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### The Literary Skill of Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal in treating theme of Partition in *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* upholding the theme of Affirmation : An Appraisal

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**Abstract:** This paper throws light on the theme of partition, the most frequent term in Literature. Many writers have contributed to the progress of this theme, among those writers Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal played a vital role in the development of partition novels. Throughout this paper, both the novelists scrutinize the aspects responsible for the partition of the country and picturize the development with emotional and psychological tortures.

**Key Words:** sectarianism, massacre, ordeals, hardship, bureaucrats, national consciousness, vandalism, monotheistic.

What is generally held is that a great national experience commonly serves as a great reservoir of literary materials as can be seen from the literature of many countries. The American Civil War, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution and the two World Wars gave birth to such notable novels as *War and Peace*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Farewell to Arms*, *The Naked and the Dead* and *Dr. Zhivago*.

Likewise, the partition of our country in 1947 provided basis for a number of novels that centre round real and fictitious to man has been a favourite subject to the writers all over the world and the partition-novelists in Indian English field have succeeded in varying degrees to bring out the shock, violence, loss of human dignity and the play of bestial instincts that the partition bred. Significant, among the partition

novels are Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Raj Gill's *The Rape*, H.S.Gill's *Ashes and Petals*, Kartar Singh Duggal's *Twice Born Twice Dead* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, all of which do obviously portray how these two communities who had fought against the British and reached the target of achieving freedom, almost without blood, stooped to detestable in human activities against each other and bathed in the blood of their own fellow countrymen.

Among the above mentioned novels, *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* are considered to be the best novels in which the two authors Kushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal are found showing remarkable insight in their characterization and narrative techniques. They use their literary skill and special care in treating the theme of petition in its varying aspects by seriously probing deep into this phenomenon covertly so as to trace the roots of this national cancer. Both the novelists are clever enough to protect a positive view of life upholding the eternal values of human endurance, dignity and optimism, winning over narrow considerations of caste, religion and selfish motives.

India's rich and varied culture has always been a source of wonder to the Western minds. The River valley civilization which was

nurtured on the rock basis of tolerance and magnanimity could never afford any acts of narrow sectarianism or selfishness. Later, through the invaders who filtered in through the passes and spoke the word of sword had to face stiff resistance from the native Indians, their religions did not encounter a similar predicament. The spiritualism, art, architecture and the way of life of the Islam were soon imbibed into our national consciousness and came to exist side by side with the traditional Indian way of life. The teachings of Jesus Christ also received a tremendous welcome from the people of this soil. Great religions of the world like Buddhism and Jainism sprang from this land and spread to other countries. All ancient religions of the world do significantly ascertain the need for leading a worthy life, guided by the principles of spiritualism, perseverance, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness. There is a common element in the religious experience, a common foundation on which it rests its faith and worship. In *The Spirit of Prayer*, William Law points out that the differences of religions are on the surface. As he puts it,

“... there is but one possible way for man to attain this salvation, of life of God in the soul. There is not one for the Jew, another for a Christian and a third for the heathen. No, God is one,

salvation is one and the way to it is one ...” (Quoted in Recovery of Faith 173).

What is disheartening to note here is that in spite of these teachings of the great seers and sages, communal disharmony resulting in large scale massacres and acts of vandalism have disrupted the peaceful coexistence of Indians through the centuries. Lord Buddha was fully conscious of these clashes of ideologies and closed systems of thought. He exhorted his followers to rise above all narrow concerns and concentrate on the way leading to final enlightenment. Kabir, the 15<sup>th</sup> century apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity tried his best to bring peace among warring Hindus and Muslims. It is quite unfortunate to note that vested interests have always tried to make use of religion, their potential weapon in achieving selfish goals. The illiterate masses very often danced to their tunes, not knowing that they were digging their own graves. Such setbacks are the real retarding forces that hinder India’s progress.

