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Prof. K. N. Shelke

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Prof. K.N. Shelke

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-:Contact:-

Prof. K.N. Shelke

Flat No. 01,
Nirman Sagar Coop. Housing Society,
Thana Naka, Panvel, Navi Mumbai. (MS), India. 410206. knshelke@yahoo.in

Cell: +91-7588058508

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Comparison of the Three Novels: *Train to Pakistan*, *A Bend in the Ganges*, *Azadi*

Dr Meenu Dudeja

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, M.A.I.T, Delhi, (Delhi) India

Abstract

The flourishing of Indian novel in English after Independence has witnessed the recurrence of the theme of Partition in various forms. Even decades after independence the theme of our freedom movement, the atrocities of British colonizers and the ultimate partition of the country keep recurring in novel after novel. Writers go back again and again to this significant movement to understand the history of our nation from different perspectives as the partition of the country resulted in an insensate communal fury which caught the whole generation in the crossfire of religious bigotry, intolerance and sectarianism.

The partition of the British India into India and Pakistan came with the much-converted Independence and brought with it the holocaust of communal riots. In the new Pakistan and in the border areas of the old India, the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Muslims who had been living as brothers began hating one other to such an extent that they resorted to looting, murdering, stabbing, burning and raping. The emotional issues cause the greatest damage to the serenity and solidarity of the human society and this has been proved true once again at the political Independence of the country.

Key Words: Partition, Train to Pakistan, A Bend in the Ganges, Azadi

The Theme and its Treatment

These three novels are grouped together on the thematic count. They have a common central theme: the partition of India along with her much coveted Independence and the communal riots and violence that accompanied the partition. In *Train to Pakistan* Jugga – Nooran love affair outshines the partition violence. The novel begins with their love-making and ends with their separation. But all this takes place against the background of partition and the subsequent and consequent violence; the lovers are separated in the most inhuman way only due to partition. As professor Vasant Shahane points out,

“The individual in Khushwant Singh’s fictional world is silhouetted against the vast panoramic background – the great human

catastrophy of the partition of India and the ghastly and inhuman events which followed” 1.

The scene in *Train to Pakistan* is laid in India on the eve of the partition in 1947. About ten million people- Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan, and Muslims from India, were in flight and in the large scale communal disturbances and killings took place, nearly a million died. Khushwant Singh selects a small village Mano Majra (an imaginary village) on the Indo-Pakistan border which is mostly free from communal frenzy and fratricidal strife. In the otherwise quiet villages, the communal tension develops because of the outsiders but before it turns to the villages witness the train coming from Pakistan with dead bodies of Hindus and Sikhs but the village is not in actual trouble of looting, burning

and killing but in the case of *A Bend in the Ganges* and *Azadi* we often come across these scenes of horrors. The Partition theme is in the background and through the Jugga-Nooran love story, without portraying much of the violence and the atrocities, Khushwant Singh suggests them by linking the same with the ups and downs of a love-affair controlled by the situation, between a Sikh youth and a Muslim girl. Khushwant Singh's artistic creation of the atmosphere in *Train to Pakistan* reminds the readers of E.M. Forster's masterly portrayal of the atmosphere in *A Passage to India*. Khushwant Singh uses simple symbols with mastery. The train is a dual symbol : it symbolizes life and action but it also stands for death and disaster. The induction of the gecko motif for the scene between Hukum Chand and Haseena is a brilliant stroke of the novelist's art of atmospheric and symbolic portrayal. The geckos crawled, made odd sounds, abruptly paused before they collided – strange sight. The lizards fall on Hukum Chand's feet – a bad omen ! His physical sensations and pleasures are gone with the sound of the shots fired at a distance – the geckos were right after all ! The murder of the moneylender Ramlal at the beginning and the love making of Jugga and Nooran, and then amorous activities between Hukum Chand and Haseena work as a prelude to the swelling act.

