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AN ESCAPE INTO THE INNERSCAPE: THE INADVERTENT SEARCH FOR AN
IMPROBABLE UTOPIA IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*

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ABSTRACT

The trauma and fear left in the minds of mankind due to the endless wars in history has always driven man to search for an escape route; an escape from the guilt and the deadly silence that prevails post war. From out of the chaotic meaninglessness, a search for life begins; a search for hope- a hope that there is still a reason to live.

It is said that the mind has its own defence mechanisms at times of crisis. Being a witness and a victim to the trauma during and post the partition of India, Khushwant Singh has made an escape route into the fictional town of Mano Majra through his novel *Train to Pakistan*; a deliberate attempt by an uneasy mind not only to preserve his memory but to fantasize and transcend his innerscape through the medium of art; to be specific, literature. As caught in the eye of a storm, Mano Majra is a town in the Indo- Pak border; unaffected by the confusion and chaos that surrounds it until a certain point. This paper focuses on the concept of an improbable Utopia and the author's quest for the same. His novel, in fact, is a call for the ideal from a land where no one even dares to dream.

Keywords: virtual reality, innerscape, Utopia, reality, hypertext, escape route

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In this postmodern world, the notion of reality presents itself as a dubious concept for man is in a dilemma as to what is real and what not. With the introduction of computer and technology, reality is no more just reality; a prefix is added- virtual. The concept of virtual reality questions the age-old notions concerning reality. The concept introduced by Antoin Artaud in 1938 while discussing the illusory nature of characters and objects in the theatre as *la realite virtuelle* in his book *Theatre and its Double* (1958), literally means reality which is virtual; or reality that is unreal; which in itself is an oxymoron.

Man's instinct to escape reality and to soar high into the world of fancy and imagination is as primitive as Genesis. Sigmund Freud postulated the idea into his theory of psychoanalysis naming it as the Pleasure Principle – an instinctual seeking of pleasure and avoiding pain. This presupposes the fact that virtual reality is an abstraction as ancient as nature

The postwar period had probably witnessed more of man's instinctual dive into a world of virtual reality. The conditions were such that the trauma and fear left in the minds of mankind due to the endless

wars in history has always driven man to search for an escape route; an escape from the guilt and the deadly silence that prevails post war. More than any other medium, literature proved to be the most effective means of escape. To dive into the world of literature is to walk alongside the author into his innerscape; into his world of virtual reality and be one among the many characters. Here, the real becomes the hyperreal and the text becomes the hypertext.

Being a witness and a victim to the trauma during and post the partition of India, Khushwant Singh, has apparently made an escape route into Mano Majra, a fictional town on the border of India and Pakistan, on the banks of river Sutlej. Singh shows how the villagers lived in a bubble, surrounded by mobs of Sikhs who hate Muslims and vice versa, while they had always lived together peacefully.

“It was as though no one had remembered to wind the alarm clock. Imam Baksh had waited for Meet Singh to make the first start. Meet Singh waited for the Mullah’s call to prayer before getting up.” (81)

Villagers were in the dark about the happenings of larger scope than the village outskirts, gaining much of their information through word of mouth. This made them extremely susceptible to outside views. The novel gives an account of the character of Iqbal who is quite puzzled by the countrymen’s code of morals. It was like the projection of rural society where everyone in the village is a relation irrespective of religion and loyalty to the village is the ultimate test. For instance, Meet Singh, the priest at Gurudwara of Mano Majra had no concerns about Iqbal staying at the temple. He says: “This is a Gurudwara, the Guru’s house, anyone may stay here.... Everyone is welcome... here next-door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to the Allah” (38- 9). Meet Singh was bothered not because Jugga, the protagonist, has committed a murder but because his hands were soiled with the blood of a fellow villager.

Jugga is a Badmash number ten (from the number of the police register in which names of bad characters are listed). But Jugga had run away, absconded. Also, some of the loot- a bag of bangles- was found in his courtyard. So we know who did it. This is not the first murder he committed- he has it in his blood. His father and grandfather were also dacoits and were hanged for murder. But they never robbed their own village folk. Juggut Singh has disgraced his family (43-4).

Infact Khushwant Singh has portrays a village of Mano Majra as an ideal locality- Almost like a Utopia; where religion, castes, or creeds are the least concerns of people. The whole village was in a dreamlike state and the bubble burst with the arrival of army troops announcing the inevitability and the dire need of Muslims moving to Pakistan.

“Early in September, the time schedule in Mano Majra started going wrong.... Ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra... a unit of soldiers arrived (81)”.

Trust gives way to suspicion; love and brotherhood transforms to revenge and hatred. When a train arrives, carrying the bodies of dead Sikhs, the village is transformed into a battlefield. Amidst the conflicting loyalties, people get lost in a series of violence and bloodshed.

The change was very subtle. It was as though the reader who has been lulled into a sense of peace and security was shocked into an epiphany which makes him aware of the fact that till then, what he witnessed and experienced as reality was no more real but a mere dream; a virtual reality; an improbable Utopia. The novel reinstates the fact that Mano Majra is nothing more than an escape into the innerscape of the author; the result of his inadvertent search for an improbable Utopia.

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