

Heterogeneity, Integrity, Humanity and Beyond: Mapping the Multicultural Magnitude in Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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ABSTRACT

In sharp contrast to the idea of monoculturalism, multiculturalism, as a body of thoughts, upholds an amiable coexistence of diverse cultural groups living harmoniously in a healthy atmosphere of cultural assimilation. As a postmodern, postcolonial thought multiculturalism promotes the idea of the acceptance and maintenance, of the promotion and celebration of the multiplicity of cultures providing all the cultures enough space to exercise and maintain their unique cultural principles and customs. In the postmodern context of the accelerating antagonism among different cultures, religions and races, the idea of multiculturalism is a sort of redress to encounter the growing severance threatening the existence of human civilization on earth. The unscrupulous and power-crazy politicians have deliberately been instigating the religious and cultural fundamentalists to relish the violent outcome of the religious fanaticism. In such a minatory situation of cultural clashes and religious rifts, the multicultural reading of Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is premised here on the assumption that the heterogeneous cultural groups should be allowed to practice freely their own cultures and core values respecting that of the others. Thus, the multicultural reading of the said novel in the article here speaks for the decimation of the narrow-minded religious intolerance and extremism to offer a way out to the growing propensity to cultural clash and communal disharmony.

Keywords: multiculturalism, religious fanaticism, partition, togetherness, pacifistic coexistence.

I have no hesitation in saying that those who are gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity, who have the least feeling of enmity against aliens, and the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others will be the fittest to take their permanent place in the age that is lying before us, and those who are constantly developing their instinct of fight and intolerance of aliens will be eliminated. For this is the problem before us, and we have to prove our humanity by solving it through the help of our higher nature (Tagore 101).

According to Raymond Williams, 'Culture', an indispensable and multi-accented term with a complex and multifarious history, is notoriously hard to pin down. It is generally used to refer to intellectual and artistic practices or works that, in their very form and meanings, define human society as socially constructed rather than natural. Culture, therefore, involves individual style or character as well as life and traditions of a particular social group. The famous 19th century anthropologist E. B. Tylor defined 'culture' as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals and law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"(Taylor 1). However, dispersion and immigration across the national boundaries in the last two centuries have become an extremely contentious issue in the global arena. As a direct consequence of this dislocation and relocation, society in general has ceased to be monocultural. Philosophers, psychologists, historians and early sociologists argue that culture is not one definite entity based on a single race or religion; rather they have developed the concept of "cultural pluralism", from which emerged what we understand today as 'multiculturalism'.

In sharp contrast to the idea of monoculturalism, multiculturalism, as a body of thought, upholds an amiable coexistence of diverse cultural groups living harmoniously in a healthy atmosphere of cultural assimilation. It is seen by its

supporters as a fairer system that allows people to truly express who they are within a society and is founded on the ideas of tolerance and respect for difference. Broadly speaking, as postmodern postcolonial thought multiculturalism promotes the idea of the acceptance and maintenance, of the promotion celebration of the multiplicity of cultures providing all the cultures enough space to exercise and maintain their unique cultural principles and customs. In fact, genuine multiculturalism values the idea of pluralism and cultural diversity which ultimately results in the domestication of ethnic differences and religious variations. It promotes the non-hierarchical understanding of cultures and traditions, an approach that is thoroughly anti-racist, as it was commonly believed that the monocultural conceptions of history and society are inherently racist. In other words, multiculturalism is often presented as a solution or response to racism. According to Terence Turner, "Multiculturalism is one manifestation of the postmodernist reaction to the DE legitimization of the state and the erosion of the hegemony of the dominant culture in advanced capitalist countries" (Turner 423). In a number of countries, the general consensus was that diversity makes a nation more interesting and exciting place to live and that it also aids and enriches the nation's growth. Many nation-states in Asia, Africa and the Americas are culturally diverse as they have all witnessed long term immigration and are thus 'multicultural' in a descriptive sense. These nation-states are representing a growing mixture of different races and such multiplicity of cultures has certainly played a large role in characterizing that particular nation's identity. And in these nation-states the idea of multiculturalism has demoted 'the politics of difference' that endorses the fragmentation of the human world by superiorizing any particular cultural, ethnic and religious value as central.

