

FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THEIR SENSIBILITIES IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Women were the worst victims of Partition. The ordeal had ghastly tempered the women folk, physically, psychologically and emotionally. Women folk presented in Khushwant Singh's novel Train to Pakistan are presented as those involved mechanically in the routine menial household chores. Throughout the length of the novel the women are described doing nothing else other than this. Endowing women with no individuality displays a patriarchal approach of Khushwant Singh towards women.

Keywords: *Partition, communal frenzy, patriarchal, ghost train.*

Partition Novel is a genre in which the plot is set amidst historical events, in which the author uses real events and adds one or more fictional characters or events, or changes the sequence of historical events. Partition Novel may center on historical or on fictional characters, but usually represents an honest attempt based on considerable research to tell a story set in the historical past as understood by the author's contemporaries.

Women were the worst victims of Partition. The ordeal had ghastly tempered the women folk, physically, psychologically and emotionally. Though not directly, they were involved in the development of the Partition. The Partition novels try to mirror this condition of women in their novels. Women became the easy targets of the communal frenzy unleashed by the fanatics. Women have to endure not only the destruction of their homes, displacement and violence, but also abduction, prostitution, mutilation and rape as they became "a sign through which men communicated with each other" (Das 56).

Atrocities were done upon the bodies of women as men of one religious group. It was a way to dishonour the men of another faith by proving that they are impotent due to their inability to protect 'their' women. In the post partition period women suffered once more as the newly independent states of India and Pakistan attempted to reinforce

their legitimacy by forcibly recovering abducted women, a process in which women's own wishes were considered irrelevant. Furthermore, many of the women who desired to be reunited with their families had to suffer the humiliation of rejection by their communities which viewed their experience as too shameful to facilitate reintegration. The novelists under study have tried to portray these sensibilities of the women towards Partition.

Train to Pakistan is a magnificent novel where Khushwant Singh tells the tragic tale of the partition of India and Pakistan and the consequent events. On the eve of the partition of the Indian sub-continent thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted and it was certainly a ghastly experience for them to give up their belongings and rush to a land which was not theirs. Partition touched the whole country and Singh's attempt in the novel is to see the events from the point of view of the people of Mano Majra, a small village. Though the novel does not portray any strong women character, Nooran and Haseena play minor roles in the development of the storyline of the novel.

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The only two very insignificant female characters that one finds in the novel are Nooran, the object of Jugga's passion and Haseena, the object of Hukum Chand's lustfulness. Haseena at that tender age is a victim of the typical Indian representative of bureaucracy in India under the British Raj and ironically not of the Partition.

The women in Singh's fictional world are silhouette against the great human catastrophe of the Partition as depicted from men's point of view. It merely indicates and suggests the awful and

ghastly experience of women involved in this historical and dehumanized process but does not portray them as characters that rise up to face the circumstances boldly.

At the outset of the novel a dacoity takes place and local money lender, Ram Lal is murdered. The peace and harmony of the village is shattered with this brutal murder. Malli with his gang raided the house of Ram Lal and murdered him. On their way back they fire shots in the air and throw bangles over the walls in Jugga's house, just to mock him as he has been their enemy. At the same time, Hukum Chand, the district magistrate, camping at the Officer's Rest House is involved in a sordid affair with Haseena, a teenager prostitute and Jugga is in the fields to see his beloved Nooran.

Jugga and Nooran are in carnal relationship when we first encounter them in the novel. Nooran here behaves like an archetypal Punjabi girl with a firm restrictive consciousness. Jugga has to struggle with her to win over her initial shyness. She is afraid of the public as well as of her parents, "Something is happening in the village. My father will wake up and know I have gone out. He will kill me." (Singh 15)

Even a simple girl like Nooran has no intention to be used like a thing just for the immediate pleasure of the flesh. She yearns to have responsible, meaningful and loving relationships. Jugga was in deep love with that Muslim girl and he frequently visits her place. The love affair of the village rogue was the matter of talk for all the people. He shows her love to Nooran violently. He thinks that he can also control her like the whole village.

Romance and communal frenzy goes with hand in hand. The religion is a dominant theme of the novel. The Hindu-Muslim-Sikh religion had dominated the idea of the novel. Politics and religious conflicts have divided them but elemental feelings of love unite them.

The lust of these two people, Jugga and Hukum Chand, increased with the rapidity of the time. The novel is full of these small instances, where we can find that men escaped and find alone time with their female partners. Singh tried bringing out the matter of women victimization, but he is not successful.

In the Jugga-Nooran love scene personal relations and emotional involvement overcome the objective world, though the rumbling of the train is a sad interruption and reminder of that humdrum world. The principle of contrast is further exemplified in the two effectively rendered scenes of Jugga-Nooran involvement and Hukum Chand-Haseena affair. Jugga's genuine involvement

with Nooran is based on strong emotion, whereas Hukum Chand's association with Haseena, though delicate and ambivalent, is initially a transitory, superficial, and casual relationship. In course of time, he becomes sentimentally involved with her; yet this relationship is basically very different from that of Jugga and Nooran. Thus, a variation in personal and human relationships is delicately and subtly portrayed.

