Partitioned Lives in Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" and Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters"

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Partitioned Lives in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

It is an acknowledged truth that the partition of the Indian sub-continent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. Before the people could realize the political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a wave of violence that swiftly became a tide. Hundreds of people were killed, raped and butchered on either side of the border. For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted. This is not what they had aspired for in the name of freedom—the partition was a dirty trick. The real sorrow of the partition, however, as portrayed in the two novels under review, was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history and cultural heritage.

This paper seeks to shed light on the two novels: Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) attempt to grapple inter alia with the question of common people's experience of the Partition.

As the plot of Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956) progresses towards its concluding part, one of the main

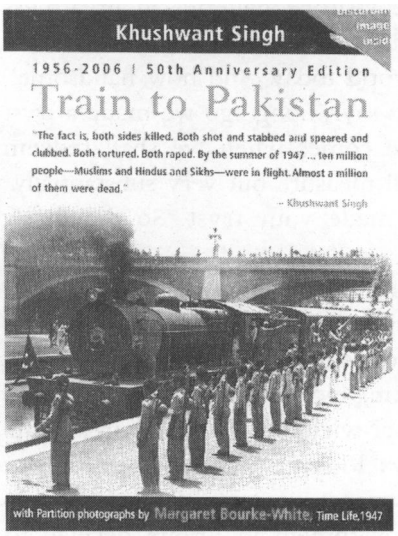
characters viz. Hukum Chand, the magistrate of Chundunnugger, is a disillusioned man as he feels the sting of his helplessness to do much to stop the communal violence that has erupted in the wake of the partition of the country. Political freedom had been achieved apparently through 'non-violent' means but Hindu-Muslim riots had erupted in several parts of India and also in the newly-created Pakistan. Hukum Chand's words of self-introspective rumination quietly proclaim the futility of this political freedom without proper orientation of the people: "What were the people in Delhi doing? Making fine speeches in the assembly! Loud speakers magnifying their egos; lovely-looking foreign women in the visitor's galleries in breathless admiration: 'He is great man this Mr. Nehru of yours. I do think he is the greatest man in the world today. And how handsome!' Wasn't that a wonderful thing to say? 'Long ago we made a tryst with destiny and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure but very substantially.' Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, you made your tryst. So did many others."(176)

The two novels, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) attempt to grapple inter alia with this question of 'the tryst of others' caught between the greed of self-seeking politicians, fanatic religious leaders and their cohorts, power-wielding corrupt bureaucrats and anti-social elements always looking for opportunities to exploit any situation to their own advantage; and the unseemly haste with which the labour government in Britain decided to transfer power.

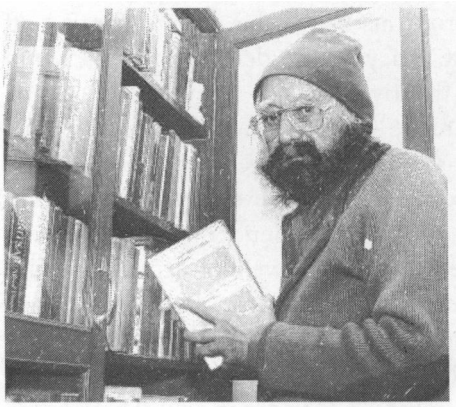
It is on record that Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy of India and later the first Governer General of free India, got his reforms commissioner, Mr V.P. Menon, to draw up the plan for the transfer of power and the division of India in just a few hours. With this plan, he himself flew to London and got Mr.Atlee the Prime Minister of England and his cabinet to accept it in exactly five minutes. The subsequent hasty implementation of this plan without much foresight, farsightedness and the much needed preparedness at several levels, led to an unprecedented holocaust of communal frenzy. Before the people could realize the political and social implications of the partition, they were swept off their feet by a wave of violence that swiftly

became a tide. Hundreds of people were killed, raped and butchered on either side of the border, and for those who survived the catastrophe, the experience was so traumatic that the memories of those grief-stricken days haunted them for years to come. For millions of people, the independence of the country brought terrible but avoidable suffering and humiliation, a loss of human dignity and a frustrating sense of being uprooted. This is not what they had aspired for in the name of freedom—the partition was a dirty trick.