Multiculturalism and diversity study has become an essential part of understanding literary works, as it is a way of opening minds to varied cultures from around the world. And

no doubt it is that literature plays a considerable role in the development of understanding across cultures. Edward Said has acknowledged the interrelationship between literature and culture by commenting that, "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; [but] it has regularly seemed otherwise to me... that society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said 27). Literature of high quality and cultural authenticity allows room for diversity, especially multicultural encounters, global understanding, exchange of ideas and the like. Basically, a proper multicultural literary creation breaks down all the borders and surprises us with its presentation of home and abroad together. An author who belongs to a particular multicultural nation is bound to reflect in his creations an entirely novel way of thinking about the cultures at work. His way of experiencing and celebrating culture will certainly be different from someone belonging to a monocultural background. A genuine multicultural literary writer effectively leads his readers to identify cultural heritages, to understand sociological changes and respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations and expand imagination and creativity. Interestingly enough, multicultural aspects tend to get expressed through literature in various forms. For example, whereas some multicultural writers seek to address such vital issues as sexism, economic polarization, discrimination and fragmentation, some other authors were influenced by social miseries and racial problems, such as John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Alejandro Morale's *The Brick People* etc. Multicultural elements are also to be found in R.K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* and Witi Ihimaera's *Tangi*.

Further, the reason and nature of multiculturalism vary from country to country and is not always an outcome of immigration or dispersion. In some cases, multiculturalism can

be provincial in nature; for example, in such countries as India which is one of the most culturally, linguistically, religiously, and to a certain context, ethnically diverse country of the world. The culture of India has been designed by its long and peculiar history, unique geography and special demographic make-up. India's languages, religions, dances, music, architecture and customs differ from place to place within the country. The culture of India is an interesting and unique one; it carries a distinctive fusion of myriad sub-cultures spread all over the sub-continent. It is indeed a multicultural society that carries a long tradition of pacifistic coexistence of its diverse peoples with occasional disturbance of this tuneful togetherness. Quite naturally, literatures of such nations are bound to be multicultural in their approach. Some brilliant texts in the realm of Indian Writing in English that observe or violate the different principles of multiculturalism are Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998), the poetic collections of A.K. Ramanujan and several such masterpieces.

Khuswant Singh's magnum opus *Train to Pakistan* (1956), written in the backdrop of 1947 partition of India into India and Pakistan, is a brilliant multicultural reading that very well manifests the ideals of cultural pluralism and ethnic mosaic.

Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque. The three brick buildings enclose a triangular common with a large peepul tree in the middle ... This is a three foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keekar tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the *deo* to which all the villagers – Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo-Christian – repair secretly whenever they are in a special need of blessing.

(TTP 2-3)

The very setting of the engrossing saga excellently vivifies the communal harmony and solidarity existing in a particular locale which remains unstirred by the surrounding events of communal frenzy. Located in the far off village of Mano Majra at the Indo-Pakistan border on the banks of the Sutlej, the novel deftly explores the peaceful harmony existing in the fictional village irrespective of the different religious affiliation of the villagers. By representing the communal fellowship in the village of Mano Majra, Singh here endorses the idea of Provincial Multiculturalism which upholds cultural and religious diversity and inclusion in a particular territory. Doubtless it is that Khuswant Singh's main purpose behind the composition of the novel is to unearth the

“inhuman bestial horrors and insane savage killings on both sides during the Partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in August 1947”.

(*Raizada* 126).

Through his distinctive power of observation and sensitive account of the repercussions of the partition, Singh here sketches the contrast between pre-partition and post-partition social condition in the village of Mano Majra. And he here conspicuously unveils the bleak aftermath caused by the inhuman slaughter. Actually the very origin of the novel lies in Singh's discontentment and depression engendered by the horror, animality and the destruction of wealth and human lives involved in the partition tragedy.

Rudimentarily designed to bring to the fore the politics of partition and its grim after-effects Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* has attained a very special status in the history of Indian writing in English in its portrayal of cultural concord in a specific village in the overall social milieu of division. The very first part of the narrative namely “Dacoity” is immensely significant because Singh here graphically shows how before the outbreak of the hideous event of partition, the different

communities of people lived in cordial harmony in Mano Majra. Before the outburst of the partition the Mano Majrans, consisting of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims happily lived in an undisturbed atmosphere of communal harmony and togetherness which is ultimately shattered by religious zealotry induced by the politics of partition. As a secular humanist, Singh here presents his ideas of multicultural inclusion and multi-religious integration in the village Mano Majra with an advocacy of cooperative interaction among diverse cultures in India. Actually Mano Majra here stands as an allegorical image of India as a whole. And Singh here holds the religiously intrigued violence of partition responsible for the demolition of the inclusive environment of mutual understanding cherished for a long time before the upsurge of communal hatred and intolerance.

The action of the novel centres round the fictional village of Mano Majra which serves perhaps as the chief protagonist of the novel. When the partition of India was announced and the communal riot broke out as its aftermath, the whole of India “was in arms, in terror, or in hiding. The only remaining oases of peace were a scatter of little villages lost in the remote reaches of the frontier. One of these villages was Mano Majra” (TTP 2). It is really noteworthy that in the very first reference to the village Singh didn’t forget to underline the signature feature of the seemingly unexceptional village. This outwardly run-of-the-mill village achieved exceptionality in its acceptance, maintenance and promotion of communal harmony in a situation when the rest of the country was involved in communal dissension and heartlessness. After pointing to the singularity of Mano Majra, Singh provides a graphic delineation of the Mano Majrans – their culture, their way of living, their unawareness of the world affair and above all their unique sense of fellow-felling. Singh begins his portrayal with the picturesque description of the physical setting of the village:

“Mano Majra is a tiny village. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque.”

