

**Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* as the best ever written on the theme of Partition in Indian English Fiction :
An Appraisal**

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An Abstract

This paper throws light on the partition of India, it was like a process of dividing the sub-continent along sectarian lines, which took place in 1947 as India gained its independence from British Empire. The theme of partition is one of the leading themes in Indo-Anglian fiction and Khushwant Singh as one of the leading figures among the partition fiction writers. Through the work *Train to Pakistan*, he beautifully portrays the partition of India and Pakistan and their sufferings. Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* delineates the psychological consequences of the partition. The novel focuses on how the event caused havoc in the minds of the people and highlights the pain and sufferings. Both the novels vividly portray that the Hindus and Muslim leaders are responsible for the partition of India.

Key words: Partition, Inhumanity, tolerance, national, Integration, peacefulness, struggle

What is universally accepted and understood is that a great national experience generally 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 great novels like *War and Peace*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Farewell to Arms*, *The Naked and the Dead* and *Dr.Zhivago*. In the same way, the partition of our country in 1947

provided a basis for a number of novels that centre round real and fictitious incidents connected with the partition. Man's inhumanity to man has been a favourite subject to the writers all over the world and the Pakistan – novelists in Indian – English have succeeded in their efforts to bring out in varying degrees the shock, violence, loss of human dignity and the play of bestial instincts that the partition had. Significant among the partition novels are *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgankar, *The Rope* by Raj Gill, *Ashes and Petals* by H.S.Gill and *Azadi* by Chamal Nahal. These novelists, are either Hindus or Sikhs who did significantly portray in their novels how these two communities who had fought against the British and reached the target of achieving freedom, almost without bloodshed, stooped to detestable inhuman activities against each other and bathed in the blood of their own fellow countrymen.

India's rich and varied culture that has survived the test of time 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, though 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 inhibited 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. The ancient religions of the world all 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 all 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. According to him, "... there is but one possible way for man to attain its 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..." (Radhakrishnan 173). It is quite

disheartening to note that despite all 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. The bane of communalism has always posed the greatest threat to India's national integration.

Truly speaking, the two main religious groups names the Hindus and the Muslims revealed strong undercurrents of mutual distrust and hatred. The Hindu majority looked upon the Muslims as mainly invaders and settlers, while the Muslim rulers paid little attention to religious amity, widening the gap between them over the centuries. The political and economic disparities between these two communities added complexities to their social and religious differences. The Hindus in general were traders, industrialists and landlords while 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. Language also had come to play a major role in widening the rift between the two communities. The establishment of separate electorate even worsened the prevailing mutual distrust and hatred of the two communities. Nationalist Muslims like Nawab Sadiq Ali Khan were quick to discern the dangers involved in such a move. He minced no words in criticizing this unholy act of dividing a nation on religious grounds:

"The principle of class and religious representation is the most mischievous feature of the (reforms) scheme. It is not good for the Mohammedans to be taught that their political interests are different from those of the Hindus. From Mohammedan point, too, the principle is fraught with mischief" (Gopal 104).

The formation of the Muslim League and the separatist attitude of the Muslim minorities enraged the Hindu majority. The Hindu Maha Sabha and other sectarian organizations gained prominence and the exhortations of their leaders further fanned the communal flame. The demand for a separate Muslim homeland embodied in the

Muslim League's resolution further frustrated the efforts of the nationalist leaders to keep India united. The clash of personalities, the differences in the political outlook and aspirations of the elite in both the communities and the attitude and the interests of the British Government played a vital role in widening the gulf between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhiji was fully conscious of the mutual distrust that had come to exist between the two communities. He writes thus:

“I know that there is much, too much distrust of one another as yet. Many Hindus distrust Mussalman's honesty. They argue that without the British, Mussalman's 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” (P 92)

Being convinced that the dream of a free India could only be realized when “Hindus, Muslim and Parsi brethren feel that they are all one” (P 326), Gandhiji even went to the extent of attending various Mohammedan conferences and delivered speeches to win over the trust of the minority community. Hindu-Muslim unity was at its zenith during the Khilafat days and Gandhi become the accepted leader of all Muslims. This was evidently seen in Muhammed Ali's speech itself:

“I declare today that the Indian army is the army of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian police is the police of Mahatma Gandhi. Every man is on the side of Mahatma Gandhi, may, on the side of religion and country” (Bemford 164).

