

# Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*: The Heteroglot World of Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus in a Sikh Village

Syrrina Ahsan Ali Haque

**Abstract**—This research aims to explore the heteroglot world of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus in a Sikh village in Khushwant Singh's novel, *Train to Pakistan*. The study examines the cohabitation of multi-religious groups in the space: the subcontinent, coexisting for centuries till sliced between two countries, India and Pakistan, at the time of partition of 1947. The objective of the research is to show how Singh's novel on the event of Partition has dialogic possibilities. The multiple voices in Singh's novel are distinct and provide multiple perspectives of coexistence and partition. This study fills the gap in research on partition literature of India and Pakistan. Novels from Indo-Pak have not been studied as dialogic sites referring to heteroglossia as a tool to explore multiple voices in a schismatic region.

M. M. Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism specifically Heteroglossia with reference to multi-religious voices is used as a tool. The historical data used highlights the significance of fiction as alternate Reality of a partitioned land and subsequently becoming a means of dialogue. Future researchers can explore various dimensions of Indo-Pak literature to study implications of geographical ruptures.

**Index Terms**—Coexistence, dialogic site, Heteroglossia, Indo-Pak literature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh describes the division of a unified India into a "Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan" [1], through an omniscient narrator. He recounts the event of deporting Muslims from a village, Mano Majra. The village has a Muslim, Hindu and Sikh population, bordering the newly created Pakistan and divided India. Singh's characters Hukum Chand, Iqbal and Juggut Singh show three sides of Partition, thus providing multiple perspectives. Hukum Chand is a Hindu magistrate and thus provides a Hindu perspective of the event of Partition. However, he is a government official so his values and actions depict human welfare rather than the bias he has against Muslims. Juggut, on the other hand, is a Sikh rogue. It is Iqbal who stands for all identities. His religious identity remains ambiguous and a point of contention till the end of the novel. He stands for all religious identities. The name, Iqbal, is shared by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. It is common to keep this name in all three sects. Thus, it is a shared symbol and is used against him as well as for him by the magistrate. He can become part of all three religious communities. Iqbal does not have to "say what Iqbal he was. He could be a Muslim, Iqbal Muhammad... a Hindu, Iqbal

Chand, or a Sikh, Iqbal Singh"[1]. In a prepartition India, this shared symbol is a tool, however, postpartition, such heteroglot symbols (carrying multiple voices) have to be assigned to one group.

This paper aims to explore the heteroglot village of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus as a means of dialogic possibilities among multi-religious groups with shared symbols. The study examines the cohabitation of multi-religious groups in the space- the subcontinent, coexisting for centuries till sliced between two countries, India and Pakistan, at the time of partition of 1947. The objective of the research is to show how novels on the event of Partition have dialogic possibilities. The multiple voices in Singh's novel are distinct and provide multiple perspectives of coexistence and partition. This study fills the gap in research on Partition literature of Indo-Pak. Novels from Indo-Pak have not been studied as dialogic sites referring to heteroglossia as a tool to explore multiple voices in a schismatic region.

This study aims to explore the following questions:

- 1) Can the depiction of shared existence with multiple voices in novels be a source of dialogue?
- 2) What are the similarities among multi-religious groups which can be instrumental in engendering and developing dialogue?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores Dialogism and Heteroglossia as explained by M. M. Bakhtin to analyze the multiple voices and the subsequent dialogic potential in Singh's novel. In this context, it is important to define a dialogic novel. It "recognizes the multiplicity of perspectives and voices". Since "each character has their own final word", which "relates to and interacts with those of other characters". Significantly, "discourse does not logically unfold but rather interacts", maintaining objectivity and never subscribing wholly to the "ideology of the author" [2] or a singular voice. "Heteroglossia in a discourse is diversity of style and voices" [2]. A single character/person has multiple voices and perspectives. With this theoretical background, the novel is thus explored.

The research methodology is inductive by using dialogism.