K.R. Srinivasan Iyengar, very aptly comments,

“Khushwant Singh, however, has succeeded through resolved limitation and rigorous selection in communicating to his readers a kind of grossness, ghastliness and total insanity of the two nation theory and

the partition tragedy. The pity and the horror of it all ! And the novel adequately conveys them both”².

Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* has the partition (including the freedom struggle) and the accompanying holocaust as the central theme but it has many other sub-themes like Gian's family history, the Debi-Shafi rivalry, the Andaman Tail affairs, the Gian-Sundari-Gopal triangle and the Second World War. There is a crowd of events. The novel makes an interesting and absorbing reading due to the dramatic events. The two heroes Gian Talwar and Debi-dayal are chosen from different social backgrounds and are presented as two different personality types to build up the parallel structure of the novel. Meenakshi Mukherjee describes this novel as,

“*A Bend in the Ganges* is panoramic in scope and epic in aspiration, crowded with events from Modern Indian history beginning with the civil disobedience movement of the early thirties and ending in the post-partition riots in Punjab.”³

In this panoramic structure, the partition and the subsequent holocaust dominates with its horrible and terrible violence. In *Train to Pakistan* Juggat Singh saves a train of the Muslim refugees and dies in doing so whereas in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Debi is killed by the Muslim fanatics and Gian brings Sundari safe to India although she has lost her parents: her mother is killed and the father is un-willing to leave his dead wife. *Train to Pakistan* ends with sacrifice in despair and *Azadi* ends with the optimistic note of new birth out of destruction and violence. *Azadi* is a monumental novel – a moving saga of the

division of the Indian sub-continent. It is a chronicle novel with a gripping narrative. Nahal has focused on the partition and the havoc played by the same. The Lull, the storm and the aftermath are the three stages of this violence and Nahal does not go beyond it. He does not include the freedom struggle and terrorist activities as Malgonkar does. In all the three novels apart from these differences, partition and the accompanying disaster is the pivotal concern.

Characterization

In these three absorbing and moving novels, some major characters are permanently remembered. They are, Jugga Singh, Iqbal and Hukam Chand in *Train to Pakistan*; Gian, Debi, Sundari, Shafi and Mumtaz in *A Bend in the Ganges*; and Lal Kanshi, Arun, Chaudhari Barkat Ali and Sunanda in '*Azadi*'. These are the people who suffer during the most critical days and they represent the millions who suffered from communal fanaticism. They are round characters, dynamic in their growth. Hukam Chand is a major figure on the dramatic stage of *Train to Pakistan*. He, at first appears as a typical Indian representative of bureaucracy in the British governed India. He is a type as well as an individual, a person as well as a bureaucrat, and in various ways, an evolving character. He shows an extremely sensible attitude when he says that they must maintain law and order and avoid any killing or destruction of property. Professor Vasant Shahane has aptly analysed Hukamchand.

"Hukumchand's confrontation with Haseena has an exotic touch and presents a strong contrast to the earlier prosaic, common place scene.

It exposes several aspects of Hukumchand as man and magistrate."4.

Iqbal is a Babu, a city dweller who is influenced by the western culture and education. He comes to Mano Majra for his party work but fails in his work. He attempts to project his Western ideas and socialist notions on the Mano Majra situation only to realize that he does not belong to this society. Though he is eager to be arrested to become a hero, the arrest comes to him as a shocking experience unlike Jugga's arrest. In the changed situation of communal tension, Iqbal withdraws himself as he realizes his limitations. There is a mystery around him initially,

"He could be a Muslim, Iqbal Mohammad. He could be a Hindu, Iqbalchand or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh."5.

