

**K**hushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan*, written in 1956 is an early novel about the times and events when the looming colours were the red and the orange of blood and fire, and the grey of smoke and ashes.

In about 200 pages, Singh recreates the lull and the storm that swept the living humans turned brutes and the dead humans across swollen waters. He achieved a fame with this novel he hasn't quite matched in his writing since then.

Four decades later, in the 50th year of the Partition — concomitant with its anniversary of Independence — comes a film on the novel by Pamela Rooks, who was born after it was written. But her documentaries on Punjab caught in recent turbulence seem to have given her a feel of the place and its men and women. In an important but significant creative decision she has used Hindustani and Punjabi as the twin languages of her film, built around people in a border village of Punjab, who have lived together for generations but are torn asunder by communal passions in the summer and rainy months of 1947.

Singh's novel is so powerful and gripping that Rooks has not found it necessary to make any major changes in the story for dramatic purposes. However, in her screen adaptation of the novel she has presented the story from the point of view of Hukum Chand (Mohan Agashe), the ageing magistrate, whose pastimes are whisky in the evening and women for the night.

Rooks' casting of Nirmal Pandey as Juggut Singh alias Jagga, the tall and burly Sikh criminal whose sensual love for the Muslim girl Nooran (Smriti Mishra) redeems him, is competent. But what impresses one is the casting of Agashe as the ageing, paunchy magistrate who fits Khushwant Singh's description of the debauched Hukum Chand perfectly.

## FILM REVIEW

# From Print to Film

## *Train To Pakistan*

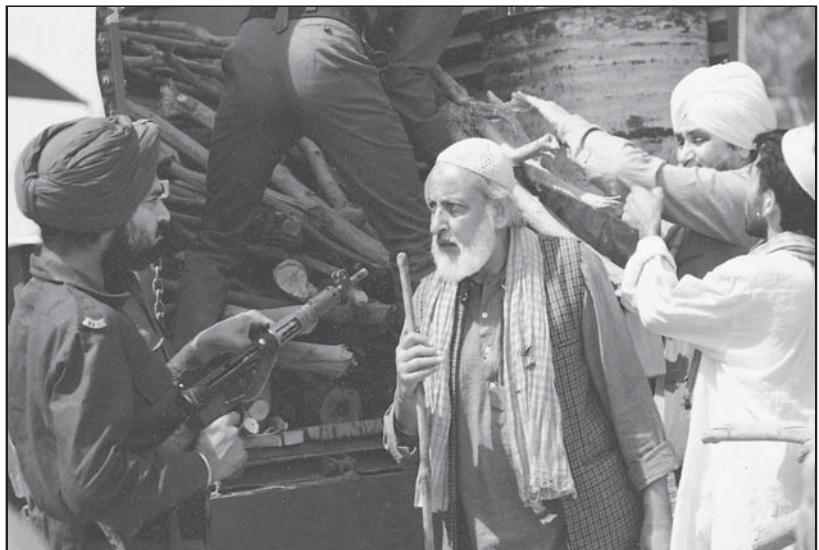
**Director : Pamela Rooks**

**Review: ○ Sudhir Bose**

And the ambivalence that Rooks gives the magistrate-singing girl relationship renders the bureaucrat's character a complexity not so noticeable in the novel; there he is almost crude in his debauchery. Also, she has shown imagination in casting M.S. Sathyu as Nooran's father and Suresh Jindal as the *granthi* (Sikh priest) in the village gurudwara. Sathyu's claim to fame is *GaramHawa* (1973) — a touching tale of rootedness and getting uprooted by the hot winds of conflicting passions—and Jindal is best known as the producer of Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (1977), the story of the decadent last nawab of Awadh and his courtiers unable to ward off the aggressive designs of the British

in the last century. The casting of Sathyu and Jindal, then, becomes part of cinematic lore in a film set around the departure of the British from the subcontinent and the communal frenzy that followed.

A problem with the film is that it is in colour. Even Rooks' first film, *Miss Beaty's Children* (1992), has a colourful, almost picture-postcard quality, although colour does not seem out of place there. But *Train To Pakistan*, a tale of murder and arson awesome in its suggestivity, is a different matter. A trainload of refugees followed by those of dead bodies are grim scenes — the colour of gore. How inappropriate colour is to the film is made obvious by two scenes. The first is a monochrome



long shot of bloated human bodies floating down the swollen river watched by numbed inhabitants of Mano Majra in moonlight, and the second is the last scene of the film, with the train heading for Pakistan without any lights in a dark night. Jagga is desperately cutting the horizontal rope across the first span of the bridge which forces the Muslim passengers down from the rooftop of the train to the killers waiting for them—and Nooran—in the compartments. These two scenes leave their impact on us through their monochrome images. Colour was redundant in these night scenes where darkness becomes a metaphor.

Spielberg's *Schindler's List* is the outstanding example of the creative use of black-and-white camera work for a story of people who escaped the holocaust; and *Train To Pakistan* is no less a story of holocaust. While the more intimate outdoor images in Rooks' film are unable to mitigate the grimness of the enveloping darkness, the long-shot images—especially of gore, arson and cremation—are too numbing for colour. The horror of a burial scene, with no more wood and kerosene available to cremate the dead, is brought home through the shocked eyes of a villager. In all these scenes Rooks directs our responses

so thoroughly that we become one with the numbed villagers.

Nevertheless, *Train To Pakistan* is a courageous attempt by Rooks to hark back to the trauma and stress of times when age-old ties suddenly didn't mean anything and human beings had turned brutes. More than a cathartic, the film has a numbing effect. Inevitably, it will be compared with Govind Nihalani's *Tamas* (1987), but in Nihalani's film the canvas is larger and the focus is different.

Professor William Walsh, an authority on Commonwealth literature, has described Khushwant

Singh's novel as "a study of the communal massacres of 1947 (that) is, in spite of them, dry and cool. It is a tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people. It goes forward in a trim, athletic way, and its unemphatic voice makes a genuinely human comment." It goes to the credit of Rooks that in transforming the novel into film she retains these attributes. In particular, she doesn't take sides and the film is marked by an economy of style and 'unemphatic voice' even as its images are shot through with underlying tension. □

## Reading

*Maybe he was drunk*  
*Maybe he was too sober*  
*Maybe he was sleepy*  
*Maybe he had just woken*  
*Maybe he was hungry*  
*Maybe he had overeaten*  
*Maybe he was old*  
*Maybe he hadn't grown up*  
*Maybe he was weary*  
*Maybe he had too much energy*  
*Maybe he was right*  
*Maybe he was wrong*  
*Maybe he was blind*  
*Maybe he just couldn't read*

K.G. Kumar



A new edition of

## In Search of Answers

Indian Women's Voices from Manushi

Editors: MADHU KISHWAR & RUTH VANITA

A selection of the most bold and eloquent reports that appeared in Manushi during its early years. The causes of women's oppression are analysed in a historical perspective, with the political, social and economic dimensions skilfully related. The book has an all-India perspective, with studies based on different regions, castes and communities.

260 pages ♦ Hardbound ♦ Price:  
Rs 280 (India)

Third Edition: Manohar Publishers  
& Distributors, New Delhi, 1996

Available from Manushi

Send payment by cheque,  
draft or MO in the name of

Manushi Trust, C-174,  
Lajpat Nagar-1, New Delhi 110024

**Special Discount Price for  
Manushi Subscribers: Rs 250/-**