

Human-nature Relationship in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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ABSTRACT: This paper showcases human-nature relationship in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and enumerates how nature reacts to the partition between two nations. In *Train to Pakistan*, Singh sketches the ailing state of the villagers of Mano Majra, an imaginary small village near Indo-Pak border by addressing a tragic tale of India-Pakistan partition. The significant episodes of the villagers' lives take place in the lap of nature, and nature, with its sight, colour and sound, coexists with their peaceful lives as well as reacts to the disintegration getting manifested in the ambiance of nature. Nonetheless, here love and romance are intertwined with the upheaval of partition, and nature seems to merge with masculine virility and feminine submission. Lastly, in the form of flood, nature appears to protest the holocaust by responding to the anguish of the villagers as if it were an agent of God to punish the hideous incidents. The findings of the paper suggest that nature is against all sorts of forceful partition.

KEYWORDS: Khushwant Singh, Nature, partition, relationship, *Train to Pakistan*

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a close and inevitable bond between nature and human life since human beings are integral part of nature. In Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, nature is, in fact, a spokesperson of human life. At the beginning of the novel, it appears that at the small fictional village Mano Majra, nature and human life are in regular orders: with the arrival of the mail train, the whole village gets up; mullah at the mosque calls the pious Muslims to prayer, the Sikh priest chants his prayer song, men start working in the field, and women do their household chores, and children take care of the cattle. During midday the villagers have their rest under the peepul tree, boys swim in the pond and ride the buffaloes, girls have fun through playing, women gossip on several issues like birth, marriage and death. In the evening people start working again, they drive their cattle to home for milking, women prepare meal for the family. After that, the families together have their supper. The mullah utters azan, the Sikh priest performs prayer. One can observe the same cyclic rhythm in the surrounding nature. In the morning, sparrows wing over the roofs, bats stop murmuring, and pye-dogs search for shade. At night, crows caw from the trees. It seems that both nature and human life are in a perfect tune. However, the question is, during the massive death, destruction, and plunder of 1947, does this harmonious atmosphere exist in human life and nature as well? Khushwant Singh tries to answer the question: "[i]t had always been so, until the summer of 1947" (Singh 6). [1.1]

II. DISCUSSION

In *Train to Pakistan* nature not only resembles human life, but also directly influences the latter. From the beginning of February, the sun becomes hotter replacing the charming spring. Then the flowers and leaves of the trees start falling. The sun rises early, and dries up the dew drops, wells, ponds and streams. It becomes hotter as the days pass by. It makes the air hot. In such a scorching heat, life becomes unbearable— people crave for water, they take out their domestic animals to drink, and the affluent ones wear sunglasses. The prickly heat, however, "produces a numbness which makes the head nod and the eyes heavy with sleep" (96) [1.2]. After that, the dust storm begins: "[i]n furious sweeps it smacks open doors and windows, banging them forward and backward, smashing their glass panes. Thatched roofs and corrugated iron sheets are borne aloft into the sky like the bits of paper" (97) [1.3]. The repeated dust storms make people frustrated, thirsty and helpless. Afterwards, the pie-crested cuckoos signal the upcoming monsoon. With a hope for rain, people climb on their roofs to see cloud in the sky. Then rain falls on earth and they enjoy it: "[m]en, women, and children run madly about the streets, weaving their arms and shouting 'Ho, 'Ho,'— hosannas to the miracle of the monsoon" (97) [1.4]. Within a few days all the enthusiasms revolved round the rain disappear. Due to excessive rainfall, the water level keeps rising until it turns into flood. The monsoon flood washes away the houses, trees, cattle, and human:

“[w]ith the monsoon, the tempo of life and death increases” (98) [1.5]. Nature, hence, immensely shapes human life. In this regard, the view of Donald A. Crosby is noteworthy:

Nothing in the universe exists outside of relations, whether internal or external. Each event or thing is conditioned and at least partially defined by its relations to other events or things, but it also is the case that each event or thing has an integrity and individuality belonging to it alone. (33) [2.1]

Actually, “[n]ature is metaphysically ultimate, that is, there is nothing outside, beyond, or behind it” (21) [2.2] and it connects itself with human life by “complex networks of interrelation and interdependence.” (30) [2.3]. In this novel, one can observe that almost all significant events have strong attachment to nature. The love-making between Nooran, the daughter of the Imam of the mosque and Juggut Singh, the village gangster, happens in the lap of nature. Though Nooran mildly protests Juggut Singh, it is a willful relation: “[s]he did not particularly want to” (Singh 15) [1.6] protest. Their relationship is peaceful and nature suits with them by its cheerful appearance. Their relationship is quite contrary to that of Tess and Alec in Hardy’s novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. Here, nature also matches with the seduction of Tess by Alec with its all-encompassing dark and gloomy environment — as if it were mourning for Tess’s misfortune.