The bane of communalism has always posed the greatest threat to India’s national integration. A careful scrutiny of the workings of the two main religious groups namely the Hindus and the Muslims would reveal strong undercurrents of mutual distrust and hatred. The political and economic disparities between the two communities added complexities to their

social and religious differences. The Hindus in general were traders, industrialists and landlords whereas the Muslims were petty traders, labourers and peasants. The Hindus had acquired an edge over the Muslims in services, trade and industry owing to their superior English education and their “competence to adapt themselves to the new situation” (Hunter 176). Despite the strong cultural and ethnic codes that bound these two communities together, their separate religions had little in common. The Islam propagated a monotheistic faith whereas polytheism was the accepted faith of the Hindus. The Islam looked down upon idol worship which formed an integral part of the daily life of a devout Hindu. To the Hindu, the cow was a sacred animal. He could not even dream of taking away its life. The Muslims on the other hand had no such considerations and often indulged in the slaughter of cows which earned them the wrath and indignation of the Hindu majority. Inter-caste marriages were scoffed at by both communities and often were the causes of bloody communal riots. Language also had come to play a major role in widening the rift between the two communities. The Hindu-Urdu controversy had a great impact on the communal relations amongst the intellectuals of the two communities. This controversy can even be traced back to 1867

when Sir Syed Ahamed Khan urged the Muslims to “organize themselves to protect their language” (Zakaria 294).

While the establishment of separate electorate worsened the prevailing mutual distrust and hatred of the two communities, the formation of the Muslim League and the separatist attitude of the Muslim minorities enraged the Hindu majority. Gandhiji was fully aware of the mutual distrust that had come to exist between the two communities. He was also conscious of the fact that there was no immediate cure for this malady. Thus he writes:

“I know that there is much, too much distrust of one another yet. Many Hindus distrust Mussalman’s honesty. They argue that without the British, Mussalmans of India will aid Mussalman powers to build a Mussalman Empire in India. Mussalmans, on the other hand, fear that the Hindus, being an overwhelming majority, will smother them” (92).

On his return to India from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi made efforts to contact popular Muslim leaders like Hakim Ajmal Khan Ansari and the Ali brothers. He even went to the extent of attending various Mohammedan Conferences and delivered speeches to win over the trust of the minority community. He was convinced that

the dream of a free India could only be realized when “Hindu, Muslim and Parsi brethren feel that they are all one” (P 326). It is to the credit of Gandhi that for the first time in the history of India he could kindle the flame of nationalism in the different sections and religious groups forgot their natural distrust and intolerance and worked together for a common goal-viz-the independence of India. But, that this friendship and amity was only at the peripheral level was soon proved by the incidents at the wake of independence. The prospect of the petition and the sure possibility of leaving one’s birth place embittered large sections of Hindus and Muslims. The communal holocaust that came in the wake of partition was quite an unexpected development for the authorities.

The violent and uncanny incidents that followed the partition of India on the communal basis will ever remain a blemish on our long tradition of religious amity and peaceful co-existence. The dawn of the long cherished freedom witnessed the bloodiest ever upheaval in the history of human race and shocked the civilized people the world over. The toll of innocent human lives sacrificed at the altar of religious intolerance was perhaps second only to the wanton killings of the Jews by the occupied Nazi force in Europe. The heinous and grisly

crimes that were enacted on the helpless victims of this tragedy, K.K.Sharma thus enumerates:

“The sudden, rude shock of partition unnerved men, destroyed their human attributes and transformed them into wild, savage beasts, who perpetrated extremely barbaric cruelties against their fellow human beings. They looted and burnt down shops and houses, killed small children and made millions of people pauper and refugees. Villages were put to flames and their populations were wiped out and millions of people were converted at the point of sword. Women became a special target of communal fury; they were abducted, raped and paraded naked in the streets ... many of preferred an honourable death by committing suicide to a life of perpetual dishonor and shame” (P 30).

Naturally enough a number of creative writers in Indian – English took upon themselves the task of fictional delineation of the horrors that accompanied the partition and the subsequent transfer of population. Even though they differed from one another in their treatment of the theme and the depiction of the social, political and psychological implications of the incident they all seemed to agree on one point that the partition was a heinous crime

perpetrated by unthinking bureaucrats and enacted on the conscience of a nation most arbitrarily. Most of the Indian English novelists writing on the theme of partition had occasions to encounter real life situations in which they were witnesses to the inhuman acts of religious fanatics. That these writers have portrayed almost identical situations in their novels is ample evidence to the fact that they had come to rely heavily on history in weaving the fabric of their novels.

Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* presents how the ‘terrorist movement’ designed to oust the British from India, degenerated into communal hatred and violence, and how the emphasis from the struggle between Indian nationalism and British colonialism shifted unfortunately to the furious and malicious hatred between the Muslims and the Hindus. In *The Dark Dancer*, Balachandra Rajan artistically analyses the various factors leading to the partition and the subsequent tragedy. The suffering lot of humanity – the victims of communal frenzy – attracts the attention of the novelist. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* has the distinction of being the only novel written on the theme of partition by a woman and that too by a Muslim. The novel expresses a feeling of guilt and sorrow because the original impulse, for the partition came from

the Muslims while the other partition novelists focus their attention on those who were forced out of their homes, Atin Hosain narrates the effects of partition on the members of a Muslim family. A joyous home 'Ashiana' the nest, was ruined by the partition. Raj Gill in *The Rape* traces the political and historical background of the partition, while H.S.Gills *Ashes and Petals* is a brilliant portrayal of the trauma of the refugees who crossed the border following the partition and Gill points out that the partition shattered the age-long relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims flee from the Indian soil. Kartar Singh Duggal's *Twice Born Twice Dead* is a vigorous plea for compassion and amity in a world torn apart by narrow communal and sectarian considerations. Critics have acclaimed Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* as the best novels ever written on the theme of partition.

*Train to Pakistan* published in 1956 was the first novel in English on the theme of partition. It is a novel noted for its strong symbolism and exquisite characterization. *Azadi* is "an epoch-making book which describes not only the terror and tumult that accompanied in fact, darkened, the attainment of freedom in 1947 but does also envisage man's Azadi or freedom from beastliness, from moral, psychological and spiritual malady" (P 126)

*Azadi* which won Chaman Nahal the Sahitya Academy Award in 1977 is a novel directly concerned with the partition and its aftermath. The novel makes a moderate attempt to diagnosed the malady, leading to the inhuman catastrophe. It does neatly criticize the Hindu and Muslim leaders responsible for the partition and the bloodshed that dazed everyone. Chaman Nahal, who was born in Sialkot, was forced to flee to India following the partition. His own position of a forced exile' tormented his self in his mature years. He thus gives vent to his purpose behind the creation of *Azadi*.

The novel *Azadi* centres round the fortunes of Lala Kanshi Ram, a wholesale grain merchant of Sialkot. Lord Mount Batten's announcement on June 13, 1947 with regard to freedom and partition of the Indian sub-continent came as a thunderbolt upon the peaceful life of Kanshi Ram. The Muslim dominated city of Sialkot soon becomes unsafe for the Hindu minority. Kanshi Ram is forced to flee the city with other Hindu and Sikh families. The sporadic acts of murder, looting and arson subsequently explode into massive and organized violence by the Muslims. Kanshi Ram, his wife Prabha Rani and their only son Arun join the foot convoy. On their way, they are subjected to untold miseries and hardships. They had to witness the death and rape of many

near and dear ones. At last, they reach Delhi wherein the face of severe ordeals, they settle down to begin a new life. K.R.S.Iyengar holds:

“Nahal concentrates on Lala Kanshi Ram’s family, but the mind can and does like a computer multiply the horror and the pity a million fold, and try to get at the measure of the total holocaust” (P 750)

The people of the frontier States, especially the Punjab had the real taste of Partition – not as a geographical division of the main land, but as sharp knife cutting across the age old amity and tradition that had bound the Hindus for generations. They had even come to share the rituals and festivals of the two religions, regardless of their own religious loyalties. Religious differences seemed to melt away forming stable personal relationships among people of the two communities. Nahal portrays the intimacy of Lalakanshi Ram’s family with that of Chaudhri Barkat Ali. It is quite significant that Chaudhri Barkat Ali’s loyalty to his friend is not in the least affected by the frenzy of his own fellow Muslims. Narrow minded sectarian ideas have no place in his mind. He knows that God is great and Muhammed is his prophet. But the same God is the God of the Hindus as well and if they

preferred to worship him in another form, that was their business” (Azadi 96).

Nahal maintains remarkable impartiality in narrating the ugly incidents following the partition. He puts across the blame squarely on the warring communities. While the Hindus suffered in the burning West Punjab, the Muslims too were in miserable plight in the eastern part of Punjab. The Hindus felt unprotected and forlorn in the declared land for the Muslims. The leaders were hollow and uncertain and the government appeared to be against the people. Kanshi Ram felt bewildered at the strange inaction of the government in preventing violence. He thus tells Arun:

“If unwilling, the Government is a partly to murder. If incapable, we Indians had no right to ask for freedom” (Azadi 124)

The news of the partition was taken differently by the different communities. While the Hindus and Sikhs read their doom in the announcement of the partition, the Muslims were jubilant and gay. They went wild with the news. They celebrated it by exploding firecrackers. The noise and the light of their crackers tormented the Hindu and Sikh population. They feared the Muslim procession shouting slogans and got united in self-defence. The Hindu youngsters were asked to guard themselves, their dear ones and property against the possible Muslim attack.

