

Train to Pakistan:A Vision of Enduring Humanism

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Abstract

The proclaimed atheism of Khushwant Singh is just a mask and the criticism that he is a novelist without vision falls flat when his work on the trauma of partition is brought under a microscope. Beneath the sardonic façade is a man to whom humanism as particularly reiterated in Sikhism is an abiding faith and a symbol of true religiosity.

Some critics of Singh's writings have been very generous in their praise for him, while some others have not been so chivalrous. Those who have praised him have gone to the extent of hailing him as an "author of international repute" a "born story-teller", while those criticizing him have held the view that "qualities, which he has been hailed for, are either altogether absent in his work or have no relevance to his creative talent and progress of his art."

Shyam M. Asnani goes to the extent of conforming to the views of Chirantan Kulshrestha who in his article, "Khushwant Singh's Fiction, has asserted that Singh is a novelist without vision. In his article he reasons:

Since his (Khushwant Singh's) creative literary output is meagre-a couple of novels and three collections of short stories-that too not of a very high order-one can hardly assail. Mr. Kulshrestha's suspicion that the critics of Khushwant Singh seem to have been tempted to praise him for his possibilities and 'immense promise' without establishing any correlation with the work he has actually produced so far.

KEYWORDS: Humanism, Faith, Love, Vision, Social, Moral, Courage, Values, Shelter, Violence, Attitude

I, however, do not agree with the critics in their perception of Khushwant Singh as a novelist without vision and qualities of head and heart. He does possess some qualities which carve out a place for him in the modern Indo-Anglican writing and it would not be out of place to quote Asnani himself who has identified Singh's qualities as an established writer in the following lines:

The comic spirit, exploration of the world around and presenting it in all its nakedness and the truth and capacity to capture reality in all its magnificence

and horror, the felicity of expression, stark originality, unique lightness of touch mingled with a touch of fantasy are precisely the qualities that are distinctly his own. He chooses only those areas and aspects of life, which he knows best and successfully presents them with sardonic wit, lively spirit, gentle jocularly and pricking prank.

Regarding the central significance of the novel, Train to Pakistan, V.A. Shahane Says:

The triumph of love, humanism, faith in the innate Goodness of man in the moment of real crisis and Challenge mark the central significance of the novel.

Regarding the vision of Khushwant Singh, the following lines throw sufficient light. Singh in his *Train to Pakistan* has laid emphasis on the fundamental human aspect:

In the face of the nihilistic approach of Iqbal, it is

made emphatically clear that the most fundamental human aspect—man-woman-love—survives in all circumstances. The Sikh scriptures are meaningfully quoted in the novel. Carefully and significantly placed at the beginning and at the end of the plan of massacre, they clearly suggest that Jugga's sacrifice was a sort of redemption not merely of the savage acts occasioned by the partition but also the abuse of religion which triggered off this savagery.

In his literary writings, Singh is purposive and meaningful in the present society of social and moral disintegration. He has a deep faith in the novels, namely *Train to Pakistan* and *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale and Delhi*.

Singh has his own vision of courage and action moulding the moral design of his novels. It is his love for humanity that inspires him to write. He has keen eye for details and a vision of life which has been sustaining him and his works.

In this context, the following lines in which Jugga tells reformist Iqbal the law of *Karma* are relevant:

Babuji, don't you believe that bad acts yield a bitter harvest. It is the law of *Karma*, so the Bhai is always saying. The Guru has also said the same in the Book.

On hearing the report of a thousand found killed in the bogie of a train from Pakistan, Magistrate Hukum Chand exclaims:

Hare Ram, Hare Ram. Fifteen hundred innocent
people. What else is *Kalyug*?

The idealistic and affirmative tone of the novel has an undercurrent of abiding Sikh faith which emphasizes human values, humanism and giving shelter to refugees:

The Sikh peasants cannot refuse shelter to refugees;
hospitality was not a past-time but a sacred duty.

