

Train to Pakistan

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A short novel written a few years after partition. It tells about a little village by the border in which the Singhs own the land and the Muslims till it as tenants. Everything is of course peaceful and has been so for generations. A murder is committed one night and the local thug, a young Singh guy living with his mother, is taken into custody, having trouble commanding an alibi as he had been seeing at the time his lover a local Muslim girl. At about the same time the village is visited by a young man from the New Delhi sent out by the Communist party to teach awareness to the masses. He too is taken into custody as being a suspected Muslim troublemaker. One night a train crosses over the border from Pakistan. Unlike the usual trains there are no crowds of desperate humans on its roofs or between its cars. The inside, however, is stacked with dead bodies, the victims of a massacre. The villagers are asked to provide fuel and oil so as to enable a mass cremation. Somewhat later another silent train arrives, this time the dead bodies are simply thrown into a ditch and buried. The authorities worry about the security of the Muslims in the village and advise a temporary evacuation until things calm down. The Singh people promise to take care of their belongings in the meantime. However those are curdled off and then allowed to be looted by some Singh thugs of a different village, which actually can be connected to the murder, but for some reasons have been set loose by the local magistrate. The Muslim inhabitants are later to be moved across the border as a further measure of precaution. Singh activists find out about it and come to the village to suggest that the Singh villagers show their manhood by revenging the deaths of their brothers on the other side. Some people are moved to take up the challenge. The Communist guy from the big town, who has been released along with the local thug, happens to be present and is aghast. He pleads with the local elder to stop the whole thing. But the elder only shrugs it off, what can he do, he is powerless, he has no influence. They might listen to the young guy instead. But when it comes to the decisive action the young idealistic activist falters, because after all he senses it would be a futile act, a good deed never to be recognised could as well not be done. And as it will surely just involve a senseless sacrifice, namely that of his own precious life. Instead it turns out to be the thug who sacrifices his life in a heroic act of cutting down the suspended rope meant to decapitate those on the roof of the passing train. He is shot down to his death as he desperately tries to cut it off. And the novel ends.

As the summary of the plot reveals a tightly woven tale, competently executed, with much so called local color, yet of course not great literature in any sense, but a useful and illuminating document from the time.

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