In *Train to Pakistan* Khushwant Singh brings to the centre stage the fact of the partition of Punjab and the question of the subsequent violence on both sides of the border in a very effective, vivid and graphic manner. In a brief preface to the novel Arthur Lall aptly comments: "Its intrinsic qualities as a novel grip the reader. Throughout, the action sweeps one along. The characters are vivid and highly credible, and Khushwant Singh keeps them going magnificently on two levels: in their quotidian matrix compounded of their passions of love and revenge, their tremendous sense of belonging to a village community, and their insolence and heroism; and then again on the wide stage set by the tornado that breaks on their lives in the shape of the cataclysmic events of the partition of India in 1947. "In fact, the novel opens with forebodings of ill omen:" The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual, and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. No one could remember when the monsoon had been so late. For weeks, the sparse clouds cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins."(1)



Khushwant Singh goes on to describe how the feeling of guilt arose from the maddening violence by the Hindus and the



Khushwant Singh

Muslims precipitated by the reports of the proposed division of the country into a 'Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan.' The riots had first broken out in Calcutta and then spread north and east and west engulfing a vast segment of population. Though the novelist does hold the Britishers and the political leaders responsible for the avoidable communal riots, he does not take any sides "Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped.... The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror or in hiding."(1-2)

The massacres and brutality unleashed by the partition are then juxtaposed against the harmonious bonds of friendship, brotherhood and good-neighbourliness in an obscure, sleepy and tiny village Mano Majra situated near the border and inhabited by only seventy families out of which "Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. The others are Sikhs or Muslims, about equal in number."(2) Simplicity and calmness of the lives of the Mano Majrans can be gauged from the fact that all the activities of villagers are closely related to and measured in terms of the arrival of and departure of various trains from early morning till late in the evening. The shattering of the peace and harmony of this small hamlet with the brutal murder of the village moneylender Lala Ram Lal and the daring dacoity at his house by the gang of Malli and his men, is a kind of foregrounding of the communal violence and the anarchic chaos that was to be let loose later. "Ram Lal uttered a loud yell and collapsed on the

floor with blood spurting from his belly. The dacoits jumped off the roof to the lane below. They yelled defiance to the world as they went out towards the river. 'Come' they yelled. 'Come out, if you have the courage! Come out, if you want your mothers and sisters raped, Come out! brave men!'"(10).

A close reading of the novel clearly reveals that the dacoity at his house and murder of the moneylender are not merely accidental—these are a prelude to the swelling acts of murder and violence across the frontier which do not remain unretaliated. The depiction of the dacoity scene serves as "a prelude to the heinous crimes that are committed against the people in flight from their homes."[2] (Tarlochan, 89) Though the conversation between the police sub-inspector and the District Magistrate of Chundunnugger about the communal situation in the district town, in the border village of Mano Majra, and the general situation on both sides of the border, is subsumed with gentle irony, it does articulate the general mindset as is clear from the following: "Do you know," continued the magistrate, "the Sikhs retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses? They wrote on the engine 'Gift to Pakistan'!"

The subinspector looked down thoughfully and answered: "They say that is the only way to stop killings on the other side. Man for man, woman for woman, child for child... Here we are on the border with Muslims living in Sikh villages as if nothing had happened. Every morning and evening the muezzin calls for prayer in the heart of a village like Mano Majra. You ask the Sikhs why we allow it and they answer that the Muslims are their brothers."(19-20)

But the calmness of the atmosphere in this 'oasis of peace' gets shattered when the 'ghost trains' start arriving in Mano Majra. The tense situation is evocatively articulated by the novelist in the opening paragraph of the chapter titled *Kalyug*: "Early in September, the time in Mano Majra started going wrong. Trains became less punctual than ever before and many more started to run through at night... Children did not know when to be hungry.... Goods trains had stopped running altogether, so there was no lullaby to lull them to sleep. Instead, ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra."(77) And as days passed by,

there were more news as well as rumours about the brutalities by the Muslims and Sikhs against each other on both sides of the border. These obviously led to suspicions between the two communities which had lived together as family members for decades. "Quite suddenly every Sikh in Mano Majra became a stranger with an evil intent. His long hair and beard appeared barbarous, his kripan menacingly anti-Muslim. For first time, the name Pakistan came to mean something to them—a haven of refuge where there were no Sikhs" (120-121). And the Sikhs too became sullen and some of them started saying "Never trust a Mussulman. The arrival of the Sikh soldiers with machine guns and the coming of a ghost train from Pakistan create a commotion among the Mano Majrans. The young were particularly unhappy and agitated especially after the arrival of some 'refugees' from across the border. Yet the feeling and spirit of mutual welfare and brotherhood endured and after a long meeting Imam Baksh said: "What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers."(126)

"Partition touched Mano Majrans at both levels—at the community level and at the individual level. At the community level it effects very badly the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, who have lived together for centuries. Yet feelings of brotherliness have not disappeared, and they meet for consultation in a scene that is both intensely humane and touching." (Manaver 31)