The Hindus shops were looted and the Hindu Deputy Commissioner who had handled the situation with a firm hand, was shot dead by his own body-guard. The communal elements in the government were really fanning the flames of communal hatred. Their intentions are revealed by Chaudhri Barkat Ali in these words:

“Either the Congress Muslims were a fraud to begin with, or they have changed sides. I’m afraid there is no organized body of Muslims denouncing what is happening in the city” (P 134).

Arun’s romance with Nur, the daughter of Chaudhri Barkat Ali is shattered with the partition. Nur, with her unreasoning youth and love feels that Pakistan should not stand between the lovers. But Arun’s approach to the situation is realistic, for he knows the fanatics and feels that the Hindus will be forced to leave Pakistan. Nur wants Arun to stay behind and embrace Islam. Embracing Islam for Nur was nothing to Arun. But now in the light of the creation of Pakistan, he develops a sense of bitterness and asks Nur to become a Hindu. Nur is stunned to hear this. She expresses her feminine frivolity. and wants Arun to act boldly. He anticipates displacement and feels that in a new place, he would be needed to support his family. He sees the possibility of coming back and marrying Nur, when his parents safely settle

in India. Arun is sore at the dirty game of the politicians. Nahal gives vent to Arun’s feelings thus:

“For the creation of Pakistan solved nothing. One would have to go round with tweezers through all the villages to separate the Muslims from the Hindus” (90).

The newly won freedom results in the conflict and bitterness between the two lovers. The British Sergeant declared that “the partition was the most stupid, most damaging, most negative development in the history of the freedom struggle here” (P 117). He blamed the British for this development and held that for the Indians the hard days were ahead and he promised to help them if they needed it. The partition of the country brings about a thorough change in the placid life of Lala Kanshi Ram. He is shocked to hear terms such as ‘minority community’ and ‘refugee’ and he is started to know that he is a refugee in his ‘own home’. He does not believe that he may have to leave Sialkot and the very thought of it is revolting to his sense of propriety. He shouts agitatedly:

“I was born around here, this is my home....

how can I be a refugee in my own home” (124)



The novel portrays a number of incidents in which the refugees were the victims of uncontrollable and unimaginable violence. It completely destroyed the atmosphere of brotherhood, harmony trust, love and solidarity and replaced it by hatred, disgust, murder, fire, rape and arson. The law and order situation reached the lowest ebb. The reluctance on the part of the authorities to prevent the inhuman acts resulted in incidents like the parade of naked women. The novel furnishes a very realistic and horrible account of these savage acts. The naked parade of Hindu women at Narowal was a brutal tragedy and the local authorities, the police and the military didn't interfere in such matters. Later in Amritsar, Lala Kanshi Ram is told about the naked parade of Muslim women through the bazaar by the Hindu mob. These shameful acts lead Kanshi Ram to the conclusion:

“We're all equally guilty?” (Azadi 339)

Now he has no hatred for the Muslims and says:

“Whatever the Muslims did to us in Pakistan,

We're doing it to them here” (338)

Lala Kanshi Ram has no complaint during the journey from Sialkot to Delhi. Throughout the journey, he keeps on talking about Sialkot, but the moment he crosses the border and reaches India, he shouts 'Vande Mataram' and kisses the

earth of this country with tears in his eyes. But on reaching Delhi, he realizes that the minorities on either side of the border have either been killed or turned to wandering gypsies. Nahal fully succeeds in establishing the true dimensions of the events that accompanied partition, showing their physical as well as psychological impacts on human life. In this respect, the novel brings out not only the irreparable material losses but also the loss of personality caused by this gruesome historical event.

The traumatic experience of partition shook Khushwant Singh to the roots and the result is publication of *Train to Pakistan* (1956), the book which won for him the coveted 'Grove Press India Fiction Prize'. *Train to Pakistan* is both a grim and pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the whirl of partition. 'The train' signifies the continuity and dynamism of life. It is a vehicle that brings for the togetherness as opposed to alienation. It is a symbol of hope and peace for the refugees. The refugees were fully dependent on the train, as it is their only ray of hope to a promised land. In the words of Vassante A. Shahane, “the train in the novel is a dual symbol on the one hand, it symbolizes life and action, it stands for death and disaster on the other” (P 69). The story centres round the destinies of the people of

Mano Majra, a border village, with a river fringing it and railway bridge spanning the river. Though the frontier between India and Pakistan turns a scene of rioting and bloodshed, everything is quiet and normal in Mano Majra. Partition does not mean much to them. "No one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah" (Train to Pakistan 20).

