



Indian Ethos in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

Ethos defines a culture, a people and even a country. According to the Oxford Dictionary, ethos is the characteristic spirit of a culture, era or community. It is a discipline that examines one's morality or the moral standard of the society. Mostly Indian English novels have been written keeping the view of Indian Ethos. Even the novelists, influenced by western culture, could not ignore this philosophy from their writing.

Keywords: Ethos, defines, culture, Pakistan

Introduction

Khushwant Singh is a great figure among the writers of the post independence generation. He was the high priest of journalism and can be said to be India's best. He was a free thinker and an international celebrity^[1]. He was a lawyer, critic, columnist and a legend and an icon in his lifetime. 'Train To Pakistan' is a very hit & popular novel of Khushwant Singh. This novel concerns 'Mano Majra', a fictional area in the north west region where India and Pakistan got their new boundaries in 1947. In August 1947, days before the partition of India and Pakistan, Khushwant Singh, then a lawyer practicing in the High Court in Lahore, drove to his family's summer cottage at Kasauli in the foothills of the Himalayas. Continuing on to Delhi along 200 miles of strangely vacant road, he came upon a jeep, full of armed Sikhs who boasted that they have just massacred a village of Muslims. Such experiences were to be powerfully distilled in Singh's 1956 novel 'Train To Pakistan'.

In the beginning of the novel, the border village of Mano Majra, where the incidents of the novel take place, is presented as a peaceful citadel, where people belonging to different communities live in harmony and peace. India is a country of many religions, cultures, communities, beliefs, customs & rituals and this is the keynote of Indian ethos. Even when rioting erupted in other parts of the Punjab, Mano Majra remained a peaceful citadel where nothing of Hindu-Muslim animosity was known.

'Train to Pakistan' is a novel about the north-western part of India around the time of independence, where the river Sutlej flowed in all its magnificence and abundance. India has been basically an agricultural country since ancient times.. Even today, many remote areas are not connected with railway lines and good roads. During the British period Indian villages were still less developed. Indian village life is a mixture of tranquility, serenity, quietude and innocence. Along with numerous small and big grass fields, several rivers, chirping of birds, swinging of emerald trees, speaking in a low voice the tale of languishment and love to the big and clear blue sky give a mesmerizing, captivating and bewitching effect to the Indian villages. Before independence, the Indian economy has mainly banked upon its agrarian society. Indian village life fully relies on

agriculture. It can be said that the soul of India lives in villages. Like other villages, 'Mano Majra', where the action of the novel takes place, has placid and uneventful life. It is a typical Punjab village where people lived without any animosity towards one another. But a big disruption occurs here with the flare up of the communal tensions that are caused by the announcement of the partition of the country. The village is inhabited by Sikhs and Muslims, with only one Hindu family of Lala Ram Lal living there. "The Sikhs own all the land around the village, the Muslims are tenants and share the tilling with the owners. There are a few families of sweepers, whose religion is uncertain. The Muslims claim them as their own, yet when American missionaries visit Mano Majra, the sweepers wear Khaki Sola topees and join their women flock in singing hymns to the accompaniment of harmonium^[2]. The co-existence of various religions has never been a problem in India since ancient times. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly points out, "There are thousands of villages like Mano Majra, where the law has always been peaceful co-existence"^[3]

Though the people of this tiny village worship their religion, yet they all put faith in the village deity 'Gram Devta'. The people of Mano Majra are illiterate and superstitious yet they are god-fearing and deeply religious. Whenever any calamity falls on the people they feel that "God was punishing them for their sins^[4]. The most important factor, in the lives of these people, is non betrayal in friendship. This is not a code of any religion but a typical Punjabi code- "The Punjabi code was even more baffling. For them, truth, honour, financial integrity were 'all right', but these were placed lower down the scale of values than being true to one's salt, to one's friends and fellow villagers. It was the projection of rural society where everyone in the village was a relation and loyalty to the village was supreme test"⁵. This whole the concept is based on one of the characteristics of Indian ethos where every Indian believes the god or the supreme power and where love and sacrifice emerge as the only means for a meaningful living. Based on this holistic vision, Indians have developed the work ethos of life.

The village folk leads a very regular life. This clock-work regularity is shown by the metaphor of the arrival and whistle of the train. Life in this tiny village is governed and conditioned by the coming and going, and sometimes

stopping at the railway station of the various trains. People, here, are very conscious of trains. Before day break, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge, the driver blows two long blasts of whistle. This is the signal for the commencement of the day's activities in the village-“ In an instant all, Mano Majra comes awake. Crows begin to caw in the Keekar trees. Bats fly back in long silent relays and begin to quarrel for their perches in the peepul. The Mullah at the mosque knows that it is time for the morning prayer. The priest at the Sikh temple..... intones his prayers in monotonous singsong [6].