## III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Singh's novel is a remark on the event of Partition at the same time as an exploration of its repercussions on multi-religious groups living together for centuries. His characters show an innate desire to live peacefully with people belonging to different faiths. Singh shows the traits which

are common among religion rather than the differences. His character, Meet Singh, who is a peace loving caretaker of the Gurudwara, claims that, "Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here next door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah" [1]. Thus, Singh's attempt to show love and shared symbols is an attempt at a dialogue. As a fictional writer, writing about a fictional village he has created a world where dialogue is possible. On the contrary, historical discourse depicts the political and religious differences, focusing on strife and dialect. *Train to Pakistan*, however, presents multiple voices of characters showing multiple perspectives, each unique yet dialogic. In *Train to Pakistan*, Singh's characters interact and confer, yet maintain their distinct voices whether Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. Even Singh's voice does not supersede any voice at any point.

In the novel, Singh's characters belonging to different religions invoke God as an integrated divine entity but each God maintains his/His identity. The multi-religious group chants in unison, "Ya Allah. Wah Guru". This chant suggests the desire of the multi-religious group for communication to a divine entity common to all. The chant shows the potential of dialogue between the people as the divine entity becomes a symbol of communication. These religious symbols are a source of communication between the heterogeneous religions of the Indian populace. There is also a dialogue between the call to prayer of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Singh shows the possibility of coexistence when he describes the location of mosque in close affinity to the Gurudwara and the Hindu temple. The spatial closeness between the temple and mosque also suggests that the two communities lived in harmony. The places of worship instead of creating differences become instrumental in engaging people into a dialogically religious discourse. Subsequently, these religious symbols become the force behind division as well. At the same Gurudwara, where anyone could find refuge, plans of execution of Muslims are made. Singh portrays how this animosity is bred by outsiders but the villagers abandon their lifelong affiliation to their fellow villagers as soon as they are incited. The symbols of worship and the relics, which were never considered antagonistic, merely different prior to infiltration of the mob, are seen as malicious. Yet, there are shared symbols which keep the different communities connected.

Art is one such symbol. It provides a common and stronger ground for all religious groups, even at this time of antagonism and strife. Singh shows that Art is beyond boundaries of religion, cast, creed and culture. Hukum Chand's involvement with a Muslim singer introduces him to the humane side of the issue. He realizes that love and art are beyond religious encapsulation. As his character, Haseena, says "Singers are neither Hindu nor Muslim" [1], defying all borders. Thus, Singh's novel presents the human aspect of the dialectical event of partition. This human chain which connects the characters is dialogic in nature.

On the contrary, Singh shows that the geographical borders deter a shared existence. The division of a geographical land at the time of Partition marks the division of humanity. Singh's characters demonstrate a yearning for existence beyond the confinement of borders. His characters do not wish to kill in the name of partition; rather their love

for each other saves them. As Iqbal points out, "Now with this partition there is so much bloodshed going on someone must do something to stop it" [1]. Singh delineates how religion becomes a driving force in dividing and prosecuting people. He shows that it is the criminals which should be punished, not Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs. In Singh's view, the partition of India is not because of religious demographics instead it is the blind adherence to religious fanaticism that laid the foundations of separation. People had subtracted ethics from their religions and focused on the religious differences as a source of strife. He writes, that "Ethics, ..., has been carefully removed" from religion [1]. The people needed to approach the differences with a secular mindset, but, religious dogmas instilled by religious fanatics ignorant with the core quality of peace in religion, override the secular approach. Singh's novel depicts events that lead to riots among friends and neighbors. However, the omniscient narrator shows connections and linkages among the rioting groups stronger than the engendered differences. These connectors, "the singers", the call to prayer and common names within the community present dialogic possibilities through their conflicting and collating yet distinct voices, which are heteroglot.

