

Nature as a Narrative Tool in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract:

Interdisciplinary research links various fields together. As a result, it has played a crucial role to unlock new realms of knowledge and comprehension. Human life is inextricably linked to nature. Moreover, each and every earthling is connected with nature in one or the other way. Even in the field of literature many works dealt with nature and utilise it as a narrative tool. *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh is one of such iconic works. He has neatly woven natural scenery and occurrences into the main events of the novel. In short, human life events and nature go hand in hand throughout the novel. In present research paper the researcher will meekly try to explore the interconnection between nature and human life.

Keywords: Nature, Mano Majra, Partition, Cloud, Rain, Weather Circle, etc.

Nature has been playing an important role in the development of human civilization and society. There are inseparable interrelations between nature and human. Being a mirror of human life literature also captures nature in its myriad forms. There are numerous literary works which represent nature in various ways. "Representations of the natural environment are as old as recorded literature and were prominent in the account of the Garden of Eden in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the pastoral form inaugurated by the Greek Theocritus in the third century BC and later imitated by the Roman poet Virgil."¹ One can see influence of nature and natural elements in the literary works of countless writers such as Ruskin Bond, Rudyard Kipling, Henry David Thoreau, John Clare etc. Even R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, have depicted nature in their works to show their contemporary society. Khushwant Singh a well-known Indo English writer is in the same queue who has given special treatment to nature in most of his works. His iconic work *Train to Pakistan* mainly revolves round partition of India and its horrible outcomes. It also contains fascinating description of nature which provides additional height to this work. His creation of fictional village Mano Majra and its surrounding places like pond, river, forest, etc. work as a narrative tool throughout the novel. Moreover, the novelist does not use straight words to describe partition violence and uncertainty, instead of that he has used natural elements to convey his message.

One can find the interconnection of human deeds and nature at the very beginning of the novel. The writer has linked insurmountable condition of weather with partition. He has narrated nature as a supreme divine authority and a punisher of wrong human deeds. He tries to show nature's response against the partition violence with drought like condition. Hence, he has used the metaphor of drier and dustier summer longer than ever before. K. Singh has brilliantly narrated the hardships of the year 1947 in his words. "For weeks the sparse clouds

cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins.”² Through the description of natural scenery, he presents the darkness and despair that engulfed the entire nation after partition. One can also evaluate it as a self realisation and collective remorse of people. It also denotes the nature’s reply against the brutal actions of people as well as hardships of the year. Thus, the writer criticises partition violence and inhuman deeds through natural conditions in the initial lines of his work. In the first part of the novel, he briefly informs the readers about natural locations around village and their geographic condition in various seasons. Along with that, he narrates many places of village where the crucial incidents of novel take place. He has glorified nature as a God by mentioning a slab stone located under the keekar trees near pond. It was being worshiped by the people of Mano Majra unlike divisions of caste, creed and religion. Daily schedule and biological clock of the villagers including birds and cattle set with the timing of trains. Trains play crucial role for the villagers as well as the creatures residing near village. He has specially shown the natural tuning of birds and trains in the novel. He shows how crows and bats react during the arrival of trains in morning and evening. Sonorous tones of other birds and cries of cattle also work as a signal for the Mano Majrans. The writer has used natural scenery from the beginning to the end of the dacoity. Moreover, blending of nature with the main events gives an additional height to the novel. Malli and his companions could be seen in the lap of nature during their planning of dacoity. When Jugga goes out at midnight for the tryst with Nooran, he encountered the couple of adjutant staying in the pond looking for frogs. The legs of adjutants were in mud, which symbolise the upcoming problem in Jugga’s life. Love meeting of Jugga and Nooran is mixed with the essence of nature. The novelist describes it as, “The stars above her went into a mad whirl and then came back to their places like a merry-go-round slowly coming to a stop.”³ It is to be said that love is a part of nature. It seems true due to Khushwant Singh’s peerless writing in the novel. In the above lines K. Singh has explained rapturous love meeting of Jugga and Nooran. He has compared momentary venereal relation through the instance of innumerable stars. It also shows intensity of love and joy which disrupts order of the stars. In other words, he represents overwhelming human emotions by narrating the natural scenery. Gradually, stars come to their actual places after fleeting disturbance. It denotes reestablishment of normalcy after extreme experience of love. In the above given lines writer has converted internal feelings of couple into a vast cosmic way. This love scene can also be evaluated on the basis of Ecocriticism because it includes multiple natural objects like air, sound of birds, dust and stars to narrate couples’ personal feelings. In addition, nature is presented here as an only witness of the personal tryst. After the scene of Lala Ram Lal’s murder, novelist develops the novel through the description of natural scenery around the rest house of Mano Majra. He narrates the gradual transformation of river’s flow into little ponds. Moreover, the writer draws attention of readers by discussing presence of various fishes and water plants in those ponds. Apart from that, he splendidly depicts the natural diversity and grandeur of Mano Majra and its surroundings. He also mentions waterfall in sunrise, partridges, fireflies, floating ducks and horrible flow of Sutlej in the season of monsoon. Furthermore, the novelist

