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***Mano Majra: Exploring Political Realities in Khushwant Singh's
Work within the Gandhian Framework***

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Abstract:

This study examines the complex link between literature and politics by analyzing Khushwant Singh's critically renowned book *Mano Majra* which is set against the backdrop of India's Gandhian period. Published in 1956, the story depicts a devastating picture of a tiny Punjabi hamlet during the turbulent 1947 partition period. With an emphasis on the Gandhian ideals and their impact on the people and events in the novel, we examine in this research how Khushwant Singh's story offers a microcosm of the greater political environment of pre- and post-independence India. This research also looks at how the lives of the characters in the novel were impacted by political events like the partition of India, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the Quit India Movement. It explores the ways in which these historical occurrences affect the protagonists' particular trajectories, illuminating the intricate interactions between human decisions and the larger political dynamics at work. This research paper explores the manner in which *Mano Majra* mirrors the political unrest of its day by closely examining the text and using literary and historical analysis. It contends that Khushwant Singh deftly balances the political and personal, providing an engaging story that both sums up the spirit of the Gandhian period and poses important queries regarding the continued applicability of Gandhian principles in modern-day India.

Keywords: Socio- cultural diversity, Communal riots, Religion, *Mano Majras*, Harmony, Gandhian Utopia, Partition, Sacrifice.

Introduction:

The fictional novel *Train to Pakistan* (based on facts) opens with a scene of partition where Mahatma Gandhi failed. Booting description of non-violence, communal riots, killing and murdering, raping, massacres happening in *Mano Majra* is the corroboration of Gandhiji's non-success. The political upheaval has disturbed the peaceful and harmonious routines of the folks of this fictional village. The village and the villagers travel localism to nationalism contextualizing anthropology contemplating social, cultural, economic and regional the-then Redcliffe line. The diasporic portion, without docility, violated people's sense of sensibility, cult of culture, commonality of communities, thrift of economy and rationality towards region and religion as well what for Gandhiji hadn't dreamt at all.



The Village *Mano Majra*:

Looking back to 1947's *Mano Majra* from Khushwant Singh's fictitious novel *Train to Pakistan* is a tiny village situated on the banks of Sutlej River. The village is acclaimed for its railway station as it's regulated by, Delhi to Lahore and Lahore to Delhi, two trains only, apart from goods trains. Wagons, at *Mano Majra*, are personified to be the only regular visitors which make *Mano Majra* live through the huffing, puffing, whistling, banging and clanking. Ultimately it's been trains that made *Mano Majra*- the village and *Mano Majras* the villagers conscious settling down their routines.

This small village, set on the border of India and Pakistan, forwards the harmony of Sikhs, Muslims and of a Hindu family. Lala Ram Lal's is a Hindu family who is a money lender and has been killed by Malli's gang of dacoits but the blame falls on Jugga-Juggut Singh, one of the Sikhs and popular for his notorious activities. Jugga loves Nooran, a Muslim girl. Their love symbolizes communal harmony. Nooran's father Imam Baksh is a weaver. The man with Islamic name and Sikh surname, Iqbal Singh has not been given any religious framework and works for politics that idealizes a political figure/politician who was British educated. His agenda was to bring land reform and to make farmers aware of their rights and to demand more for. When he has been imprisoned for Lala Ram Lal's murder, the sub-inspector supposes him to be Muslim. The local people consider him to be a demagogue whereas Hukum Chand and Meet Singh take him to be Sikh. Meet Singh is a Sikh priest of *Mano Majra*, a friend of Imam Baksh and Iqbal Singh what is an account of "an undercurrent of friendly rivalry." The Magistrate and deputy commissioner of *Mano Majra*, Hukumchand, comes from a Hindu family, is ready to make as many as Muslims move away to avert massacre, police in a true sense.