Sexuality is the most prohibited area of discourse. We have tendency to revolt against such social prohibitions which gives the subject a distance psychological pleasure. The typical reluctance and hesitation of Jugga with a girl of Muslim religion conventionally considered adversary to Sikhism, makes the intensity of relationship more powerful and stable. Thus, some metaphysical values are attached with these passionate feeling. Winning over a reluctant and unwilling woman bestows the male psyche with a feeling of competence and achievement. To Jugga, life without such a Nooran seems to be worthless. His transgressive personality undergoes a silent metamorphosis and he gets ready to sacrifice himself for Nooran. This love life of Jugga and Nooran was eclipsed by the arrival of the 'ghost train'.

Nooran went out in the rain. She passed many people in the lanes going about with gunny bags covering their heads and shoulders. The whole village was awake. In most houses she could see the dim flickers of oil lamps. Some were packing; others were helping them to pack. Most just talked with their friends. The desire to inform about the departure propels her to face Jugga's mother. The conversation between Nooran and Jugga's mother reveals her longing for Jugga. She bears all the insults hurled at her by his mother.

'Nooran shook the door of Jugga's house.... Jugga's mother was out. She hoped something would happen.... something which would make Jugga walk in. She sat and waited and hoped.

"Who is it?" asked an old woman's voice, when Jugga's mother returned... Jugga! Jugga! is it you? "No, Beybey, it is I - Nooran. Chacha Iman Baksh's daughter. "Nooran, what brings you here at this hour?" The old woman asked angrily. "Has Jugga come back?" "What have you to do with Jugga? His mother snapped. Nooran began to cry. "We are going away tomorrow?" "What relations are you to us that you want to come to see us? You can go where you like." "Nooran played her last card." I cannot leave. Jugga has promised to marry me." "Get out, you bitch!" The old woman hissed. "You, a Muslim weaver's daughter, marry a Sikh peasant! Get out or I will go and tell your father

and the whole village. Go to Pakistan! Leave my Jugga alone. Nooran felt heavy and lifeless. "All right, Beybey, I will go. Don't be angry with me.... Don't be harsh to me just when I am leaving. Jugga's mother stood stiff, without a trace of emotion on her face. "I will tell Jugga!" Nooran stopped crying. Her sobs came at long intervals. She still held on to Jugga's mother. Her head sank lower and lower till it touched the old woman's feet. "Beybey!" "What have you to say now?" She had a premonition of what was coming.... "Beybey, I have Jugga's child inside me. If I go to Pakistan they will kill it when they know it has a Sikh father." "How long have you had it?" "I have just found out. It is the second month." But his mother now assures her, "when all this is over and Jugga comes back, I will go and get you from wherever you are He will hurry for his own sake.... He will get you if he wants a wife ... Have no fear." A vague hope fulfilled Nooran's being. She felt as if she belonged to the house and the house to her ... Jugga's mother, all were hers. She could come back even if Jugga failed to tum up. She could tell them she was married" (Singh 129-31)

Pakistani soldiers evacuated the Muslims of Mano Majra. Muslims decide to take shelter in the refugee camps in Chundunnugger. The Muslim officer orders them to leave behind their cattle, furniture and the goods etc., which cannot be taken in the trucks. When Jugga reaches the village he is revealed with the foul plan of the Sikh to sabotage the train carrying the Muslims to the refugee camp. But Jugga is concerned mainly with the welfare of Nooran, who, he comes to know from his mother, is carrying his child. Danger to the train means danger to her life. Khushwant Singh has deftly described the thorough efforts of Jugga to save his beloved Nooran. "He (Jugga) pulled himself up, caught the rope under his left armpit, and again started hacking with his right hand. The rope had been cut in shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the center as he fell. The train

went over him, and went on to Pakistan." (Singh 181)

Thus, the plan of a handful of fanatic young Sikhs from outside Mano Majra in order to retaliate, to blow up the bridge and the train scheduled to carry Muslim refugees to Pakistan failed. Suvir Kaul rightly observes that Jugga's sacrifice for Nooran "..... brings back order and humanity to a village swept away by the flood of fratricidal violence sweeping over the Punjab." (Kaul 15) Jugga selflessly sacrifices his own life to save innocent lives threatened by the planned Mano Majra massacre. Jugga's act of saving Nooran and also the lives of Muslims on the train to Pakistan demonstrate that private values are transmuted into a general good. Jugga also intuitively knows that what he is going to do, has something good in it. Khushwant Singh unfortunately has missed the women perspective in the novel which is sad since here was one of the true writers who could capture India from villages to cities like no one else could. It would have been more appreciable if he would have thought of women not as objects of sex (as he does with both the women characters in the novel) but more as victims of the Partition violence. There is hardly a woman character in the novel who reaches the heights Jugga reaches. There is no woman thought in the book and at one point called the 'weaker sex' just to give a hint of the existing social conditions. The women voice seems subdued and alienated, displaying a dominant masculine ideology in operation with regard to the Partition.

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