Mano Majra consists of about seventy families and Lala Ram Lal's is the only Hindu family. Its Sikhs and Muslims are equal in number. The Sikhs own the lands and the Muslims are tenants and farm workers. The general atmosphere prevailing in the village before the arrival of the 'ghost train' is idyllic in so far as there are no religious disputes or communal tension. The passage of trains reminds the Mullah and the Sikh priest of the time for prayer and life in the village with its varying course goes on. The simple, peace-loving inhabitants of the train conscious Mano Majra are not at all affected by the communal clashes elsewhere; they are blissfully ignorant of the rampant killing which had spread all over the north of the country. The robbery and the murder of the money lender in the early part of the novel are not accidental; they are nothing but

a prelude to the swelling acts of murder and violence. The peep tree and brotherhood that binds the villagers together. Assembling under its shade in the noon for their siesta and exchange of pleasantries, they are ignorant of the newly gained freedom or of the division of the country on communal basis. Thus an ignorant Muslim peasant asks Iqbal:

"Tell us something. What is happening in the world? What is all this about Pakistan and Hindustan?" "We live in this little village and know nothing", the lambardar puts in Babuji, tell us, why did the English leave?" (TT 42).

The Mano Majrans are mute victims of the inhuman activities perpetrated on them by indifferent bureaucrats like Hukum Chand and the Sub-Inspector of Police. Both of them nurture communal feelings at heart and have no compassion left for the hapless refugees. They have little sympathy left for the unfortunate sufferers. Neither are they prepared to stretch a helping hand to those in distress. The supreme sacrifice of Juggat in the end stands in direct contrast to the indifference and inaction of the bureaucrats. The novelist purposefully highlights the solidarity of the village folk, that, in times of peace transcended narrow communal considerations. Moreover, a Punjabi village's code of conduct was rather baffling to an

outsider. For them, truth, however and financial integrity were placed lower down the scale of values than being true to one's friend and fellow villagers. It is why Juggat's supposed crime in his own village is sneered at by the people of Mano Majra. In this rural society, 'everyone in the village was a relation, loyalty to the village was the supreme test' (TP 37). Even though Meet Singh cannot boast of any formal educational background, he appears in the novel as the Messiah of peace, non-violence and universal brotherhood. He represents the tension-free and hatred-free life of the Mano Majrans when he says:

"Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here next door is a Muslim Mosque. When I prey to my Guru, uncle Imam Bakshi calls to Allah...." (TP 35)

A true Sikh, Meet Singh throughout the novel tries with all his might to keep ill-feelings and mutual hatred under check. Meet Singh stands the only beacon of light in an otherwise dark world of mutual distrust and communal hatred. The Sikhs of Mano Majra are concerned about the safety of their Muslim brothers. Their age old love for their Muslims fellow villagers remains unshaken against heavy odds. This makes Mano Majra a fine example of communal harmony and integration. The author has selected Juggat of all the villagers as the savior

of innocent human beings. He, though a criminal and a thief, a person looked down upon by his own fellow villagers, could rise above narrow communal barriers and perform an act of supreme nobility even at the cost of his own life. It may be contended that he risked his life in order to save his beloved Nooran from the disaster. But judging by his words and actions 'one can easily infer that he never patronized any ill-feeling towards the people on the basis of caste and creed. He is a fitting foil to the three characters in the novel, typical of their three different situations, epitomizing the civilized life. Harish Raizada rightly observes:

"There are Hukum Chand, the high official in the government, Meet Singh, the Sikh priest and Iqbal, the nationalistic and idealistic, non-communal political workers. Jugg's moral stature stands out in strong relief against the hypocrisy, cowardice and sham of these characters" (PP 171-72)

Khuswant Singh intended the novel as a realistic delineation of the partition, that he himself had come to witness. The shameful incidents of those days completely shattered his belief in the innate goodness of man. For the first time in his life, he came face to face with the beastliness, cruelties and the evil inherent in human beings. He felt and wrote:

“It was time one exploded this myth of the innate goodness in man. There is innate evil in man.... And so I just wrote about it “(Transcript of ‘Indian Account’ by John Thompson).

To conclude, it may be stated that of the novels like *Train to Pakistan*, *Azadi*, *The Rape* and *Ashes and Petals* which have treated the

Partition and its aftermath. Comprehensively, *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* remain the best ever written on the theme of partition in Indian – English fiction, both novels do stress the continuity of life in spite of harrowing expiries.

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