Gandhiji's Views on Partition:

Along with Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi has also been referred to a character who actively participated in Indian freedom movement. 1920 was the year when Mahatma Gandhi took the leadership of the Indian National Congress. He wanted Indians to come out of their flaws and get united. It was Lord Mountbatten who took an advantage of agitated communal riots and increased more discord between Hindus and Muslims of India. Gandhiji went ahead with "Quit India" movement forthwith and demanded for their power stoppage. As its causation Gandhiji was put to jail at Aga Khan Palace till 1944. In 1945 the Indian National Congress and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League



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agreed to separation of British India in India and Pakistan. Realizing the consequences, Gandhiji accosts in the novel-

“Yes, the Englishmen have gone but the rich Indians have taken their place. What have you or your fellow villagers got out of independence? More bread or more clothes? You are in the same handcuffs and fetters which the English put on to you. We have to get together and rise. We have nothing to lose but these chains.”

The disharmony and detestation were already prevailed between two prime Indian Communities- Hindus and Muslims. Consequently, “a wave of riots swept over the country within a short while desecration of Hindu temples by Muslims of Amethi, Sambhal and Gulbarga took place followed by fierce disturbance....” (Tendulkar) In 1924, when Gandhiji was released from imprisonment, he saw that communal riots have unfurled the nation. “Hindu-Muslim Tension- its Cause and Cure” was written by him and reviews on it were equally invited. Compiling all those reviews, reactions, raised question and connotations, he wrote down his urge to people,

“I am requesting my countrymen to adopt non-violence as their final creed, for the purpose of regulating the relations between the different races, and for the purpose of attaining Swaraj. Hindus and Musalmans, Christians, Sikhs and Parsis must not settle their differences by resort to violence, and the means for the attainment of Swaraj must be non-violent. This I venture to place before India, not as a weapon of the weak, but of the strong. The Hindus and Musalmans prate about no compulsion in religion. What is it but compulsion, if Hindus will kill a Musalman for saving a Cow? It is like wanting to convert a Musalman to Hinduism by force. Similarly what is it but compulsion, if Musalmans seek to prevent by force to Hindus from playing music before mosques? ... In such a plan, character would be the only test. What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another, if it doesn't mean a moral rise? What is the meaning of my trying to convert to the service of God- for that must be the implication of shuddhi or tabligh- when those who are in my fold are daily denying God by their actions? ‘Physician heal thyself’ is more true in matters religious than mundane.” (ifid., P 175-177)



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The aspects of socio-cultural diversity, what Gandhi stated and tried to convince to the Hindus and Muslims, especially, of India, was in reality was lived by *Mano Majrans*. *Mano Majra* is set on the border of India and Pakistan. Even during the time of partition *Mano Majra* lives pre-partition life. As if multi-culturalism were their surviving identity. The village drawn by Khushwant Singh is ideally Gandhian utopian village where we find inter-racial polyphony. All are an independent identity, yet socially, emotionally and economically dependent on each other. There were no biases and prejudices for any cast, inspite of racial discrimination. It was a self-reliant village like Gandhian Gram Swaraj where overall growth of the society is always at the prime focus which is possible only when an individual is in core of economic system.

On 4th April 1941, Mahatma Gandhi wrote to Munnalal Shah regarding his idea of an ideal village where he declared that a village is an ideal place to lead a happy, healthy and wealthy life. The same has also been propagated in his journals called 'Harijan' and 'Young India'. He emphasized on hand woven clothes so the weaver, Imam Baksh is portrayed as the representative. The food eaten by villagers should be own grown so the Muslim and Sikh peasants are representing independent farmers. Up to an extent they provide food to other racial people, too, that shows no question of either untouchability or caste and class discrimination. Thus, to him, a village ought to be independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants, and yet independent for many others in which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every villager's first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth' (Joshi 5). The village that is not based on inequity and favouritism in which there are no vertical divisions but only horizontal; no high, no low; all service has equal status and carries equal wages; those who have more use their advantage not for themselves but as a trust to serve others who have less; the motivating factor in the choice of vocations is not personal advancement but self-expression and self-realization through the service of society' (Gandhi 23). Hence, Khushwant Singh's *Mano Majra* almost fulfills most of the, criterias of Gandhi's Gram Swaraj, i.e., Swadeshi, Self-sufficiency, equality, self and full employment (apart from Jugga and some notorious dacoits- Malli and his gang who murdered Lala Ram Lal) and above all hegemony of mankind that respects individual's existence and identity, each other's culture and religion.

