



# LIFE

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**RESISTANCE  
REVOLUTION  
RESURGENCE**

Editors  
**Julie Dominic A  
Esther Mani  
Dani C. Francis**

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(Literature)

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# Reverberation of Identity Crisis and Cultural Conflict in *Train to Pakistan*

Dr A Princy Anto  
Assistant Professor in English  
Sacred Heart College, Chalakudy

Identity crisis and cultural conflict go hand in hand. Identity in very general term can be said as: what you are, what you are not and what is done to you. One's identity is shaped by the nationality, culture, language, religion and family. One generally has ascribed and achieved identity: the former with which we are born with and the latter that which we achieve. In a post colonial context, one's identity is closely associated with the nation, region and culture. One's identity is put into question where there is a colonial past to the culture one belongs to. There are two different types of identity. One is individual identity and the other one is collective identity which leads to cultural conflict. These conflicts are very much explicit in the novel *Train to Pakistan* written by Khushwant Singh in the context of partition of India. This novel is replete with conflicts arising out of the partition of 1947 which shows how communal frenzy engulfed the remote village of Mano Majra where Sikhs and Muslims had lived in peace for years.

This paper intends to focus on the political and identity crisis that a multi-cultural India faces in spite of its great effort to promote national integration amidst cultural difference. India is a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural and multireligious society and she has been able to retain its unity in diversity. But in such a place where diversity prevails, the idea of separate geo-political national entities has become inevitable, the minorities being concerned for their future under the larger ethnic group. The partition of India in 1947 is the greatest setback in the history of India's integrity.

The locale of the novel, Mano Majra is described as one of the "oases of peace" (*Train to Pakistan* 4). The village



embraced all Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians in one clasp. Written in the background of the partition of India, the novel clearly portrays some of the painful aftermaths of the division. Along with the partition of the land, values of greater concern were also shattered. Peace, love, unity, cooperation and nonviolence were wiped off and animosity, inhumanity, hatred, horror, violence and revenge, were planted. In other words, the evacuation of people led to evaporation of values.

The defacement of ideals is depicted in the novel through the character of the magistrate and the police and in turn leads to cultural clash. They manipulate the lives of the common folk and drag them towards their end. They first make the people uncertain and unsteady, by a lot of brainwashing. When the police try to evacuate the Muslims from Mano Majra they had no authentic reason which indicates their fake identity. The head constable's visit had divided Mano Majra into two halves as neatly as a knife cuts through a pat of butter. But cruelty and inhumanity reign as the Muslims were sent off first to the camp, and then to Pakistan. Even the common folk dread the injustice of the police. While the villagers noticed the inauspicious occurring in the river somebody thought of informing the police. Then a small man commented bitterly, "What will they do? Write a first information report?" (125). This vulnerable situation faced by the common man was aggravated by the calamity and destruction sowed by the authorities. For instance, Malli's Gang and Jugga were released in Mano Majra, and not in Malli's hometown; and that too without a trial and acquittal. Knowing well that Malli's group housed the culprits, they were let loose deliberately, in the place where the murder occurred: "I see the trick now. That is why the police released Malli. Now I suppose Jugga will join them, too. It is all arranged" (146). Politics and political chaos are throbbing issues in the novel. The village, Mano Majra, was a single whole family but its wholeness is shattered by the political and judicial intrusion. The novel has much to say about politicians and judiciary. The so called politicians and judiciary use their power



according to their whims and fancies. They have neither any regard for the prestige of the persons concerned, nor for the reality of the matter. Their interpretation of facts varies with time and place.

The novelist points out that the innocent people of Mano Majra are ignorant of the political situation of their country. The sub inspector speaks thus: "I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan" (21). The people accept the fact that they know nothing and they are also ignorant of the reason why the English had left India. But they desire to know more about the world, and so when they know that Iqbal is an educated man they demand information. Singh comments: "Independence meant nothing or little to these people," and they think, "freedom is for the educated people who fought for it" (43-44). They consider themselves slaves of the English in the past and now the slaves of the educated Indians. According to the Manomajrans, "the only ones who enjoy freedom are thieves, robbers and cutthroats" (45). They are also aware that they "were better off under the British. At least there was security" (45).