Besides, the association between Juggut and Nooran’s affair, nature can further be explored by queer ecology because “there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5) [3.1]. Juggut belongs to the Sikh community and Nooran is a Muslim girl. Their relationship is not granted in a typical religion conscious society and so, in Juggut’s absence when she seeks shelter to his mother, the mother denies. It appears that their relationship reaches its zenith and gets consummation in a landscape, alongside the river, surrounded by trees and stars in the sky. Amidst nature they are free to explore their desires as if the virility of the landscape confirmed Juggut’s masculinity. The madness of their passion gets expression in the exhilaration of nature with the rhythmic sound of Nooran’s breathing and “the warm smell of dusty skins . . . [t]he stars above her went into mad whirl and then came back to their places like a merry-go-round slowly coming to a stop” (Singh 15) [1.7]. Truly speaking, “[w]ilderness”, is “a ‘safe’ place for outlaw sex” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 3) [3.2].

Generally, nature is regarded “as something to be exploited by humans” (Nayar 44) [4.1]. Likewise, in the patriarchal society women are regarded as “natural resource, as an asset to be owned and harnessed, harvested and mined, with no fellow-feeling for her depletion and no responsibility for her conservation or replenishment” (qtd. in Roach 38) [5.1]. In this novel, Hukum Chand, a corrupted district magistrate, exploits and demeans a teenage girl named Haseena Begum. His maltreatment of this teenage girl can be comprehended by ecofeminism that argues:

[P]atriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. It ignores women’s work, knowledge and ‘situatedness’ (her immediate location in nature, where the relationship with the environment is far more intimate than that’s of a man’s). (Nayar 249) [4.2]

The girl is not at all beautiful, but “young and unexploited” (Singh 30) [1.8] like the virgin nature, that can attract men’s attention since women bodies are seen as “both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited” (qtd. in Roach 39) [5.2]. As a male Hukum Chand is also not an exception. Haseena may be younger than his daughter, yet he does not bother. Being a dominant member of the patriarchal society, he is just concerned with the female body to be exploited: “[h]er breasts barely filled her bodice. They could not have known the touch of a male hand” (Singh 30) [1.9]. She is no more than a passive sporting tool to him. Her helplessness is articulated even in her song where she compares her to a moth that “loves the flame” (29) [1.10] and succumbs to death.

Again when the girl finishes her song, he does not simply give money to her, rather, he plays a nasty game with her. He asks her to come closer to have money and grins lecherously until she sits on his lap. The companions who come with her take his attitude for granted as he holds autonomous power and she is to gratify him. Her grandma further assures him, “[s]he is hardly sixteen and completely innocent. She has never been near man before. I have reared her for your honour’s pleasure” (31) [1.11]. Her speech supports the legality of women’s subjection to male authority. Actually, here the girl is presented as a part of nature itself. She decorates her with natural objects; she wears “perfume made of khas” (95) [1.12]. She smells like mother earth which metaphorically merges her “with nature as servile resource, as part of the nonhuman surround and only semi-human” (Roach 38) [5.3]. Catherine M. Roach states: “in patriarchal culture, when women are symbolically associated with nature or seen as having a particular affinity with nature that surpasses that of men, then women are seen as less fully human than men” (38) [5.4].

The indissoluble bond of nature and human life can be traced in the second portion of the novel titled “Kalyug” (Singh 81) [1.13]. At the very beginning the narrator enunciates: “[e]arly in September the time schedule in Mano Majra started going wrong” (81) [1.14]. In the Indian subcontinent September is a month of irregular weather; there may be low rainfall or high rainfall or thunderstorm. Sometimes dews drop at night. The same inconsistency is noted in the villagers’ lives. Trains, the clock- work of the villagers’ daily life, do not

come on time. This lack of punctuality disrupts the habitual life. Both Imam Baksh and Meet Singh do not realize what is the time now, when to call people to prayer. People wake up late “without realizing that times had changed and the mail train might not run through at all” (81) [1.15]. The situation is so worse that children do not know when to be hungry and cry for food. Before the sunset everyone comes to house. Goods trains do not come to “lull them to slumber” (6), [1.16] instead ghost train go “past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra” (81) [1.17].