The communal tension and the anti-Muslim atmosphere makes a coward of him whereas the rough, mannerless, unsophisticated dacoit Jugga proves to be superior by the sacrifice of his own life in saving the train of Muslim refugees. Iqbal and Jugga represent the class divisions in the society. Jugga Singh's involvement with Nooran is so deep that he meets his noble death in saving his 'love.' He reminds us of the noble lovers Debi and Mumtaz in *A Bend in the Ganges*, and especially Mumtaz, who dies for her lover Debi-dayal, a Hindu, killed by her own people. For Jugga and Mumtaz, both from the lower class, religion does not count in love. Arun is a practical lover in *Azadi*; he is not matured in his involvement for sacrifice. Arun loves Nur but is not prepared to become a Muslim and stay in Pakistan for her. When he has to part with

Nur, he can forget her and in the refugee camp, he enjoys Chandni's love, Shafi, in *A Bend in the Ganges* is a selfish lover, he loves Mumtaz but when he finds that he cannot get her he does not mind throwing an acid bulb at Mumtaz when she is going with Debi-dayal. Gian Talwar loves Sundari but she uses him only to take revenge on her debaucherous husband Gopal – as a 'male whore'. Jugga and Debi stand out as remarkable lovers – men who are above religious fanaticism. Gian becomes a national 'hero' by rescuing Debi's sister Sundari and father Tekchand from the Muslims. Lal Kanshi Ram in *Azadi* has his strength and weakness. As an Arya Samajist he is proud of the ancient civilization and culture of India. He respects Sanskrit, owns up Hindi but speaks only Punjabi. He hates the English for holding India in captivity, and yet admires them for their honesty, impartiality and administrative skill. He is startled to know that he is "a refugee in his own hoem"⁶.

After witnessing the horrors of the partition and the communal violence, he wishes to leave the New Pakistan as early as possible. He can no longer hate the Muslims. He has seen both Hindus and Muslims suffering at one other's hands. This has a neutralizing effect on him and he, reaching Delhi safely tells his wife calmly that he has no hatred for the Muslims – even after losing everything due to them ! The action of *Azadi* alternates between Lala Kanshi Ram and Arun as centres of consciousness, Barkat Ali Chaudhari and Ghani Khan are in contrast with each other. Barkat Ali is above religious eccentricities and is very sad to see his friend Lala Kanshi Ram going with a refugee convoy whereas

Ghani Khan takes a sinister pleasure in the same. Barkat Ali escorts Arun to the railway station when Arun goes to find out his sister Madhu's dead body but then, Ghani Khan teases Arun at the station. Barkat Ali cannot tolerate Ghani's teasing Arun in the latter's distress and attacks Ghani almost to kill him. Barkat Ali's counterpart is Meet Singh in *Train to Pakistan* who does not want the Muslims to leave Mano Majra as he thinks that the land belongs to the Muslims as much as it belongs to the Sikhs. In the communal tension, violence and the destruction due to the communal riots, people like Lala Kanshi Ram, Barkat Ali, Meet Singh, Juggat Singh, and Debi-dayal stand out for their nobility. They are all above fanaticism and the world is still a worth living place due to such people only. In the days of ethnic tensions and problems we need such people to save the world from communal tensions. It is surprising that in all the three novels, the women are not much involved in the major actions. They are portrayed as the victims of violence and suffering. In *Azadi*, Nur has to sacrifice her love for Arun in her helplessness; in *Train to Pakistan*, Nooran has to leave Jugga though she is willing to remain in Mano Majra; in *Azadi* Sunanda has to face an attempt of rape by Captain Rahamat-Ullah-Khan and Chandni is abducted; naked women are paraded and humiliated in the street; in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Debi's mother dies in the attack by the Muslims and Mumtaz dies for Debi. Of all these women, only Bibi Amar Vati in *Azadi* stands out superior to her husband Gangu Mull who becomes a Muslim in order to own his wife's property. Almost all the women suffer due to partition, they are the victims of the violence and fanaticism of men in these three novels.

