

KARMA

by Khushwant Singh, 1950

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) was an esteemed Indian author and journalist. His many novels and short stories often dealt with hypocrisy. He was from a Sikh family that was greatly influenced by Partition, and this is the theme of his best-known novel, *Train to Pakistan* (1956). Singh was also greatly invested in politics, and from 1980 to

1986 he was a member of the upper house of the Indian parliament. Some of his other well-known pieces of fiction are *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), and *The Company of Women* (1999). "Karma" is from the short story collection *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* (1950).



Khushwant Singh

BEFORE YOU READ

01

How are Indian trains compartmentalized? Do some research.

Karma

Sir Mohan Lal looked at himself in the mirror of a first-class waiting room at the railway station. The mirror was obviously made in India. The red oxide at its back had come off at several places and long lines of translucent glass cut across its surface. Sir Mohan smiled at the mirror with an air of pity and patronage.

'You are so very much like everything else in this country, inefficient, dirty, indifferent,' he murmured.

The mirror smiled back at Sir Mohan.

'You are a bit of all right, old chap,' it said. 'Distinguished, efficient – even handsome. That neatly trimmed moustache – the suit from Savile Row, the carnation in the buttonhole – the aroma of eau de cologne, talcum powder, and scented soap all about you! Yes, old fellow, you are a bit of all right.'

Sir Mohan threw out his chest, smoothed his Balliol tie for the umpteenth time and waved a goodbye to the mirror.

He glanced at his watch. There was still time for a quick one.

'Koi hai?'

A bearer in white livery appeared through a wire gauze door.

translucent gennemsigtig

pity medlidenhed
patronage nedlidenhed
inefficient ineffektiv

indifferent ligegyldig

Savile Row en gade i det centrale London, der er særligt kendt for sine herre-skræddere

carnation nelike
talcum powder hvidt pulver af fintmalet talk el. fedtsten der bl.a. bruges på huden for at opsuge fugtighed og mindske friktion

Balliol tie et slips fra Balliol College i Oxford

umpteenth time for 117. gang

koi hai? hindi for 'Er der nogen?'

livery uniform, tjenerdragt
gauze trådnæt

ek chota h
cane chair
ruminate

betel leaf
hvis næ
som be
smidlet
sari en in

bangle (r
bearer d
baerer

coolie ul
særligt

zenana l
kvinde

hoist løf

brass r
tiffin ru
fiere l
amble
hawker
replenis

chapat
sen
mål
pickle
grø
ker
edr
haunc
vizier
he
barris
nativ

ek chota hindi for 'en lille en'.
cane chair kurvestol
ruminate gruble

betel leaf betel-blad (plante hvis nødder og blade bruges som bestanddel af nydelse-smidlet 'bete').
sari en indisk kvindedragt

bangle (metal)armbånd
bearer drager (person der bærer de rejsendes bagage)

coolie ufaglært arbejder særligt om en drager

zenana hindi for 'til/for kvinder'.

hoist løfte

brass messing, metal
tiffin rund stålmadkasse i flere lag
amble lunte
hawker gadesælger
replenish fylde op igen

chapati indisk fladbrød, der serveres med næsten alle måltider
pickle blanding af små grøntsager el. grøntsagsstykker i en stærkt krydret eddikelage
haunches bagdel
vizier vesir (titel for minister el. højtstående embedsmand)
barrister sagfører
native indfødt, lokal

illiterate analfabetisk

anglicized gøre engelsk
Hindustani et andet ord for 'hindi'
nocturnal natlig

emit afgive, udsende

belch bøvse

'Ek chota,' ordered Sir Mohan, and sank into a large cane chair to drink and ruminate.

Outside the waiting room Sir Mohan Lal's luggage lay piled along the wall. On a small grey steel trunk Lachmi, Lady Mohan Lal, sat chewing a betel leaf and fanning herself with a newspaper. She was short and fat and in her middle forties. She wore a dirty white sari with a red border. On one side of her nose glistened a diamond nose ring and she had several gold bangles on her arms. She had been talking to the bearer until Sir Mohan had summoned him inside. As soon as he had gone, she hailed a passing railway coolie.

'Where does the zenana stop?'

'Right at the end of the platform.'

The coolie flattened his turban to make a cushion, hoisted the steel trunk on his head, and moved down the platform. Lady Lal picked up her brass tiffin carrier and ambled along behind him. On the way she stopped by a hawker's stall to replenish her silver betel leaf case, and then joined the coolie. She sat down on her steel trunk (which the coolie had put down) and started talking to him.

'Are the trains very crowded on these lines?'

'These days all trains are crowded, but you'll find room in the zenana.'

'Then I might as well get over the bother of eating.'

Lady Lal opened the brass carrier and took out a bundle of cramped chapatis and some mango pickle. While she ate, the coolie sat opposite her on his haunches, drawing lines in the gravel with his finger.