(TTP 2)

The reference to the traditional Indian Hindu name Ram Lal, the Sikh temple and the mosque suggests the coexistence of the multi-religious communities in the village. There are only about seventy families in Mano Manjro and Lala Ram is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims, about equal in number. The Sikhs own all the land around the village; the Muslims are tenants and share the tilling with the owners. There are 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 womenfolk in singing hymns to the accompaniment of a harmonium. Sometimes they visit the Sikh temple, too. (TTP 2).

The quoted paragraph is an ample evidence of the kind of solidarity and integrity that existed in Mano Majra, a village of heterogeneous religious communities. The only Hindu family, the Sikhs, the Muslims and the sweepers of uncertain religious affiliations lived peacefully and in an atmosphere of amity in the village. The sense of togetherness and collectivity that characterized the Mano Majrans is well brought out in their symbolic gesture of repairing “the three-foot slab sandstone”, “the local deity” whom all the Mano Majrans worshiped irrespective of their religious affiliation, caste and creed.

The village’s Cultural assimilation is figuratively well-suggested by Singh by the villagers’ interdependence on each other for performing their religious rituals. The two major religions of the village coexisted in perfect coordination by maintaining the distinctiveness of their cultures. “The Mullah at the mosque 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 long sonorous notes, '*Allah-o-Akbar*'. The priest at the Sikh temple lies in bed till the Mullah has called. Then he too gets up ...intones his prayer in monotonous singsong to the sound of splashing water." (TTP 4-5) Herein lies the justification of the idea of multiculturalism as 'Salad Bowl' rather than as 'Melting Pot'. This manifests multiculturalism's distinctive aspects as a theory. It is not simply the sum of diverse cultures; it is, to quote the British Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, "not as flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equality of opportunity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance." (Rattansi 9) So the emphasis is both on "cultural diversity and equal opportunities." (Rattansi 9)

Devoid of any political consciousness, the Mano Majrans led their life in an ambience of social solidarity and cultural companionship in spite of the communal disturbance and brutality around the village. Notwithstanding the news of atrocities round the village the Mano Majrans continued their life of mutual well-being. The first blow to the village's long-cherished harmony was the murder of a Hindu moneylender and the incrimination of Juggat Singh, the Sikh Gangster of the village who was in love with a Muslim girl. When a train arrived on Mano Majra station carrying the dead bodies of the Sikhs murdered brutishly in Pakistan, the village's long-preserved harmony was in crisis. Finally the bond of fraternal feelings among the diversified villagers of Mano Majra that singularized the village was on the wane by the calamitous politics of partition: "When it was discovered that the train had brought a full load of corpses, a heavy brooding silence descended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all night talking in whispers. Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him, and thought of finding friends and allies." (TTP 124) The congenial atmosphere of the village was soon lost and was replaced by an ambience of suspicion and cynicism. "Muslims sat and moped in their houses. Rumours of atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims in Patiala, Ambala and

Kapurthala, which they had heard and dismissed, came back to their minds. They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped in the marketplace....For the first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them-a refuge where there were no Sikhs." (TTP 127-128). The feeling was more or less the same on the other side as well:

"The Sikhs were sullen and angry. 'Never trust a Mussulman,' they said.... (The Mussulmans) Executed two of their Gurus, assassinated another and butchered his infant children;... Now a trainload of Sikhs massacred by Muslims had been cremated in Mano Majra.... Then there was the murder of Ram Lal. No one knew who killed him, but everyone knew Ram Lal was a Hindu.... So they decided to be angry with the Muslims; Muslims were basely ungrateful."

(TTP 128-129).

However, the warm-hearted bond among the Mano Majrans was not so fragile that it was to be shattered so easily. The feelings of hostility and animosity were very soon overcome by the Mano Majrans who had been living in a milieu of unshakeable harmony from time immemorial. And the foregoing feelings of fellowship very soon re-established itself on the soil of the Mano Majra. The Muslim Imam Baksh said:

"What have we to do with Pakistan? We are born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers. Imam Baksh broke down. Meet Singh clasped him in his arms and began to sob. Several of the people started crying quietly and blowing their noses."

(TTP 133)

In reply the Sikh Lambardar reverberated something akin to the Imam's speech: "Yes, you are our brothers. As far as we are concerned, you and your children and your grandchildren can live here as long as you like. If anyone speaks rudely to you, your wives or your children, it will be us first and our wives and children before a single hair of your heads is touched." (TTP 134) After mutual understanding and warm exchange of thoughts

when it was finally decided collaboratively that the Muslims would go to the refugee camp so long as the trouble was on

“The lambardar felt a strong sense of guilt and was overcome with emotion. He got up and embraced Imam Baksh and started to cry loudly. Sikh and Muslim villagers fell into each other’s arms and wept like children.”