Setting

The setting in these three novels is almost the same – the place is the newly set up border line area and the time is about the fateful Partition of India. Khushwant Singh sticks to the Village Mano Majra and all actions take place there only. In *Train to Pakistan* it is the small stage of the big drama and yet magnitude of the drama is very vividly and impressively brought out. Khushwant Singh does not cover the freedom struggle nor does he offer a detailed account of the sufferings of the refugees after the fateful line is drawn. His concern is only to show the horrors of the Partition affecting the individual and the society, and he uses it as a dramatic background. The damage done to the happy society by the partition is felt when we see the change in the social life of Mano Majra after the partition. Before the partition the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Muslims are living together in the high spirit of fraternity, respecting each other's religion. To impress upon the readers this atmosphere of fraternity, Khushwant Singh very minutely describes the quiet, amicable life in the village. Love stands out above all in Jugga's sacrifice for his Muslim girl.

Prempati describes this village as:

“Except for the varying percentage of religious groupings the village Mano Majra, the focal point of *Train to Pakistan*, was by and large typical of the rural Punjabi life. In term of economic sluggishness and cultural backwardness the village was like any other village of the entire sub – continent.”⁷.

The Punjabi rural life remained unaffected by the middle class movements before the

partition, but the partition did not leave a single corner unaffected in the border area. We know the extent of damage done by the partition to a remote village. Jugga's sacrifice is the anti-climax of the communal riots and also the fitting climax of the brotherly atmosphere in the village. Dacoity and robbery play a significant role in the development of the story. *Train to Pakistan* is a documentary novel. With Hukumchand as the type, Khushwant Singh exposes the police system which was the worst feudal gift by the so called British liberals. Manohar Malgonkar also exposes the police system in Gian Talwar's family story in *A Bend in the Ganges*. When Vishnu-Dutta has murdered Hari, the eye witness Tukaram, Gian's family servant is heavily beaten and Vishnu Dutta is acquitted of the murder charge by bribing a police inspector who buys a new motor cycle. Malgonkar covers a longer period from pre-partition freedom struggle to post-Independence communal riots. It has the variety of setting – Konshet village with rural agrarian problems, the Andaman Jail with the problems of the prisoners, Bombay life that Sundari faces and the border areas on both the sides disrupted due to the communal riots. Singh and Malgonkar are essentially writers of adventure tales of heroes and outcasts embroiled in great events-war, partition, freedom struggle – that call for heroic actions rather than words. Chaman Nahal is not concerned with freedom struggle though he writes about Gandhi's impact. In *Azadi* the only dominating theme is the consequence of the partition and the major happenings in the novel take place in the New Pakistan and the refugee camp. The village in *Train to Pakistan*, a variety of places in *A Bend in the Ganges*, and the refugee camp

in *Azadi* - these three different settings aim at one focal point only and that is the suffering of the people due to the partition.

Other Aspects:

In all the three novels, there is love and sex. In *Train to Pakistan*, Jugga – Nooran involvement and Hukum Chand – Haseena affair show two levels of love. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, there are passages describing the love between Tekchand and his wife and that between Gian and Sundari, revealing two levels. In *Azadi*, there is matured love between Lala Kanshi Ram and Prabha Rani. Sensual love through illicit relations is expressed in Gopal-Malini relationship and in Gian-Sundari affair, there is an attitude of revenge on Sundari's part rather than of love. Arun-Chandni Love develops due to the mutual physical attraction and also due to the need for Arun to fill in the vacuum created by Madhu's death. Though there are references to the past sexual experiences in Lala's mind, these are the expressions of marital intimacy.

Since these novels deal with the Partition which is the outcome of Independence after the freedom struggle, Gandhiji, the father of nation and the pivotal figure in the freedom struggle ought to come on the scene. In *Train to Pakistan*, he is not seen as the novel is more a story of Jugga's sacrifice in contrast to the communal tension than an account of freedom struggle or of actual riots and destruction. *A Bend in the Ganges*, begins with Gandhi and his influence on the people but later on there is no reference to him. In *Azadi*, there is almost an anti-Gandhi atmosphere because people expected a lot from him and in reality, they had to suffer due to the partition which they never expected.