This cultural chaos leads to identity crisis. In the novel a person whose identity so brutally questioned is none other than Mr. Iqbal. Bhai Meet Singh enquires whether Iqbal is Iqbal Singh. No answer is given. Bhai continues with his next question. Then playing with the name of Iqbal, the narrator opines that Iqbal could be a Muslim, Iqbal Mohammed or a Hindu, Iqbal Chand or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh. It is one of the few names common to the three communities. The novelist who takes so much care from the beginning not to reveal the identity of Iqbal, exposes the truth towards the end of the novel: "The situation was different now, and in any case it was true that he was born a Sikh" (144). This leap is quite unexpected but thrilling. The police too play a dubious role in declaring Iqbal 'a Muslim' at first and then 'a Sikh' later. V. T. Girdhari in "Historical Text, Human Context: A Study of *Train To Pakistan*" agrees that the novel is "not just a political novel but a social one – a politics-polluted society, played with by the bureaucrats for their personal private ends,



under the pretensions of executing the so-called policies of the so-called Government" (Dhawan 83). Furthermore, when they arrested him, they themselves determined he was Mohammed Iqbal, a Muslim Leaguer, and not a social worker. But by the end of the novel they change his name, "Mr. Iqbal Singh, social worker" (140). Hearing that, Iqbal retorts, "Not Mohammed Iqbal, member of the Muslim League? You seem to fabricate facts and documents as it pleases you" (140). The police intensify the youth's resentment but Iqbal has to surrender. The novelist invites the reader to think, "Where on earth except in India would a man's life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed?" (143). In this issue, it results in, an 'in betweenness' that is, neither here nor there situation in Iqbal's life which leads to divided culture and identity.

Cultural difference is evident in the event, when a group of people plans for massacre and revenge, some others sacrifice their lives for the good of thousands of people. The strange boy and his group, who appears all of a sudden at gurudhwara, challenge the assembly gathered there, to join him in his revenge: "For each Hindu or Sikh they kill, kill two Mussulmans. For each woman they abduct or rape, abduct two. . . That will stop the killing on the other side. It will teach them we also play this game of killing and looting" (130). When Iqbal hears this from Meet Singh of gurudhwara, his identity as a social worker arises and is apprehensive about the coming calamity. He feels awfully bad for the lives of the many. Though he thinks in terms of self-preservation first, the point of sacrifice also strikes him: "The doer must do only when the receiver is ready to receive. Otherwise, the act is wasted" (148). While his meditation ends without any action 'budmash number ten' acts in time so that he becomes the saviour of a whole lot – a person who is given an identity of 'budmash' by the society proves himself with an identity of a saviour. Thus the cruel plan of derailing the train is shattered without any harm to the passengers of the train. And Jugga's death becomes a glorified act. The narrator at the end sums up the self-effacing act thus, "The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan" (157).



The title *Train to Pakistan* echoes the cultural conflict. The novelist emphasizes the importance of the train in the life of Mano Majrans. In the whole narration, the punctuality of the train shows the order and the peace of the time. And the novelist takes care to show that the trains become irregular when there is disorder and disturbance in the life of Manjo Majrans. It was in early September that the time schedule started going wrong and then the punctuality of the train also became conditional:

Trains became less punctual than ever before and many more started to run through at night. Some days it seemed as though the alarm clock had been set for the wrong hour. On others, it was as if no one had remembered to wind it. . . . People stayed in bed late without realizing that times had changed and the mail train might not run through at all. Children did not know when to be hungry, and clamoured for food all the time. In the evenings, everyone was indoors before sunset and in bed before the express came by – if it did come by. 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. (68)

The novelist describes the predicament of the people who are totally thwarted: “All that morning, people sat in their homes and stared despondently through their open doors. They saw Malli’s men and the refugees ransack Muslim houses. They saw Sikh soldiers come and go as if on their beats. They heard the piteous lowing of cattle as they were beaten and dragged along” (121).

The novel gives credit to the writer’s sense of values. In “*Train to Pakistan: A Study in Crisis of Values*” Harish Raizada gives an admirable comment on the writer’s enduring faith in morals and values:

*Train To Pakistan* is, however, a classic in the post-independence Indian English fiction not only because of the bold, brutal and unrelenting realism with which it tears asunder the mask of hypocrisy and exposes the sordidness and savagery of human life, but also because of the author’s optimistic and affirmative world-view that emerges from it,



his enduring faith in the values of love, loyalty and humanity and the unconquerable spirit of man in the face of the mighty forces of wickedness and savage cruelties. (Dhawan 127)

Identity, sense of belongingness, and sense of cultural conflicts are some of the aspects dealt in this novel. The novelist while depicting the partition trauma also seems to portray Punjabi ethos and identity. All the characters like Meet Singh, Lambardar, Imam Chacha, Nooran, Juggut Singh, Mali and his gangs are thoroughly rooted in Punjabi peasant culture. Religion forms an integral part of their life. Meet Singh demonstrates the Punjabi code of religious ethics. In this regard Anup Beniwal remarks:

The author in a nutshell seems to advocate the existence of a composite Punjabi identity which is more powerful than Sikh and Muslim dichotomy. He however does not present it as a romantic idyll, sans problems and conflicts. (Beniwal 33)

Behind every critical situation there lies the birth of a new generation. Khushwant Singh has the positive assumption of a birth of a harmonious human society of India intervening religious, linguistic and caste divisions. But in spite of the novelist's affirmation, communal conflicts and identity crisis never go away from the soil of India. It will remain intact as long as religion and community based political parties exploit religious and communal sentiments to gain their political influence.

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