Communal Riots:

All this was tenable until *Mano Majra* was directly affected by what was already in the air of British India – brutal murders, rapes, communal riots, loots. This horrified picture of India during the partition is presented by the author contradicts the loyalty and harmony of *Mano Majrans*. When the train from Lahore arrives full



of burnt corps of Sikhs at *Mano Majra*, gives shock to the inhabitants. The brutal wave spreaded its terror amongst *Mano Majrans*. When few days later *Mano Majrans* came across another train of burnt dead bodies, its scenario changes. The first train made people swore not to make happen this brutality to them, their neighbours and friends, but the next wreaked corruption, conflict, unfaithfulness to the new refugees and other villagers as well. Amongst new refugees there were around about three crores of Sikhs and Muslims from Pak, Baluchi and Pathan. Refugee camps at *Mano Majra* were set for Muslims and Sikhs arriving from Pakistan. The village up to now was safe and unaffected, but suddenly turned into bloodshed and barbarity. The viciousness surrounded *Mano Majra*. The Magistrate wanted Muslims to drag out of the village. Friendship turned to animosity. The virtue of coexistence got disappeared. And then the train to Pakistan is entangled.

The contextual setting of the novel at social level derives traditional pre-partitioned Punjabi society made by Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. *Mano Majra* represents a stereotype backwoods, Punjabi way of living. Mainly Sikhs and Muslims were the locals of *Mano Majra* apart from a Hindu Magistrate Hukumchand and moneylender Lala Ram Lal. All being together, though divided into communal identification, showed same culture and linguistic identity. They were religiously separate but emotionally discerning. They spoke for communal harmony and lived for and with multiculturalism. The characteristics of Sikhs' spirit of a culture, era or community as manifested in their attitudes and trustworthiness towards their fellow villagers and friends is depicted by the novelist in this novel. Khushwant Singh Said: "For them truth, honour, financial integrity are all places lower down the scale of values than being true to one's friends and fellow villagers. For friends you could lie in court or cheat, and no one would blame you." (TP, 38)

After the arrival of the ghost train, *Mano Majra* was splitted. Muslims realized the earnestness of the circumstances and preferred to go to the refugee camps to be out of harms up to an extent as they knew of cruelty of Hindus and Sikhs done in Patiala and Ambala. They took promises from their Sikh brothers to conserve their property till the situation becomes normal and Sikhs happily agreed. But the coming of the loading vehicles and dozens of trucks give them shock as those Muslims had to get transferred to Pakistan forever. They were not to return ever. On this, they said: "We have looked upon the Muslims as our brothers and sisters. Why should they send somebody to spy on us." (TP, 105)



The statement witnessed the brutality on Muslim's part done to other races. But *Mano Majrans*, had to surrender, with insecurities in their minds the situation they had no way out. *Mano Majran* Muslims decided to set in refugee camps. Even some Sikhs from Pakistan were also provided food and shelter in *Mano Majra*. Some Sikhs in Khaki made villagers cautious by telling them : "Never trust a Musalman... The last Guru had warned them that the Muslims had no loyalties. He was right. All through the Muslim period of Indian History, sons had imprisoned or killed their own fathers and brothers." (TP 106)

But the sense of belongingness is still reflected in the words of Imran Baksh, the leader of Muslims when one of the young men assured- "As long as we are here, nobody will dare touch you. We die first and then you look after yourselves (110), without suppressing his feelings said : "What we have to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers." (TP,110-111) While saying these words Imam Baksh crumbled but it was Meet Singh who handled him with care. The people turned emotional.