Unfortunately, Gandhi's efforts to forge complete unity between the two communities could not bring forth the desired result as Hindus and Muslims “retained their separate entities and could not merge with each other to create, a strong nation” (Choudhri 16). The All Parties' Conference Committee which met at Delhi under the presidentship of Gandhi failed to evolve “ways and means by which an agreement could be reached between Hindus and Mussalmans as also among all the political parties” (P 296). Perhaps the first suggestion for a separate homeland for the Muslims came from Abdul Halim Sharkar, novelist and editor of the weekly *Muhazzib* in 1890. Jinnah in his presidential address to the Lahore session of the All India Muslim League in 1940 formally enunciated his ‘two nation theory’. In his words:

“Mussalmans are a nation according to any definition of a nation and they must have their homeland, their territory and their State” (Shakir 196).

The Lahore resolution marked a watershed in the history of Hindu-Muslim relations. The Muslims not only wanted a separate identity but also a separate homeland of their own. Once their idea got implanted in the minds of the Muslim population, things started moving at hectic pace leading to the widening of the gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims. The prospect of a partition and the sure possibility of leaving one's birth place embittered large sections of Hindus and Muslims. The partition of the nation was brought about most abruptly and without any thought of the possible repercussions. The communal holocaust that came in the wake of partition was quite unexpected, making innocent men, women and children succumb to the commercial hatred and mutual distrust. 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, shocking the civilized people all over the world. Enumerating the heinous and grisly crimes that were enacted on the helpless victims of this tragedy, K.K.Sharma rightly observes:

“The sudden, rude shock of partition unnerved man, 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. Villagers 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 in the streets with shaven heads and breasts revealed from their trunks. Many of them 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 might differ

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 convenience 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 witnessed 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* pictures the lives and fortunes of three young men – Gian Talwar, Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman. In spite of their different family backgrounds, the three men have one thing in common; they are all freedom fighters. Gian is a disciple of Gandhi and a non-violent fighter in the freedom struggle. Debi Dayal and Shafi Usman belong to a terrorist group that has scant respect for non-violence. Gian in the end undergoes a moral regeneration, growing before our eyes from a naïve, impulsive young man in the first scene to a decisive and matured adult. The novel 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 a powerful way, the novelist narrates the struggle of the Indian nationalists, the mad and misleading communal frenzy, the triumph and tragedy of the hour of freedom, the screams of the victims rent the morning air and the dawn of freedom greeting the sub-continent in the pools of blood:

“The entire land was being spattered by the blood of its citizens, blistered and disfigured with the fires of religious hatred; its roads were glutted with enough dead bodies to satisfy the ghouls of a major war” (*A Bend in the Ganges*, 332).

Balachandra Rajan in *The Dark Dancer* does artistically analyse the various factors leading to the partition and its subsequent tragedy. The novel impresses upon our mind that hope, beauty, truth and goodness will survive the crimes, cruelties and

large scale devastation brought about by the partition. The novel closes with the highly optimistic remark about Krishnan. “He walked back slowly to the strength of his beginning” (The Dark Dancer 308). *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, Attia Hossai narrates the effects of partition on the members of a Muslim family. Raj Gill in *The Rape* traces the political and historical background of the partition and points out the utter confusion of the people on either side of the border. Violence gripped the struggling people and unprecedented scenes of bestial horrors were in the offing. Terrible destruction was in sight:

“Destruction it was to be, unforeseen,
Unpredicted and on an unprecedented
scale; destruction that choked the tears
in the eye and the cry in the throat,
destruction, that was to redden the
pages of history for all time to come” (The Rape 71)