But when the Muslims feel compelled by the circumstances to leave for Pakistan in spite of all the good intentions of the local Sikhs, another aspect of partition/freedom is revealed. Infamous Malli and his gang who had looted the village moneylender and murdered him in defiance of the law, not only now align themselves with the instigators but are also officially appointed 'custodians' of the Muslim property left behind and proceed to loot in broad daylight. On the instigation of the young Sikh boys, quite a few of the Mano Majran Sikhs volunteer to aid and abet the destruction of the train stealthily at night so that the Muslims of Chundunnuger and Mano Majra among others, would not go alive and safely to Pakistan. The young Sikh, ironically ofcourse, swears by the Gurus and inflames the

fellow Sikhs of Mano Majra with the words: "By the Grace of God, We bear the world nothing but good will"(226) on his lips. It is, however, the sagacity of the shrewd and wily but good-intentioned District Commissioner who heaps all kinds of abuses on the new political bosses for creating the traumatic situation, that saves the Muslim passengers from being butchered not with the help of the police but with the help of the village Budmash Jugga who was released from the jail and who was told that his beloved Nooran was also travelling by the same train. Jugga, though a *dus-numbari* (a proclaimed offender) had his mind and heart fired with the noble sentiment of love for Nooran. No sooner is he released than he rushes to cut the thick rope streched and tied tightly across the railway bridge, after seeking Guru's word from Bhai Meet Singh even without understanding the meaning of that word. In the process of ensuring safe pasage of the train to Pakistan, he has to make the supreme sacrifice of his own life: "He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost upon him. There was a volley of shots, the man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan."(181) Though some critics have labelled this ending of the novel as 'somewhat melodramatic' due to the lack of sufficient foregrounding of Jugga from a budmash, an anti-hero, into a hero, Jugga's sacrifice can be probably viewed as a form of wish fulfilment for the writer to achieve in fiction what on his own admission, he could not achieve in real life at the time of partition.

Referring to the questions raised at the Press Conference after the screening of the film version of *Train to Pakistan* directed by Pamela Rooks at the International Film Festival in New Delhi (11-20 January 1998), Khushwant Singh made the following comment which seems to be pertinent even today i.e. sixty three years after the unfortunate tragedy of Partition took place: "Should the partition be forgotten? Has it any relevance to us today? My answer to both the questions is an emphatic yes. We must not forget the partition because it is relevant today. We must remember that it did in fact happen and can happen again. That is why I keep reminding people who clamour for an independent Kashmir, Khalistan or Nagaland to remember what happened to Muslims when some of them asked for a separate

Muslim state. I keep telling my fellow Sikhs that the worst enemies of Khalsa Panth are Khalistanis, and of the Nagas those who ask for an independent Nagaland. Reminding ourselves of what happened in 1947 and realizing the possibilities of its recurring, we should resolve that we will never let it happen again."

In *Difficult Daughters*, her first novel, published in 1998 and located primarily in the India of the 1940s, Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence.

The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities). The dramatic and brutal story behind the partition of India, as played out in the region of Punjab is the compelling backdrop of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. In the novel brutality and mayhem arising out of Partition comes to us through the accounts of various characters in the novel. These accounts recall the horror and brutality which resulted in loot and murder of several million people on both sides of the border.

Through Virmati's brother Kailashnath's account the Hindu-Muslim tension comes to the fore: "It was 5 March. Those Muslims were well prepared. They knew how to make bombs, explosives. We had to discover ways to protect ourselves, fast. They looted and burnt, drank our blood, destroyed our peace, and put the fire of revenge in our guts. They had always hated us, tried to poison the well once." (246)

Her brother Gopinath's account recounts the horror at the bloody aspect of partition when entire train loads were butchered and humane values had gone for a toss. His account vividly

describes the ghastly act: "...I had to go to the station. I will never forget the sight of that train. I threw up on the platform. It was taken staright to the shed to be washed. There was blood everywhere, dried and crusted, still oozing from the doorways, arms and legs hanging out, windows smashed." (247) It becomes clear that everyone in those turbulent times felt afraid for their lives when Gopinath says: "We all travelled on those trains. It could have been me, anybody I knew. After that we lived with fear. We were afraid to go out, even when the curfew was lifted. We were prisoners in our own homes." (247-248)

Akin to the disillusionment with Partition expressed by Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan*, Gopinath says, "The British left us with a final stab in the back. We didn't want freedom, if this is what it meant. But we were forced to accept Partition and suffering along with Independence, as a package deal." (248)