Gandhian Philosophy:

Here lies the real understanding of Gandhian religious philosophy. Gandhi's concept of religion dwells in the secularism and pluralism of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc. Gandhiji persuaded liberty of religion to every religion is quite distinct one. He doesn't mix up religion with socio cultural entities. According to him, religion at personal matter is "a matter of the heart. It is between a man and his God." "I swear by religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair." To him, the religions can there be as many in number of people. Religion, being a personal affair, "If we succeeded in confining it to the personal plane, all would be well in our political life." (Bhatt, 148). In a way religion should not only dissolve or transcend the soul but should also purify. In his words, "Religions are different roads converging upon one point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals." (ibid. .149) He instinctively says, "All religions teach us that two opposite forces act upon us and that the human endeavour consists in a series of eternal rejections and acceptances." What has been projected in the *Train to Pakistan* in the name of communal harmony. The soul struggling to achieve religion in a true sense undergoing a spiritual journey is called "self-realization or knowledge of self." (150) The way socio-cultural formations are projected in the novel, the true religious journey led them to their intense commitments of keeping their houses, cattles and all their belongings safe till the situation's normalcy and they come back after the so-called temporary wave of brutal partition. So, we can say that



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religion in true sense doesn't teach only commitments but also morality and morality always lead to the truth what is an ultimate philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhian philosophy of truth is also adopted by Khushwant Singh in the novel, like in the end, all had to accept *Mano Majra* Muslims' forever farewell, Iqbal Singh's being Sikh instead of declaring him as Iqbal Mohammed or Mohammed Iqbal, the truth of Juggut Singh that he hasn't killed Lala Ram Lal, even the bitter truth that Meet Singh had accepted and surrendered of Malli and his companions, the Sikh gang will certainly kill even their brothers and neighbours just because they are Muslims, apart from the other minor truths the major and chief truth of true love of Jugga and Nooran- the love between a Sikh and a Muslim girl-the love beyond social and racial bondages. Jugga, the notorious Sikh dacoit, in the end, becomes savior, who relieves all the Muslims, specially his pregnant Nooran into the train shredding the rope with the knife and his teeth and the train runs over him and goes to Pakistan. Thus, the violent Jugga failed Malli's plan of violence. This is how Nooran's love moved him to non-violence. The passionate love turned to national love/ love for nation.

The greatest truth and/or the post truth, who walks on the path of love, non-violence and truth has to always sacrifice. Here, the focal of the novel is Juggut Singh and the central character in the freedom struggle of India is M. K. Gandhi. Comparing the two figures, duo sacrificed their lives for the noble cause of liberation, if one at micro, another at macro level. Both of their sacrifices have been remarkable. Both of them were father figures- one of Nooran's child's and another one was declared to be of the nation. Fatherhood overcame to motherly love!

Thus, the research paper concludes on magnifying the pre-partition social, cultural and religious harmony converted into communal riots, caste and gender discrimination, social assaults, violence, religious fanaticism, the treacherous migration, massacre of fully loaded trains during the time of partition. The Gandhian utopia turned to horrified and terrified fobia.

The Padma Bhushan (1974) and Padma Vibhushan (2007) awardee Khushwant Singh has woven many of the aspects of Gandhian Gram Swaraj in *Mano Majra* where 'colonial imperialism' and 'industrial capitalism' don't exist. Exploitation of peasants has no space. The interdependence at social level has demolished their economic dependency. They had acquired the religion that welcomed all the religions. But this was the scene just before the partition. The reverted situation brought *Mano Majra* at centre, center of



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India and Pakistan, that *Mano Majra* which had no place in the map of India before partition. It became the hub of refugee camps. The blooming wellness of *Mano Majra* became the focal point of the heap of dead bodies carries by the ghost train/s. The locals became refugees overnight. Ultimately the melodious *Mano Majra* turned into chaotic camp of refugees.

Conclusion:

The resembling study of the two writers, historians, political and social reformers, lawyers, whose policy is honesty are the father figures- Khushwant Singh and Mahatma Gandhi, one of the builders of *Mano Majra* and another, the builder of the nation are witnesses of pre and post portioned India. Khushwant Singh, in his built-up nation '*Mano Majra*', the main character of the novel Juggut Singh, made him sacrificing his life for the noble cause of liberation and the leading figure of Indian freedom movement, Gandhiji sacrificed his life for the nation. Both the activists witnessed harmony and disharmony of India. Looking back to 1947, in the end, whether it is *Mano Majra* or India, in case of division, as far as Britishers' policy of 'divide and rule' is concerned, it can be said, 'life imitates art for more than art imitates life.' (1889 essay, The Decay of Lying, Oscar Wild).



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