

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.

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 Saville Row with the carnation in the button-hole—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.

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 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 chapatties and some mango pickle. While she ate, the coolie sat opposite her, 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 barrister, and meets 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.

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 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 guard’s 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 betelnuts 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 sang-froid. 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. 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 Bailiol 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. Five years of a crowded glorious life.

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.

'Janata-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 into 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. 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.

- Khushwant Singh

About the story -

The story 'Karma' takes the reader back to the colonial pre-Independence India, when many western-educated Indians prided themselves on their superior Western culture and demeanour. In this story Sir Mohan Lal, an anglophile, puts on airs about his Oxford background and perfect English accent, only to be humiliated by a pair of ill-educated, drunken and boorish English soldiers' who not only dislodge him from his reserved berth but first strike him on the face, and then fling him out of the train. This traumatic experience shocks him into realizing his true identity.

Written by Khushwant Singh, a well-known novelist, short story writer and journalist, the story is dramatic, vigorous and witty. The style is lucid and forthright.

Glossary

translucent: allowing light to pass through

carnation: a flower of bright, rosy, pink colour

Saville Row: a fashionable shopping centre in London

aroma: sweet smell, fragrance

eau de cologne: a perfumed toilet water

Balliol: An Oxford college founded in 1263 by John de Baliol (d. 1269)
 umpteen: many
 glistened: shined
 ruminate: meditate
 zenana: ladies' compartment
 hoisted: raised
 ambled along: moved along at an easy pace
 hawker: a person who sells things by going from place to place
 gravel: small stones
 vizier: an important official in past
 replenish: fill up again
 anglicized: made something English in character
 squat: short and thick
 sangfroid: undisturbed poise and calmness in difficult circumstances
 The Times: leading British newspaper published in London
 vista: prospect, possibility
 dons: lecturers
 boat races: annual boat races between Oxford and Cambridge universities
 rugger: rugby football
 blazer: loose-fitting jacket, sometimes in the colours of a team, club, school or college
 clanging: making a bond ringing sound
 emitted: sent out
 belch: to let air come up noisily from stomach and out through mouth
 Piccadilly: A street in central London, extending from Hyde Park eastwards to Piccadilly Circus, noted for its fashionable shops, hotels, and restaurants
 Cardamom: dried seeds used in cooking as a spice (Ilaaychi)
 bulged: stuck out
 commune: to share feelings without speaking
 gait: a way of walking
 slung: threw in a careless way
 mattered: spoke something in a quiet voice that was difficult to hear
 unoccupied: (here) empty
 yelled: shouted loudly
 reeled: moved because you were hit
 protested: opposition
 preposterous: unreasonably annoying and shocking
 glued: joined two things together
 stared: looked at for a long time
 tempo: speed or rhythm
 saliva: liquid that is produced in mouth that helps to swallow food
 tripped: fell down

Inns of Court: law societies in London having the sole right of admitting persons to the bar
 coupe: a railway compartment for two passengers
 trudging along: walking wearily
 haversack: a canvas bag carried on the back or over the shoulder
 'Ere: here
 yer: your
 nigger: here, a coloured man (or a negro)
 Ek dumjao: get out at once (Hindi)
 inebriated: drunken
 livid: of the colour of lead, blue-grey (here, it means furiously, angry)
 the King's: the King's English, standard English
 chap: informal and old fashioned man
 bother: trouble
 ruddy: here it means 'bloody' (slang)
 bloated: swollen, stuffed, full
 dribble: a drop or a small trickling stream
 dart: quick, sudden, forward movement

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

- Khushwant Singh was not a
 (a) journalist (b) novelist
 (c) short-story writer (d) politician
- Balliol is a/an
 (a) Oxford college (b) Christ college
 (c) Rodgee's college (d) a famous university in London
- He is a vizier ... Who is a vizier?
 (a) Sir Mohan Lal (b) Bill (c) Jim (d) Lachmi

(B) Answer the following questions in about 10-15 words each:

- Where was Sir Mohan Lal's luggage lay piled up?
- 'Are you travelling alone, sister?' Who speaks these words and to whom?
- 'She was fond of a little gossip and had no one to talk to at home.' To whom does these lines refer to?
- Who flings Mohan Lal out of the train?

(C) Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

- Comment on Sir Mohan Lal's manner of speech.
- What is Mohan Lal's attitude towards Indian culture?
- Write a note on Sir Mohan Lal's dress.

4. What was Lachmi's attitude towards the coolie?
5. Why did Lachmi travel in the Zenana and not with her husband in the first class?

(D) Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. Bring out the significance of the title 'Karma'.
2. Who is an anglophile in the story? Describe the characteristics that make him an anglophile.

(E) Say whether the following statements are true or false. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False:

1. Sir Mohan Lal in Khushwant Singh's story 'Karma' is an anglophile. []
2. Sir Mohan Lal and his wife Lachmi (in Khushwant Singh's Karma) lived in the upper storey of the house. []
3. The story 'Karma' is about post-independence India. []
4. Sir Mohan had decided to welcome Jim and Bill. []