The diversity of voices is present in single characters too. This is an inherent quality of the character Iqbal, he stands for all three religions as well as areligious ideals. Theoretically, Bakhtin urges the need for "diversity of languages" [2]. As Robinson writes, "an active and engaging understanding of other's discourse incorporates the other's perspective into one's frame", leading to possibility of "learning from incorporating the other's discourse making dialogue" in turn "possible" [2], thus, a novel becomes a "site of heteroglossia because it can represent multiple speech genres, debates of a time period and bring perspective into fuller understanding of each other" [2]. Singh's voice is seen as a depiction of all voices whereas maintaining his Sikh voice yearning for dialogue. As opposed to the historian Jaswant Singh, another Sikh historiographer, who writes that Sikhs demanded a separate state on the pretext that they owned most of the land in Punjab, Khushwant Singh as a fiction writer does not either support or uphold such demands. Jaswant Singh writes, "fearing that Gandhi was going to accept the League's demand for Pakistan, the Sikhs had come out with their demand for Sikhistan", with "areas where they had their toil turned waste land into rich agricultural farms, and in which the bulk of their landed property was located, should be constituted into a separate Sikh state" [3]. However, no such claim is made by either of the Sikh characters in the novel *Train to Pakistan*. In fact, villagers celebrate plurality of languages and beliefs.

Theoretically, each language and voice "embeds" "social and world view", leading to an "irreducible plurality of belief systems" [2]. Therefore, heteroglossia is "larger polyphony of [the] social and discursive" [2], defying predominance of one voice while showing the presence and cohabitation of incommensurable ideas, concepts and voices in a shared existence. It is this "incommensurability which gives dialogue its power", as "all subjects are able to speak and act autonomously" [2]. In *Train to Pakistan*, each character has a distinct voice and perspective regarding their

village, Mano Majra and India. United India provided an “abundance of dialogue, of coexistence of differences” with different religious groups living side by side each other, however, politics of dialectics, of “one center point” overarching all other opinions and ideas led to the division of geographical land as well as slitting of throats of neighbors and friends. The “rediscovery of dialogue is now conditioned on overcoming the imposition and enforcement of a social setting of monologue” [2], which is prominent in a historical discourse. The novel, *Train to Pakistan*, compiles various but distinct perspectives, approaches in which Singh projects that “each ideology can hold more salience in particular circumstances” [2]. This is extremely relevant to the concept of religion which Singh is depicting. His own religion, Sikhism originated in 1499. Guru Nanak, the founder of this religion, founded Sikhism, at a time when the “dominant religion of the country, Hinduism, was in conflict with one of the newest religions from the West, Islam. Sikhism developed as an alternate third path for Indians”. The word “Sikhism” comes from ‘Sikh’, which means ‘a strong and able disciple’. Sikhism is a combination of “Hinduism and Islam in its beliefs, practices, and traditions. Some of its aspects of its teaching on God, reflect Islam more than Hinduism, while other doctrines, such as karma, reflect Hinduism more than Islam” [4]. Thomas Patrick Hughes, a British missionary in his book, *Dictionaries of Islam*, writes, “Sikhism, in its inception, was intimately associated with Muhammadanism; and that it was intended as a means of bridging the gulf which separated the Hindus and the Muslims”. Hughes further reiterates, “The literature and traditions of Sikhism present a strange intermingling of Hindu and Muhammadan ideas...Nanak purposely intended his creed to be a compromise between those two great religions” [5]. Hence, Sikhism is an integration of two religions in the subcontinent. Subsequently, Singh shows how each religion can hold salience of its own. Singh depicts religious differences as well as similarities which contribute to inclusion of all without allocating predominance to one. This heteroglot village is an example of the greater India as it had been. *Train to Pakistan* is an endeavor at portraying these multiple yet distinct voices. Singh uses names like Iqbal, religious slogans “Ya Allah” and “Hey Wah Guru” [1], chants and symbols like the triangle which has the temple, the mosque and the Hindu landlords house to elevate plurality in voices, at the same time using connectors like, bridges, regional commonalities, common natural elements like animal imagery and hybrid relations between different ethnic or religious groups to incorporate differences as a means to address these differences. These voices can be categorized as four distinct voices in the text, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and the author’s omniscient voice of the animals, the village and the train, which in turn carry multiple voices. However, these voices are connected by an unimposing and anodyne voice of Iqbal, which subsumes supremacy of any voice. He can only “curse his luck for having a name like Iqbal” wondering “Where on earth except in India would a man’s life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed?” [1]. He would have proclaimed proudly, “I have no religion” before the arrest but he subsumes the voices of all and adopts his Sikh identity to save himself. In the same