Judged from the above Singh is indeed a hypocrite when he calls himself an atheist. He may not believe in God, but he does believe in God's Virtue of sacrifice. Or else, how could he conceive the character Juggat Singh, a criminal, who is overpowered by a dominant spirit of sacrifice for his love which transforms his physical love in to a sublime love. Critics Sheo Bhushan Shukla and Rini Shukla in their learned paper have also contested the views of Chirantan Kulshrestha and Shyam M. Asnani that Khushwant Singh is a writer without vision. The Say:

Even though his fictional output is limited,
Khushwant Singh remains a major Indo-English
novelist. He writes about the challenging and
disturbed times in our history and applies the
surgeon's touch to various ills of our social life.
He, somehow, lacks that depth and intensity which
is the hall-mark of great creative literature. He will
certainly, be read as long as the Indo-English novel
lives, but he may not be able to touch those classical
heights which are the dreams of every writer.

About the novelist's vision, they maintain:

Chirantan Kilshrestha is not right to hold that the
novelist is a man without vision. He has his vision
that moulds the moral design of his novels. At times
he may appear to be an "angry middle aged man"
trying "to shout his disenchantment with the
world", but what inspires him to write is not his
anger but love for humanity.

Jugga's infatuation for the Muslim weaver's daughter, Nooran, has been a cause of jubilation for the police. This has been the factor responsible for keeping jugga rooted

the village to the great relief of the policeman. This point is reported to the Magistrate by the sub-inspector of police on his query about Jugga, the criminal.

The sub-inspector reports:

Jugga has a liason with the girl, Nooran, a Muslim weaver's daughter. She is dark but her eyes are darker. She certainly keeps Jugga in the village. And no one dares say a word against the Muslims. Her blind father is the mullah of the mosque.

It is the point, and none dares say a word against Muslims', that inspires Magistrate Hukum Chand to order release of Jugga from the jail on the fateful night of the Muslim refugees leaving Mano Majra for Pakistan. He did so apparently to save the Muslims from being killed through Jugga foiling the bid of communalists to blow off the train midriver as he too wanted his Haseena, the dancing girl, whom he has enjoyed in the Government Rest House, to have a safe passage to Pakistan.

The Magistrate's release order for Jugga and his sacrifice are so timed as lends mystery to the story. Jugga's love for Nooran transcends to the level of sublimity.

After going through *Train to Pakistan*, it is clear that the novel is a study on divided nationalism on both sides of the Ind-pak border. It was, in fact, failure of one's own character as long-time friends and neighbors instantly turned foes and a frightening fighting spirit manifested almost everywhere.

In the sacrifice of Juggat Singh the novelist intends to inform the readers and posterity that overpowering urge for violence in the men may be resisted only by the force of love, which drives the hero of the novel, Juggat Singh, to avert the mass killings by laying down his own life.

It is in love that a criminal like Juggat Singh finds his real identity and gives him inner strength to reform and moral strength to risk his life for his love, Nooran, and in his preparation for sacrifice he realizes his real self. His love for Nooran transcends from personal to universal as in the process he averts a disaster and massacre.

Thus, in the ultimate analysis, I find that the novelist brings out forcefully that love in men is as deeply rooted as the urge for violence. Love gives strength and courage to face violence with fortitude. The novelists economizing words tell the love is an antidote to violence and this point is brought out suggestively.

The novelist has shown how love transforms a criminal into a humanist, into a crusader against violence and communalism, and seeks his fulfillment in saving the life of his love.

As explained above, I hold that Khushwant Singh is a novelist with vision and he has a message for the people to shun violence and stand up against the evils gripping the society and the nation.

It would be relevant quote Shahane who, commenting on the novel *Train to Pakistan* as a humanistic novel and the novelist's faith in man, says:

...it is a creative rendering of the real, and it

reaffirms the novelist's faith in man and renews his
owed allegiance to the humanistic ideal.

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