Again, “the lives of humans resemble those of many other types of natural beings. These beings also have interior, conscious, firsthand perspectives on their environments and the sensations, feelings, dispositions, expectations, outlooks, and goals belonging to these perspectives” (Crosby 94) [2.4]. Crosby’s speech indicates that human lives are connected to the lives of other natural beings as well. In this novel, one notices remarkable resemblances between humans’ tendencies and activities, and those of insects like geckos, moths, and lizards. For instance, Hukum Chand watches a moth that flies around the chimney and flies up to the ceiling where geckos and lizards are waiting to devour it. It hits the ceiling again and again. He knows that, if the moth alights a few moments on the ceiling, one of the geckos or lizards would “get it fluttering between its little crocodile jaws” (Singh 91) [1.18]. Here, one can find an analogy between him and the geckos or the lizards because, apart from being a magistrate, he is a typical Hindu and is waiting for a chance to eat up the Muslims. He expresses his hatred for the Muslims to the sub-inspector: “. . . God alone knows what I would have done to these Pakistanis if I were not a government servant” (23) [1.19]. Later on he observes two fighting geckos that fight until they fall from the ceiling. These fighting geckos embody the two nations, India and Pakistan, whose battle results nothing more than “inhuman bestial horrors and insane savage killings on both sides” (Harish 126) [6].

Nature, indeed, cares for the “accomplishments, values, and prospects of human beings” (Crosby 141) [2.5] and when it finds any decline of humanity it exhibits its “destructive side” (141) [2.6] and resists the evildoers. From the very beginning of the text, one finds that nature reacts against the humiliation of humankind: “[t]he summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers” (Singh 1) [1.20] as it witnesses the battle between India and Pakistan — “both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped” (1) [1.21]. In this regard, Dr Sheelu Singh Bhatia (2014) talks about nature’s reactions:

Characteristically enough, the novel begins with a small paragraph on the unusual weather condition which is exceedingly hot and dry in the month of August and is very much in consonance with the exceptional heat and holocaust of communal riots . . . nature in its different moods – summer, monsoon flood, and rain is functional in the novel. As nature’s holocaust in the month of monsoon coincides with the holocaust of partition, the two movements are taken together throughout the novel to reinforce the total effect of the events described in the novel. (1) [7.1]

Nature counteracts when a ghost train, full of dead bodies of Hindus, arrives from Pakistan. All day long the villagers of Mano Majra suspiciously wait to know what the train has carried from Pakistan: they stand on the roofs to see what is going on at the rail station, women forget to cook food, hungry children clamor for food yet women do not light the hearths, and men do not milk their cattle. But they do not know anything until nature unleashes the hideous deed for them. At night Sikh soldiers cunningly burn the dead bodies to conceal the brutal killing, violence, rape, and destruction from the villagers. Nature, however, reveals the truth:

A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then wood. And then — a faint acrid smell of searing flesh. The village was stilled in a deathly silence. No one asked anyone what the odour was. They all knew. They had known it all the time. (Singh 89) [1.22]

Nature also revolts against the gruesome endeavour of wiping out traumatic history of partition by rain that extinguishes the fire and exposes “[a]hundred yards of charred corpses” (99) [1.23]. Afterwards, an excessive rain mourns for the evacuation of the Muslims from the village, Mano Majra.

The villagers cannot endure the tumultuous situation any longer and earnestly wishes that, the river would “rise more and drown the whole of Mano Majra along with them, their women, children, and cattle — provided it also drowned Malli, his gang, his refugees, and soldiers” (147) [1.24]. Nature responds to this urge and the water level of the river rises and the stream becomes “a menacing and tumultuous spread of muddy down” (147) [1.25]. Within two days the Sutlej turns into “terrifying sight” (147) [1.26]. It seems that the river is revolting against all inhumanity. The river yields thousands of carcasses of men, women, children, bulls, horses. From the side of the river, the villagers hear human voices pleading for helps. The river water rises further. The river carrying thousands of dead bodies tells the insurmountable woes of partition: “some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, many women’s breasts were slashed. They floated down the sunlit river, bobbing up and down. Overhead hung the kites and vultures” (151) [1.27].

Nature also foretells the death of Juggut whose selfless sacrifice rescues hundreds of innocent lives vulnerable to plan of massacre and ensures the triumph of humanity. Before his death it becomes gloomy: “the moon came up. It looked tired and dissipated. It flooded the plain with a pale light in which everything was a little blurred . . . The river did not glisten; it was like a sheet of slate with just a suspicion of a ripple here and there” (189) [1.28]. It, by its dismal appearance, mourns for the upcoming demise of Juggut.

III. CONCLUSION

In *Train to Pakistan*, nature and the villagers of Mano Majra have dynamic relationship. They strongly reciprocate and encompass one another. Nature in variegated levels merges with the lives of the villagers: it harmonizes and directly affects their feelings, expectations and activities by mourning for their sufferings and reacting to the viciousness, brutality and inhumanity of partition exposing its terrible side. Moreover, it co-exists with masculine virility and feminine innocence. Considering all the associations between the abovementioned two, it can be said that in this novel nature and human life go hand in hand.

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