way, the heteroglot world of Mano Majra becomes alive to these multiple voices and the shared symbols which connect these voices, like, the animals, hybrid relations and bridges, new religious symbols and loyalty towards villagers.

*Train to Pakistan* provides that debatable perspective, opening dialogue rather than closing it with the depiction of cohabitation. In this heteroglot novel, the author is given a distinct voice too. Though, Iqbal is a Sikh, his name and the fact that he is circumcised and his dress beguile others from discerning his religious identity. Singh, uses this character to voice his own opinion. Iqbal, does not stand for any specific identity, yet he has an Indian identity which is an amalgamation of West and East. He contemplates on the condition of India, which “is constipated with a lot of humbug. Take religion. For the Hindu, it means little beside caste and cow-protection. For the Muslim, circumcision and kosher meat. For the Sikh, long hair and hatred of the Muslim... Ethics, which should be the kernel of a religious code, has been carefully removed” [1]. All races, ethnicities and religious groups lived in harmony for centuries till the outsiders, The British, come and disrupt the harmony. They divide the communities to establish their hold. It is easier to rule divided subjects than a unified body of people. As Ayesha Jalal declares in *The Pity of Partition*, at the time of Partition “there were perpetrators and victims of a murderous orgy in 1947 among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the midst of the abdication of all sense of responsibility by managers of a departing colonial state” [6]. This ruling party used the same religious tools for division which had been employed as means of integration. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims revered their places of worship. They upheld their religious symbols above all material aspects of the world. However, living together for centuries these symbols diluted and emerged hybrid in certain areas. Eventually, “Britain’s irresponsibly hasty withdrawal from India” [7] dispersed this integrated and hybrid coexistence. Singh’s novel attempts to show integration as an embedded feature of shared existence. He shows how hybridity leading to hybrid love contributes to this integration.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Singh’s characters and their distinct voices portray the possibility of dialogue in their actions. Juggut Singh’s action of saving hundreds of Muslims on the bridge, in order to save his Muslim lover, Nooran, is Singh’s endeavor to show dialogue is present in hybrid love. As Nooran carries a Sikh child in her womb she is a harbinger of Sikh Muslim entente. Juggut chants the unknown religious mantra while cutting the rope across the bridge which could have killed hundreds in the train to Pakistan. Hukum Chand, relying on the power of love, orchestrates this action to save humanity and the Muslim prostitute. Thus, Singh’s novel depicts possibilities of interaction and integration through the distinctness of each character’s voice and actions.

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**Syrrina Ahsan Ali Haque** was born in Lahore, on Feb. 8, 1971. She has completed her PhD coursework and is currently working on her thesis. The paper is a part of her research on dialogic possibilities in partition novels. She completed her MPhil degree from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore in 2010 and was enrolled in the doctoral program at University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. Her major field of study is English literature.

She was placed on the principal's roll of honor list for acquiring the highest CGPA in MPhil. She is teaching MPhil, masters and undergraduate classes at Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore School of Economics and GCU in Lahore, Pakistan. Her book, *Sand in the Castle: A Collection of Short Stories*, was published in USA in 2010. It is taught as supplementary reading at universities. She has presented papers at conferences and represented writers at conventions in Pakistan and abroad.

Ms. Haque has represented writers from Pakistan at the University of Manchester and Kinnaird College for Women apart from multiple schools and universities in Pakistan.