'Are you travelling alone, sister?'

'No, I am with my master, brother. He is in the waiting room. He travels first class. He is a vizier and a barrister, and meets so many officers and Englishmen in the trains – and I am only a native woman. I can't understand English and don't know their ways, so I keep to my zenana inter-class.'

Lachmi chatted away merrily. She was fond of a little gossip and had no one to talk to at home. Her husband never had any time to spare for her. She lived in the upper storey of the house and he on the ground floor. He did not like her poor illiterate relatives hanging about his bungalow, so they never came. He came up to her once in a while at night and stayed for a few minutes. He just ordered her about in anglicized Hindustani, and she obeyed passively. These nocturnal visits had, however, borne no fruit.

The signal came down and the clanging of the bell announced the approaching train. Lady Lal hurriedly finished off her meal. She got up, still licking the stone of the pickled mango. She emitted a long, loud belch as she went to the public tap to rinse her mouth and wash her hands. After washing she dried her mouth and hands with the loose end of her sari, and walked back to her steel trunk, belching and thanking the gods for the favour of a filling meal.

The train steamed in. Lachmi found herself facing an almost empty inter-class zenana compartment next to the guards van, at the tail end of the train. The rest of the train was packed. She heaved her squat, bulky frame through the door and found a seat by the window. She produced a two anna bit from a knot in her sari and dismissed the coolie. She then opened her betel case and made herself two betel leaves charged with a red and white paste, minced betel nuts and cardamoms. These she thrust into her mouth till her cheeks bulged on both sides. Then she rested her chin on her hands and sat gazing idly at the jostling crowd on the platform.

The arrival of the train did not disturb Sir Mohan Lal's sangfroid. He continued to sip his Scotch and ordered the bearer to tell him when he had moved the luggage to a first-class compartment. Excitement, bustle, and hurry were exhibitions of bad breeding, and Sir Mohan was eminently well bred. He wanted everything 'tickety-boo' and orderly. In his five years abroad, Sir Mohan had acquired the manners and attitudes of the upper classes. He rarely spoke Hindustani. When he did, it was like an Englishman's – only the very necessary words and properly anglicized. But he fancied his English, finished and refined at no less a place than the University of Oxford. He was fond of conversation, and like a cultured Englishman he could talk on almost any subject – books, politics, people. How frequently had he heard English people say that he spoke like an Englishman!

Sir Mohan wondered if he would be travelling alone. It was a Cantonment and some English officers might be on the train. His heart warmed at the prospect of an impressive conversation. He never showed any sign of eagerness to talk to the English as most Indians did. Nor was he loud, aggressive, and opinionated like them. He went about his business with an expressionless matter-of-factness. He would retire to his corner by the window and get out a copy of *The Times*. He would fold it in a way in which the name of the paper was visible to others while he did the crossword puzzle. *The Times* always attracted attention. Someone would like to borrow it when he put it aside with a gesture signifying 'I've finished with it.' Perhaps someone would recognize his Balliol tie which he always wore while travelling. That would open a vista leading to a fairyland of Oxford colleges, masters, dons, tutors, boat races, and rugger matches. If both *The Times* and the tie failed, Sir Mohan would 'Koi hai' his bearer to get the Scotch out. Whisky never failed with Englishmen. Then followed Sir Mohan's handsome gold cigarette case filled with English cigarettes. English cigarettes in India? How on earth did he get them? Sure he didn't mind? And Sir Mohan's understanding smile – of course he didn't. But could he use the Englishman as a medium to commune with his dear old England? Those five years of grey bags and gowns, of sports blazers and mixed doubles, of dinners at the Inns of Court and nights with Piccadilly prostitutes.

squat kort og tyk
bulky stor og tung

anna indisk møntfod – en 16.-del af en rupee
dismiss sende bort

minced finthakket

idly ubeskæftiget, dovent
jostling tæt befærdet, skubber til hinanden

sangfroid koldblodighed

exhibition tegn på, demonstration

breeding avl, opdragelse
'tickety-boo' mægtig fin, i orden

Cantonment militærforlægning

prospect udsigt, mulighed
The Times avis udgivet dagligt i Storbritanien

vista udsigt
don (ældre) universitetslærer
tutor universitetslærer
rugger rugby

sordid amoralsk

obese meget fed

gait måde at gå på
dismay fortvivle

haversack rygsæk

inebriated beruset

bedding sengetøj

Five years of a crowded glorious life. Worth far more than the forty-five in India with his dirty, vulgar countrymen, with sordid details of the road to success, or nocturnal visits to the upper storey and all too brief sexual acts with obese old Lachmi, smelling of sweat and raw onion.

Sir Mohan's thoughts were disturbed by the bearer announcing the installation of the Sahib's luggage in a first-class coupe next to the engine. Sir Mohan walked to his coupe with a studied gait. He was dismayed. The compartment was empty. With a sigh he sat down in a corner and opened the copy of *The Times* he had read several times before.