By the time the 10:30 morning passenger from Delhi comes in, life in Mano Majra has settled down to its dull daily routine- “ Men are in the fields. Women are busy with their daily chorus. Children are out grazing cattle by the river. Sparrows fly about the roofs, trailing straw in their beaks [7]. As the mid day Express train goes by, people stop for rest and take lunch – “When they have eaten, the men gather in the shade of the Peepul tree and sit on the wooden platforms and talk and doze. Boys ride their buffaloes into the pond jump off their backs and splash about in the muddy water. Girls play under the trees. Women rub classified butter into each other's hair, pick lice from their children's heads and discuss births, marriages and deaths [8].

The routine of the people in the evening begins with the arrival of the evening passenger train from Lahore. Here a very idyllic scene of village life is presented – “The cattle are rounded up and driven back home to be milked and locked in for the night. The women cook the evening meal. Then the families gather on their rooftops where most of them sleep during the summer. Sitting on their charpoys, they eat and sip hot creamy milk and idle always the time until the signal for sleep [9]. The signal for sleep is the steaming of the goods train at the village station. People say to each other- There is the goods train. It is like saying good night [10]. The Mullah again calls the faithful to prayer. The priest also murmurs the evening prayer to drowsy old men and women. By the time the goods train leaves the station. “ The children are asleep. The older people wait for its rumble over the bridge to lull them to slumber [11]. Thus, the depiction of the regular life of the village folk is very authentic and presents a beautiful picture of Indian ethos.

These people of Mano Majra seem to be totally unconscious of the high political drama that is being played in the country as a whole. While in most metropolitan towns, communal unrest starts Mano Majra remains blissfully unconscious of everything. The magistrate asks the police authorities to keep special watch in Mano Majra because it is the most important village on the border here. It is so close to the bridge” [12]. Its strategic position as it links India and Pakistan is very important. Soon the peace and tranquility of Mano Majra is disturbed by the passing of the ghost trains from the railway station at odd hours. These trains are full of dead bodies of Hindu people from Pakistan. After the arrival of the ghost train, people feel dumbfounded. Police men prepare pyres. They all knew that the train had come from Pakistan [13]. The arrival of the ghost train makes people suspicious of each other on the basis of religion. This results in communal discord in Mano Majra. In this small village, Sikhs and Muslims live almost in an equal proportion. The Sikhs are rich landlords while most of the Muslims are poor tenant farmers. Since times immemorial the two communities had been living with each

other in perfect peace and amity. Thus, what happens in Mano Majra can be taken as the microcosm of what happened in India at the time of partition.

Khushwant Singh calls this period “Kalyug”. According to Hindu and Sikh beliefs, ‘Kalyug’ is the fourth and final era in this spiritual evolution of man. This is also referred to as the “Iron age” of Kalyug. The word ‘Yug’ stands for ‘era’ or ‘time cycle’. This yug is the most difficult for the human race and many atrocities and unfairness will become common place in society. Khushwant Singh puts these words in the mouth of the magistrate Hukum Chand-“Harey Ram, Harey Ram fifteen hundred innocent people? What else is Kalyug? There is darkness over the land. This is only one spot on the frontier. I suppose similar things are happening at other places [14].

What the love and sacrifice, Khushwant Singh shows at the time of partition, is the soul of Indian culture. Through the character of Juggut Singh, the novelist highlights the importance of love in our life to save humanity and compassion. His love for Nooran, a muslim girl, makes him go against his own people. In the fourth part of the novel named ‘Karma’, the novelist tells the importance of ‘Karma’ means “action” in the life a man which is the central theme of Shri Madd Bhagwat Gita. In this section, the sacrifice of Juggut Singh to save the lives of his girl friend and other muslim refugees shows the Indian philosophy of life where sacrifice is in our blood and many examples are in our glorious past.

Thus the novel ‘Train to Pakistan’ is a historical novel by Khuswant Singh which also presents a moral values of Indian culture. The story is based on Indian Ethos in which the first part of the novel ‘Dacoity’ symbolizes that humanity has been looted of its human attributes. The second part ‘Kalyug’ symbolizes the inner blackness of human heart and the last part ‘ Karma’ denotes the human action in the successive cycles of his existence and also the Indian life in relation to man's experience with the unknown cosmic design. Therefore, the novel is coloured by Indian Ethos which shows the moral standard of the society of partition time.

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