The novel centres round the idyllic love of Dalipjit, a sikh boy and Jasmit, a girl who did not belong to his class and status. The love affair turns tragic with the death of Jasmit on their long trek to India. Circumstances turn Dalipjit’s old father, Ishar Singh into a cruel and inhuman beast. He even goes to the extent of raping a helpless Muslim girl called Laila, whom his son had rescued. H.S.Gill’s *Ashes and Petals* published in 1978 is a brilliant portrayal of the trauma of the refugees who crossed the border following the partition. Gill points out that the partition shattered the age-long relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims and made the Muslims flee from the Indian soil. The Hindus on the other side of the border were caught in the same dilemma. *Twice Baron Twice Dead* by Karter Singh Duggal which presents a panoramic vision of human sufferings through hundreds of anecdotes is nothing but a vigorous plea for compassion and amity in the world torn apart by narrow communal and sectarian considerations. The novel neatly depicts the plight of the

refugees and evacuees, people abandoning their homes and living in refugee camps and of the haunted psyche of the tortured men and women. Amidst the gloom of the unfortunate tragedy, the writer points out that the violent bloodshed was the creation of a handful of mischievous elements. Taking into account the consequences of Partition, writers like Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal took seriously to writing on the theme of Partition in their novels.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* , have been acclaimed as the best novels even written on the theme of Partition. *Train to Pakistan* published in 1956 is said to be the first novel written in English on the theme of Partition, which is noted for its strong symbolism and exquisite characterization. As R.K.Dhawan put it, "Chaman Nahal's *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). Chaman Nahal, who was born in Silakot, was forced to flee to India following the partition. His own position of a 'forced exile' tormented his self in his mature years. He gives vent to purpose behind the creation of *Azadi*, thus:

"I have always rejected the two-nation theory; the creation of Pakistan in no way solved the problem of the minorities. And till this day, I pine for the city in which I was born and raised. I see this as the typical yearning of all involuntary exiles. Hence, I wrote *Azadi* as a hymn to one's land of birth, rather than a realistic novel of the Partition"(P 40).

The novel centres round the fortunes of Lala Kanshi Ram, a wholesale grain merchant of Sialkot Lord Mount Batten's announcement on June 3, 1947 with regard to freedom and partition of the Indian sub-continent came on 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 convey. 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 several ordeals they settle down to begin a new life. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar observes:

“Nahal concentrates on Lala Kanshi Ram’s family, but the mind can and does, like a computer multiply the harrow and the pity a million fold, and try to get at the measure of the total holocaust” (P 40).

The people of the frontier States, especially the Punjab had the real tasks of Partition – not as a geographical division of the main land but as a sharp knife cutting across the age old amity and tradition that had bound the Hindus and Muslims for generations. They had even come to share the rituals and festivals of the two religions, irrespective 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 Lala Kanshi Ram’s family with that of Choudhri 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). Chaudhri Barkat Ali is a strong critic of religious fanaticism. Nahal maintains remarkable impartiality in narrating the ugly incidents following the Partition. He puts 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. Arun’s romance with Nur, the daughter of Choudhri Barkat Ali gets shattered with the partition. 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” (Azadi 90).

The newly non freedom results in the conflict and bitterness between the two lovers. Abdul Ghani even shamelessly tells Kanshi Ram:

“I want you to leave because you’re a Hindu,

and you don't believe in Allah" (Azadi 128)

The communal venom is evident in Ghanis' statement about Madhu, Arun's sister:

"I put her and her husband into the fire
with my own hands, and they're now on their
away to do zakh, to hell-where I hope they
rot for ever" (Azadi 177).