Chaudhari Barkat Ali turns to non-violence and secularism due to Gandhi. In these fictional stories, a historical figure from the real world does not have a prominent place and so we do not see much of Gandhi.

In these novels, there is an increasing awareness of the danger from religious fanaticism. The emphasis is on the need of understanding one other. Mano Majra, in *Train to Pakistan* is a quiet village and even after the partition the Sikhs do not accept the idea of the Muslims leaving India for Pakistan. The atmosphere of fellowship between the two communities is disturbed by some fanatic Sikhs and we feel sad with Meet Singh over what happens. In *A Bend in the Ganges* we see the changes in the Hindus and the Muslims from fraternity to hostility. Shafi is Debi's friend but turns against him due to the instigation from his friend from Bombay who is under the deep influence of the Muslim league propaganda. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims – all of them are caught in the frenzy and are equally blood thirsty, but among them there are some who remain human beings above the hostility like Barkat Ali, the praying Hakim in *Azadi*, and Lala Kanshi Ram. The message is that love is superior to religion or fanaticism. The great lovers Arun-Nur, Jugga-Nooran and Debi- Mumtaz meet the tragic end due to the situations they are caught in. They are the victims of the circumstances and their sacrifice certainly would show the world the proper way of life. In these novels there are horrible and shocking descriptions and references to the killings and looting of the innocent people but the havoc and destruction is presented in such a way that we feel pity for their feelings of hostility based on religion.

These descriptions of atrocities make us intro-spective and with Lala Kanshi Ram we can say that we are far above hate. We realize the futility of religious pride and supremacy. We find in *A Bend in the Ganges* and in *Azadi*, the incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister among many social restrictions. This complex psychological aspect of a brother – sister relationship is ably dealt with by Malgonkar and Nahal. In *A Bend in the Ganges*, Malgonkar describes a scene between Debi and Sundari,

“But then, in all honesty, that was something, she herself had loved to do, and at times she had wondered if there was something a little unnatural in her fondness for her brother....But then, if there had been anything sexual in their relationship, she would have found herself resenting his growing independence, she (Sudnari) told herself.”⁸

The sanctity of this glorious relationship is kept intact. In *Azadi*, Madhu and Arun, come very close physically rubbing noses and touching tongues,

“Indeed to his alarm, he discovered his tongue had already slipped out of his mouth and was lying on the hot and wet tongue of Madhu. The next instant, Madhu shot out of bed like a belt, ‘Arai Baba, I must go ! It is getting late,’ she said with a heavy voice which did not seem to come from her larynx, and ran out of the room.”⁹

Notes and References:

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2. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, Indian writing in English, (New Delhi : Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1984, 4th ed.) P.502

But the next morning, she forgets this incident and their relationship is again normal.

The partition has cost both Hindus and Muslims, the lives of innocent men, women and children. There are horrible, shocking stories of the atrocities in this communal frenzy....Stabbing, looting, burning and raping – all these activities were rampant on both sides of the ‘border’ during those days. Women from sixteen to sixty are abducted, raped, their breasts cut, made naked and are most humiliatingly paraded in the streets. Above all these descriptions, some individuals stand out for their sufferings. The individual suffering of Jaggat Singh in *Train to Pakistan* and of Lala Kanshi Ram in *Azadi*, of Tekchand Kerwad in *A Bend in the Ganges* moves us more than the communal suffering. Juggat is from the deprived class, he is a dacoit, Lala is a middle class grain merchant and Tekchand is a rich businessman, however they are brought on the same level of suffering. Lala Kanshi Ram loses everything but somehow settles in Delhi, Tekchand feels guilty over his inability to save his wife and so leaving the opportunity to escape from death, remains in Pakistan to die. Juggat Singh behaves most unlike a dacoit and dies while saving the train of Muslim refugees and especially, his love Nooran.

The intensity of suffering of these individuals vividly depicts the colossal damage done by the partition.

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Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K. N. Shelke

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Flat No. 01, Nirman Sagar Coop. Housing Society, Thana Naka,
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