The indelible impression left by the atrocities committed during partition finds voice in the account of Kanhiya Lal: "I am a doctor and I had never seen so much blood. It was horrible.I will never forget it as long as I live. Burning, burning, Amritsar was burning. Every night, for days, the sky was red, we could smell the smoke all the time."(248)

The account of Swarna Lata, a political activist echoes the familiar sentiment of every Indian who believed that Hindu-Muslim unity could not be shattered in their areas "When we heard about Rawalpindi, we all felt sick, but for some strange reason we felt such massacres could never occur in our city, where we daily saw evidence of the Hindus and Muslims living as one. I suppose there are some things which one cannot comprehend." (249)

According to Urvashi Butalia, "Partition was not only a division of properties, of assets and liabilties. It was also, to use a phrase that Partition victims use repeatedly, a 'division of hearts.' The feeling of being violated and looted by a community which a few days earlier had been a fellow community is expressed thus by Swarna Lata: "...And they [Muslims] did come. We escaped to a friend's house. We had seen too much plundering all around... Next morning, we saw they had ransacked the whole house. Our hearts were empty, and after that there was nothing to do but depart."(250)

"The history of Partition," as Urvashi Butalia writes, "was

a history of deep violation—physical and mental for women"(131) This aspect of partition comes through Indumati's account: "The Mussulmans chopped our people's head off, raped our women, cut off their breast, all of which they claimed was in retaliation for what the Hindus were doing to them."

How killing became a fact of life is voiced by Virmati's brother-in-law, Parvati's husband: "Some [refugees] stayed, desperate for news of those who had been left behind or lost in the march. They wanted to go back and look for them.And, if they were unsuccessful, they wanted to kill. Kill anybody who was not their own. The age, the sex, nothing mattered."

Swarna Lata, the political activist, gives voice to the common man's reaction to the Partition by saying: "It took us all by surprise—we never expected it—it would pass after they got what they wanted—what was the point of murdering, looting, raping after the goal had been achieved? When the refugees came, they told stories about the killing, the abductions—those screaming girls—they spared no one, not even ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds—the forced conversions—people dying of hunger..." (252)

Both the novels under study make pointed reference to the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru's speech at the time of independence where high sounding words such as "tryst with destiny" have been used to describe the subsequent independence and Partition of India. Both the novels bring out starkly the common man's 'tryst with destiny' which brought along with it only mayhem and violence.

The closing word on this issue is uttered by Harish, Virmati's husband who says in an embittered voice at the time of naming his daughter" What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven't been born. We have moved back into dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom. Is there no end to this needless violence and stabbing? Was this price necessary for freedom?" (256)

So, both the novels bring out the impact which the ghastly and pointless killing and violence had on all humanity involved. The partition brought along with it unprecedented violence and atrocities.

It has to be remembered that freedom is not just the

absence of external pressure, it is also the presence of something else. The struggle for freedom is not without its darker side.If the fight for political freedom aims at ensuring peace for a particular community, it may also arouse and mobilize diabolical forces in man—forces which one would have believed to be non-existent or at least to have died out long ago. If social and moral freedom is unlimited, it may unleash the numerous problems of excess and the lack of restraint. Taking all this into account, the question that arises is whether there is such a condition as complete freedom? Are freedom for the society and the individual linked to and compatible with each other? And is absolute freedom a possibility for an individual, a community or for a nation? Should there be sufficient essential preparation, orientation, and education of the individuals and of the society to enable them to digest their freedom, realize its full potential and cope with this freedom with dignity and with rationality? Fortunately both the novels raise these significant questions in all their various dimensions and the narratives of the two obliquely explore and subtly answer these questions with the much needed flexibility of interpretation especially with reference to the pluralistic, multilingual, multicultural, multireligious and multiethnic character of the vastly-spread society of India in its widespread regions and teeming with paradoxes and contradictions at several levels.

In conclusion, it can be said that the partition of the Indian sub-continent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. The violence it unleashed by the hooligan actions of a few fanatics, the vengeance that the ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wrecked on each other worsened our social sense, distorted our political judgement and deranged our understanding of moral righteousness.

The real sorrow of the partition, however, as portrayed in the two novels under review, was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history and cultural heritage. The relations between the Hindus and the Muslims were not, of course, always free from suspicions, distrust or the angry rejection by one group of the habits and practices of the other; but such moments of active malevolence and communal frenzy were a rare and transient exception to the common bonds of mutual goodwill and warm feelings of close brotherhood.

Organizations which nurtured violent hatred towards each other and incited communal passions did exist, but at the very margins of the solidly and healthily functioning social and cultural order. It is the unthoughtful decision of partition and hollow love of 'nationalism' that let the mischief off and out.

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