Sir Mohan looked out of the window down the crowded platform. His face lit up as he saw two English soldiers trudging along, looking in all the compartments for room. They had their haversacks slung behind their backs and walked unsteadily. Sir Mohan decided to welcome them even though they were entitled to travel only second class. He would speak to the guard.

One of the soldiers came up to the last compartment and stuck his face through the window. He surveyed the compartment and noticed the unoccupied berth.

"Ere, Bill," he shouted, "one 'ere."

His companion came up, also looked in and looked at Sir Mohan.

"Get the nigger out," he muttered to his companion.

They opened the door, and turned to the half-smiling, half-protesting Sir Mohan.

"Reserved!" yelled Bill.

"Janta - Reserved. Army - Fauj!" exclaimed Jim, pointing to his khaki shirt.

"Ek dum jao - get out!"

"I say. I say, surely," protested Sir Mohan in his Oxford accent. The soldiers paused. It almost sounded like English, but they knew better than to trust their inebriated ears. The engine whistled and the guard waved his green flag.

They picked up Sir Mohan's suitcase and flung it onto the platform. Then followed his Thermos flask, suitcase, bedding and *The Times*. Sir Mohan was livid with rage.

"Preposterous, preposterous," he shouted, hoarse with anger. "I'll have you arrested - guard, guard!"

Bill and Jim paused again. It did sound like English, but it was too much of the King's for them.

"Keep yer ruddy mouth shut!" And Jim struck Sir Mohan flat on the face.

The engine gave another short whistle and the train began to move. The soldiers caught Sir Mohan by the arms and flung him out of the train. He reeled backwards, tripped on his bedding, and landed on the suitcase.

"Toodle-oo!"

Sir Mohan's feet were glued to the earth and he lost his speech. He stared at the lighted windows of the train going past him in quickening

tempo. The tail end of the train appeared with a red light and the guard standing in the open doorway with the flags in his hands.

In the inter-class zenana compartment was Lachmi, fair and fat, on whose nose the diamond nose ring glistened against the station lights.

5 Her mouth was bloated with betel saliva which she had been storing up to spit as soon as the train had cleared the station. As the train sped past the lighted part of the platform, Lady Lal spat and sent a jet of red dribble flying across like a dart.

saliva spyt

WHILE YOU READ



01

How are the appearances of Mohan and Lachmi described?

03

How does Mohan distinguish himself from other Indians?

02

How does Lachmi interact with the coolie, and what does that say about her?

04

How do the soldiers treat Mohan?

AFTER YOU READ



01

Characterize Mohan and Lachmi. You may include Mohan talking to the mirror and the following quote: "He came up to her once in a while at night and stayed for a few minutes. He just ordered her about in anglicized Hindustani, and she obeyed passively. These nocturnal visits had, however, borne no fruit." (p. 105, l. 35)

05

There are some Hindi words in this short story. Discuss why you think Khushwant Singh has chosen to include words which are foreign to the English reader. You may include the term 'the empire writes back' (323)

02

Read about 'mimic men' (109) and relate the term to this story.

06

Comment on the ending.

03

Characterize the narrator with examples from the text.

07

What is the theme of this story?

04

Comment on the kind of English the two soldiers speak.

08

What kind of India is portrayed in this text?

A What does it say about the soldiers?

B Why do you think the soldiers can't understand Mohan's English? Discuss.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Make a reading of the text based on historical criticism (see 'Historical Criticism' on page 330).

Make a reading of the text where you include Homi K. Bhabha's theory of 'Mimic Men' as well as Edward W. Said's theory of Orientalism (see p. 315).

Make a reading of the text based on postcolonial theory (see 'Postcolonial Theory' on page 322) and postcolonial criticism (see 'Postcolonial Criticism' on page 336).

Mimic Men

In 1994, professor Homi K. Bhabha published an essay called "Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse". In this essay, Bhabha explains how the British in colonized nations like India relied on a class of Indians who could represent the British in opinions, intellect, and morals. The British, therefore, had to teach these representatives how to speak and act English. Unfortunately for the Indians, they were not considered as such since they were not English – they were only mimicking the English.

Even though these 'mimic men' did not share the power of the English colonizers, Bhabha argues that they, nonetheless, posed a threat to colonialism because as the Indian acted and spoke English, the dichotomy of 'them' and 'us' – 'colonizer' and 'colonized' was harder to uphold.

In 1836, Lord Macaulay (British historian and Whig politician), president of the Council of Education in India, gave his speech "Minute on Indian Education", in which he explains the need for an Indian workforce who could help carry out the British ideals:

"I feel with them that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population."

— **T. B. Macaulay**

excerpt from "Minute on Indian Education",
2 February 1835