(TTP 135).

“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. Life, they said, would be as it always had been.”

(TTP 140).

The incessant rain throughout the night serves as a very powerful symbol here. Even nature could not accept the disruption of the brotherly love that characterized the village and seemed to bemoan over disturbance of the reciprocal existence of the Sikhs and Muslims in Mano Majra.

The arrival of Iqbal Singh to Mano Majra brought a new cultural type to the village with which the villagers were unfamiliar till then. Iqbal, the England-educated young communist and social activist who had been sent by the People’s Party of India to propagate some political lessons to the villagers on the remote border carried with him an entirely different culture to the village. In stark contrast to the Mano Majrans’ deep-rooted religious devotion Iqbal was a well-educated atheist initially suspected to be a member of the Muslim League. Iqbal represents the western-educated Indian who is characterized as an embodiment of the influence of British culture on the Indians. His ‘holdall’, tin of sardines, tin of Australian butter, packet of dry biscuits, his ‘silver hip flask’, his progressive philosophies and knowledge of the world affairs bring an absolutely new culture to the village of Mano Majra on the frontier. It is undoubtedly absorbing that in spite of the ambiguity concerning Iqbal’s actual religious affiliation and his cultural difference from them, the Sikh Mano Majrans greeted him with full cordiality

and their customary generosity and nobility of mind. In his dealing and conversation with unfamiliar Iqbal Singh, the Sikh priest Bhai Meet Singh uncovered his magnanimity and altruism. Such was the atmosphere of peace and harmony in the Mano Majra that the villagers' didn't hesitate to welcome an unfamiliar outsider without thinking much about its consequence even in the critical atmosphere of communal disharmony in the country.

As a socially-concerned writer, Khuswant Singh not only presents the problems of religious fundamentalism and communal disharmony, but also provides a suggestion of potent solution to this grim predicament. In the novel *Train to Pakistan* the love of the Sikh boy Juggat Singh for the Muslim girl Nooran serves as a positive force that transcends the contemporary situation of all-pervasive religious rifts and communal bias. Juggat's unwavering love for Nooran, the daughter of the Mullah stands beyond the vicious impact of partition. Singh here has deliberately presented an interreligious love affair in order to promulgate his ideas of communal accord. Yet it is not to be forgotten that Juggat Singh did not feign love to entice Nooran. Initially Jugga's love for Nooran appeared to be a sort of fulfilment of carnal desires on the part of Jugga. But ultimately he proved himself to be a devoted lover who doesn't think twice to sacrifice his life to save the life of his dear beloved, although a girl of other community, more significantly in a climacteric condition of communal violence. Jugga's serious concern for the well-being of his beloved led him to frustrate the conspiracy of the religious bigots to sabotage the train that was carrying the evacuated Muslims of Mano Majra to Pakistan. And it is really significant that Jugga's attempt to save the life of his beloved finally succeeded in rescuing the lives of the trainload of Muslims. A clearly perceptible transformation finally came to Jugga's personality: The 'badmash', the self-confessed ruffian ultimately turned out to be a philanthropist who sacrificed his own life to save the lives of his Muslim brothers and thus

disseminated the ideals of love, humanity, brotherhood and multicultural harmony. "In the sacrifice of Jugga Singh the novelist intends to inform the readers that the over powering urge for violence in men may be resisted only by the force of love, which drives the hero of the novel, Jugga Singh, to avert mass killings by laying down his own life." (Dubey 3). Beside presenting Jugga as his spokesman to promote the ideas of love and humanity which seems to be the very purpose behind the composition of the novel, Khuswant Singh also conveys an ardent sense of a reformist movement, a multifaceted and flexible social theorist who marks the celebration of a healthy human society characterized by co-operation, tolerance, respect and love.

In the postmodern context of the accelerating antagonism among different cultures, religions and races, the idea of multiculturalism is a sort of redress to encounter the growing severance threatening human civilization. The unscrupulous and power-crazy politicians have deliberately been instigating the religious and cultural fundamentalists to relish the violent outcome of the fanaticism. In such a minatory situation of cultural clashes and religious rifts, the multicultural reading of Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is premised here on the assumption that the heterogeneous cultural groups should be allowed to practice freely their own cultures and core values respecting that of the others. Thus, the multicultural reading of the said novel speaks for the decimation of the narrow-minded religious intolerance and extremism to offer a way out to the growing propensity to cultural clash and communal disharmony.

All references to the novel *Train to Pakistan* are indicated with acronym of the title and page numbers in parenthesis.

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