This is enough to send a sensible man like Chaudhri Barkat Ali into a fit of anger. These words and actions remain an indelible blot on humanity. The novel, no doubt, portrays a number of incidents in which the refugees were the victims of uncontrollable and unimaginable violence, completely destroying the atmosphere of brotherhood, harmony, trust, love and solidarity and replaced it by hatred, disgust, murder, fire, rape and arson. 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. The focus is often on the loss of personality caused by this tragic event rather than an irreparable material loss. Thus, the novel *Azadi* brings out not only the irreparable material losses but also the loss of personality caused by this gruesome historical event. The harrowing incidents of 1947 are said to have administered a rude shock on the faith of all the sensitive and thinking people of India and abroad. The incident triggered questions about the intrinsic nobility of man taught through ages, by our sages and saints including Mahatma Gandhi, during various stages of our country's cultural evolution Khushwant Singh gives vent to his mental agony thus:

"The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country ..." (Singh's talk Broadcasting on 5 April 64).

Train to Pakistan by Khuswant Singh is both a grim and pathetic tale of individuals and communities caught in the whirl of Partition. The story centres round 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”, (Train to Pakistan 20). The arrival of the ‘ghost train’ at Mano Majre from Pakistan carrying the dead bodies of Hindus and Sikhs creates a commotion, triggering off mutual suspicion and distrust between the Sikhs and Muslims of the village. Muslims are evacuated to a refugee camp. Religious fanatics from outside plan a large scale massacre on the train to Pakistan, the train that is to carry the Muslim refugees of the village. The timely action of Juggat saves the train and the passengers from near disaster, but he himself gets killed in the attempt. The simple, peace-loving inhabitants of the train conscious Mano Majra 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 not accidental; they are a prelude to the swelling acts of murder and violence. 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.

The villagers of Mano Majra get the first taste of communal hatred from the insolent behaviour of the sixth soldier who comes to the village for collecting wood and kerosene. His treatment of Imam Baksh’s salutation is a clear indication of the troubles lying in store for them. In the very evening, the stench of the burning flesh stupefies them:

“The village was stilled in a dead silence.

No one asked anyone else what the odour was. They all knew. They had known it all the time. The answer was implicit in the fact that the train had come from Pakistan” (Train to Pakistan 73)

The scene unfolds horrible dramas of communal violence – the sinking of human values in the mire of communal frenzy. Khushwant 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 him. 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 thus:

“It was time one exploded this myth of innate goodness in man. There is innate evil in man... And so I just wrote about it” (Broadcast).

It is a vehement plea by the author to uphold human dignity above narrow walls of sectarian attitudes for Khushwant Singh strongly believed that “whatever its frustrations, love is the greatest, the most exhibiting experience of life”. The delineation of the sufferings of the victims and the mental makeup of the perpetrators of this evil is done by the novelist in a dispassionate way. The novelist does not try to moralize. His sole intention is to lay bare a particular human situation. But covertly and deftly he conveys a message how even religion, which is meant to ennoble and uplift humanity can be easily contorted by crafty and vile fanatics to yield but only barbarism. It is significant to note that throughout the novel, Khushwant Singh remains an impartial observer and narrator without ever taking sides and blaming anybody in particular for the tragedy that could have been averted. A true artist to whom the recent political history becomes a dominant emotion of his creative mind need not wait for a time lapse through which incidents can percolate into crystal clear realities. The partition of India is an incident that concerns our immediate past of which many of our contemporaries have vivid recollections. The causes, courses and effects have become part of history. As such, no novelist could have given a new twist to those happenings. No doubt, the partition novels abound in starkly realistic and frequently disturbing descriptions of riots, bloodshed, mass rapes and other horrors.

To conclude, it may be said that all the partition novelists were painfully aware of the dimensions of the shameful atrocities caused by communal hatred and the partition novels invariably convey the message that the partition of the sub-continent on communal basis was effected abruptly and most arbitrarily and that it was the politicians’ hunger for power combined with the indecent haste of the British which brought about the tragedy. Novels like *Train to Pakistan*, *Azadi*, *The Rape* and *Ashes and Petals* have treated the Partition and its aftermath

comprehensively. One can see cursory references to the Partition even in the novels of R.K.Narayan, Balachandra Rajan and Attia Hossain. Of these, *Train to Pakistan* and *Azadi* remain the best ever written on the theme of Partition in Indian-English fiction.

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