attempts to persuade his readers of the reason that Mano Majra is a favourite place for government officials and visitors by narrating its natural beauty, flora and fauna.

When the first 'Ghost Train' arrives at Mano Majra, writer does not directly explain the actual condition. He uses nature as a tool of narration and writes that, "The northern horizon, which had turned a bluish grey, showed orange again. The orange turned into copper and then into a luminous russet. Red tongues of flame leaped into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then of wood. And then a faint acrid smells of searing flesh."⁴ Khushwant Singh has artfully blended the partition violence with nature by using the above lines. It presents brutal violence and massacres in tangible form. By changing the flames of fire, he informs readers about the massacred train. However, he does not convey the actual message in straight words. He has employed the natural objects as like flames of fire and light wind to describe the collective cremation of dead bodies. Here, the researcher politely believes that, it would be more suitable if the event was described by the villagers themselves. Moreover, he also considers it as a manipulation of human emotions. In addition, the overuse of natural imagery can distract readers from the main event.

K. Singh has given special importance to geckos and moths in between the incidents of novel. He has explained skirmish between moths and geckos in broader sense. The narrator has symbolised terrible condition of partition with a microcosmic natural representation. It also points out towards the Hukumchand's insecurity of death. Hukumchand observes that geckos look at the moths flying around them. In the scene writer shows that geckos seem ready to catch moths under their little crocodile jaws. By seeing this Hukumchand compares the tragic situation as well as helplessness of numerous partition victims through the instance of moths. Geckos represent destructive forces of violence and communal hatred. He also considers partition as an inevitable condition. Hence, he portrayed partition as a cruel fate that belongs to everyone. During the time of partition survival was the biggest issue. Thus, the above lines display insecurity and havoc of partition that engulfed entire Indian Subcontinent. In between Hukumchand's sleep in the night to morning scene, the writer has minutely narrated entire weather circle of Indian Sub-continent. He gives precise and depth information about the various seasons and responses of people upon it. He tries to show weather with its real characteristics. Moreover, the writer made his readers aware about various rain patterns by sorting them into different seasons. Initially, he shows rain of winter and its temporary effects upon people. He displays how spring sluggishly turns into summer. Along with that, he discusses the impact of summer on soil, trees, plants, flowers and grass. The novelist further explains how the prickly heat of sun, hot air and lakes of mirages create annoying atmosphere for the humans as well as creatures. Then after, summer is replaced by monsoon. However, before that people must endure the hardships of storms and dusty weather. The author briefly gives an account how the hurricanes damage material properties and other natural objects. Then, rain arrives after a prolonged wait. Arrival of rain fills people with joy and enthusiasm. Though, the actual season of rain is not like ordinary raining. When it comes lasts for the considerable amount of time. It gives new life to sweepers, creepers and

numbers of other insects. Even nature also reacts upon it by covering land with a green layer of grass. He shows that along with joy rain also brings hardships for the people. Eventually, the season of monsoon takes farewell and gives way to autumn. Khushwant Singh has discussed weather circle and its impacts on the people. He has nicely utilised his years of experience in the detailed depiction of nature. In addition, it can also be evaluated as a minute observation of the Indian weather. Thus, the writer has endeavoured to make a novel more fruitful by adding the special portion of nature amid the main occurrences.

