh (Jugga) aims at bringing out the essential duality in the nature of the character. Juggut is a towering, muscular, and uneducated villager who places action over thought. He is known for frequent arrests and gang problems. He has served several jail terms on various charges. He is notoriously known as Jugga, the badmash (Jugga, the scoundrel), but at moments, he shows a degree of self-awareness. He is a rare combination of the criminal and the lover.

In the beginning, we feel that Jugga's love for Nooran is basically physical. However, this love gets elevated and ennobles his soul to the extent that he sacrifices his life for her sake. When the Sikhs decide to attack the Muslims travelling on the train to Pakistan, and Nooran is likely to travel by the same train, Jugga sacrifices himself to

save the people on the train. As ChirantanKulshreshtha remarks,

Jugga's act of love and sacrifice silhouetted against the backdrop of hatred and violence, towers above the communal differences and lends a meaning to the general aimlessness of life in the partition days. (Kulshreshtha 152)

When bureaucracy, the intelligentsia, the political and religious leaders all fail miserably, Jugga comes to rescue. Help comes from the most unexpected quarter. Though Nooran was Jugga's motivation, his actions raise him in the eyes of the readers. What he did was simply incredible. SrinivasaIyengar describes him as

A speck in the dust-whirl that was partition. (Iyengar 500)

Jugga is full of Punjabiness, which believes in sacrificing oneself for the sake of friends. He is a human being with his vices and virtues. He is brave and courageous, and yet, is afraid of the police torture. He is arrested for a crime he hasn't committed but remains talkative and normal even in jail. He can beat Malli almost to death but can die for his beloved.

Hence, an amazing combination of Softness and mettle, Jugga achieves immortality and redemption in his death. He is the most impressive character of the novel.

D] Community

The Community plays a major role in determining the response of the characters and thus emerges as an important force, putting forward its claims as the protagonist of the novel. Partition was based on the theory of constructing nations according to religion or community. Mano Majra has two main communities: Muslims and Sikhs, and there is a Hindu family in the village. Jugga's behaviour is determined by his community and Punjabiness. However, the village has an even stronger claim to the title of the protagonist.

E] Village

The communities form an inseparable part of the village and all characters are unmistakably governed by the culture of and love for their village. And it is village that dominates the entire action of the novel. V. A. Shahane remarks,

Mano Majra is the principal protagonist in this drama of agonizing death and pulsating life. The village is more important than the role of any single

character in the novel... It is the major character in the book. (Shahane 68)

There is an inseparable relation between the village and its people. The bond is so strong that they cannot even think of separation. Mano Majra, the fictional village on the border of Pakistan and India, is predominantly Muslim and Sikh. The Sikhs and the Muslims are so entrenched in the village that they have nothing to do with the political developments. Imam Baksh says:

What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here and so were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers. (147)

Mano Majra is famous for its railway station. All the activities here are linked to the arrival and departure of trains. All people live in perfect harmony, completely unaffected by the tumultuous event of Partition. The villagers are artless and honest. They all pray to a sand stone in times of crisis, irrespective of their religion and community:

there is one object that all Mano Majrans even Lala Ram Lal-- venerate. This is a three foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keeker tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the deo to which all the villagers--Hindu, Sikh, Muslims or pseudo-christian-repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing.(10-11)

This situation starts deteriorating when the news of communal violence in Bengal and Punjab arrive. The riots spread all over India and mass migration started. The peace is finally shattered with the murder of Ram Lal, the local money-lender. Then come the massacres that led to train loads of corpses being carried across the border. These trains passing through Mano Majra create an environment of shock and disbelief in the straight-forward village folk. A deathly silence spreads in the village and the mutual trust between the communities starts fading and a feeling of revenge takes its place. Tension starts mounting and it seems inevitable to send away the Muslims to Pakistan to save them. The events

had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter. (141)

When the Muslims are compelled by the administration to leave the village, they are

completely non-plussed at the unprecedented developments and it comes as a shock to them as they would have to leave their home. The night of separation is described thus:

Not many people slept in Mano Majra that night. They went from house to house, talking, crying, swearing love and friendship, assuring each other that this would soon be over. (153)

The novelist resolves the conflict through the Punjabi culture and its code of conduct as witnessed in Jugga. Among its codes, the most significant one is that of love. What he understands is his uninhibited Punjabi love which is the brightest and most durable patch on the tattered clothes of humanity.

Conclusion

The village becomes a microcosm of the vivisected sub-continent, caught in the whirlpool of one of the cruellest, meanest and bloodiest events in the history of mankind. It also offers the solution to violence and hatred. It is the guiding and motivating force for actions of characters and their reactions too. Thus, it can rightly be pronounced as the protagonist of the novel.

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