One can analyse the moon light meeting of Nooran and Beybey (Jugga's mother) through the lense of Ecofeminism. Singh has involved nature to show the inner dilemma of Nooran. The conversation of both the women in moonlight gives unique touch to the novel. The writer has utilised metaphor of dark cloud to describe inner thought of Nooran about her father. By using this, the writer wants to draw the psychological condition of Nooran before migration. She does not want to leave the village at any cost. However, she knows that being a Muslim her father would not accept her relation with Jugga. Hence, she tries to convince Jugga's mother about their relation. Therefore, she enters Jugga's house to confess her relation. After having short conversation, she leaves the house abruptly while the thought of her father comes into her mind. The novelist has decorated inner strife of Nooran with the natural objects such as moon light and dark clouds. This scene also represents religious barriers against love.

Khushwant Singh showcases the mood and thoughts of people through blending of nature. After seeing the evacuation of fellow Muslim villagers and atrocities upon innocent cattle, the hearts of Mano Majrans were heavy with pain and repent. The writer has compared the hearts of people with the raised turbid water of Sutlej. Rising water of Sutlej symbolises uncontrollable violence of partition. K. Singh has narrated despair of people in his words that, "They only wished that it would rise more and drown the whole of Mano Majra along with them, the woman, children and cattle—provided, it also drowned Malli, his gang, the refugees, and the soldiers."⁵ The above mentioned scene can be evaluated on the basis of Pathetic Fallacy Theory. Pathetic Fallacy is a literary device that aligns nature with the characters' inner feelings and moods. In the above lines Khushwant Singh has shown psychological trauma and hopelessness of people during partition. He has compared the collective pain of villagers through flood water. Here, the writer tries to magnify the Muslim migration from the village by blending collective emotions of people with nature. Moreover, the novelist tries to represent the suppressed sensibilities of partition victims. Thus, the above lines denote the inner rage and retaliatory feelings of villagers against forceful migration and injustice inflicted upon them.

In the initial chapters of novel nature revolves around the thoughts of characters and event. It works as a backbone of novel. However, in the last chapter nature leads entire scenery of destruction itself. Novelist has utilised river as a symbol of partition devastation. Along with the other natural objects river is the main theme of novel. It symbolises deteriorating condition of partition society through the imagery of muddy water. In the previous scenes of novel water of Sutlej is demonstrated calm and clean with its sluggish

flow. While migration and violence take place in the novel, its small channels of water suddenly turn into massive flood. In addition, the narrator has employed river to show brutal massacres. The novelist also depicts partition destruction through mangle corpses. He shows how numberless unidentified dead bodies floating in the river and become the food of crows and vultures. Thus, Khushwant Singh has unveiled horrible destruction of partition by portraying natural elements. The researcher meekly believes that, natural narration of a political event provides the accurate estimation of partition carnage.

In the last scene of novel nature demonstrates the upcoming death of Juggut Singh. Here K. Singh has changed the appearance of moon and river than previous scenes. He explains it as, "A little after eleven the moon came up. It looked tired and dissipated. It flooded the plain with a weary 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."⁶ Khushwant Singh has applied silent surveillance of nature to show the climax of novel. Moreover, exhausted and a blurred moon denotes aversion of nature against evil intentions of ambushers. Usually, river is considered as a symbol of life however it is presented here with nominal ripples. It also showcases numbness and apathy against hatred and violence of partition. The researcher humbly believes that describing the climax of novel with more detail would make it more meaningful. Overall, it may be said that Khushwant Singh has created a historic work through the artistic use of nature.

To conclude; Khushwant Singh has employed nature in the background of entire novel. In addition, he has interconnected the thoughts, sensibilities, feelings and actions of characters with nature. One can examine how nature unveils the madness and brutality of partition along with natural description. In a nutshell, Khushwant Singh has brilliantly applied nature as a narrative tool in the novel.

References:

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