

# Encounters with Difference in Krishan Chander's play *Darwaze Khol Do*

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## **Introduction**

Krishan Chander was part of the movement associated with the Progressive Writers' Association 1935. His play, *Darwaze Khol Do* (*Open the Doors*) was first published in 1963. In the concluding remarks of the playwright, "Ikhtetamiya (2)" (pg 59-64) printed along with the play, Krishan Chander shares his opinion about the state of diversity and the minorities in free India, almost two decades after independence which helps set the structure of feeling that the play is set in and the horizon of expectations that it arises from.

Krishan Chander, in the concluding remarks, writes about the great diversity in the country, in terms of religions, faiths, languages, cultures, traditions and customs. The disagreements between communities based on these diverse differences have been taken advantaged of by 'outsiders'. The most relevant and recent incident that he quotes there is the British

Raj which managed to rule over the entire country by playing on the existing communal divisions. He discusses how the use of military force or political pressure would not be ideal to achieve unity of any sorts as homogenisation, especially of faith, would never be a solution to overcome differences, *“in sab par taqat ka is-steam roller chala kar ek kar dena qatai’ na-mumkin hai, kyunki ye log patthar ke tukde nahi hai. Insaan hai jo behtar sirf behtar halaat se behtar banaye ja sakte hai”*<sup>1</sup> (pg 60). Ashoka and Akber both, he points out, led India through prosperous times and their success lay beyond their military conquests, as both gave up war and focused on the well-being of their subjects. Ashoka had become Buddhist, while Akber was Muslim and both had a majority of subjects from faiths other than their own and were known to be very tolerant rulers too. Krishan Chander links this presence of plurality to the prosperity of the nation in their times. He also quotes friends of his, who keep wishing the country had just one faith so that maybe partition would not have been a reality, or so that the communal divide in the nation would cease to exist, but Krishan Chander draws attention here to the fact that the beauty of the nation, comes from the many differences that have always existed within it. The idea of enforcing one religion seems to be a popular one at that time, but Krishan Chander is strongly against it. He talks of the impracticalities of this sort of solution by reminding us of the problem of untouchability. India has a huge group of people that wish to be integrated into mainstream society and religion, but haven’t been given the acceptance they need to make it a reality. He asks what then is the point of desiring a singular faith when there’s an entire community wanting to join, but not being allowed to. According to him, it is the responsibility of the majority to ensure that the rights of the minorities are enjoyed by them if they wish to create a progressive, equal and unified society. He gives us the example of Hitler’s Germany to illustrate how discrimination, even when practised with the belief that it will make the

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<sup>1</sup>Homogenizing these people with the power of a steam roller is absolutely impossible, since people aren’t pieces of rock. These are people, who can only be made better under better circumstances.

nation better, becomes the main cause of the nation's downfall. He ends his essay, that contextualises his play, by reminding his readers that the greater problems in the world will not be solved through hatred and misgivings held towards one another, but by working through the differences. Poverty and unemployment need cooperation and collective efforts at equitable distribution, not hatred to be overcome.

The theme of the play aligns well with the other writings of the PWA writers, that were also about existing social issues and promoting diversity, pluralism and the acceptance of other cultures and faiths etc, as they strove to make a difference through their writing. Discrimination based on faith and lifestyle was and still is very common, especially when it comes to housing, renting and residential localities as is demonstrated in the play.

#### **What is Going on in the Play**

The play *Darwaze Khol Do* is about the owner of a building, Ram Dayal, who is looking for tenants for his building, Kamalkunj, which is nearing completion and is up on the market. Over the course of the play, many people approach Ram Dayal asking for a flat or for a number of flats on rent. But he refuses to rent the flats out to them because they do not fit the criteria he is looking for in a potential tenant, i.e. people that match his faith, caste and culture etc. There are many other characters of different faiths and ethnicities that we come across in the play as well, these people who are working for him or with him, provide an interesting contrast to the encounters with prospective tenants. Ram Dayal's son, Kamalkant, and his attitude towards the prospective tenants, also provides a basis for contrast with these encounters as father and son engage differently with difference.

In the play there are certain stereotyped others that Ram Dayal comes across as he engages with prospective tenants; a Muslim Couple - Karimullah (Kriparam Bharadwaj) and Sajida (Savitri), Peshawari Hindu Pathans - Malik Lala Aftab Rai and Iqbal Diya, a Friend of a Muslim: Munnan (Mahesh Narayan Mathur), a Perfect, Untouchable Hindu -

Vellu, and some Christians: Isabella Coelho (Billu) and Doctor Edward Coelho. The ‘stereotypical’ representation of these different identities seems to be intentional as the writer is trying to demonstrate the realities of discrimination and to make a point about accepting diversity (as we also see from his concluding comments published at the end of the play).

### **The Muslim Couple**

This couple pretends to be Hindu when they meet Ram Dayal as they are well aware of the discrimination that they will face if their faith is known. Their behaviour is very clearly affected by their knowledge of the gaze of the other. As Sartre (1943) points out in *Being and Nothingness* (qtd. From the essay “Others”; 2000), we come to see or perceive ourselves the same way that we are conscious of being perceived by others. This minority couple is aware of how they are perceived by the majority, and resort to changing their behaviour and mannerisms to conform. Their being Hindu becomes an activity to gain the other’s approval and be perceived as different from what they are. They ‘become’ for the other. There is hesitation conveyed in the dialogues of the characters where they are lying to portray themselves as Hindus so that they can be accepted by the Hindu building owner. In fact, even in the instances where they tell the truth, their dialogues have a certain sense of uncertainty as the couple seem to debate which truths to mention and which not to until their cover is blown.

When their pretence falls because their son walks into the room calling them “*Ammi*”<sup>2</sup> and “*Abbu*”<sup>3</sup>, they accept that they’ve lied, and explain that they lied as they knew that being Hindu would definitely have helped them to get a flat, as their faith was the reason why they had been turned away from so many buildings so far. Ram Dayal asks them to get a flat in a more Muslim locality, such as Urdu Bazaar, Khudabaksh Mohalla or the Jama' Masjid Chowk. He couldn’t understand why they had to come looking for houses where he was, in a Hindu locality. He later

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<sup>2</sup>Mother

<sup>3</sup>Father

tells his son “*lo bhala mai kisi Musalman ko flat kyu dene laga*”<sup>4</sup> (pg 16). The systemic distancing from difference is very evident right from the beginning of the play from just the first encounter with difference.

### **The Peshawari Hindu Pathans**

Right at the beginning, when he sees this couple, Ram Dayal is very sceptical of them. They are very obviously Pathan, he points out, as is evident from their dressing and from their names too. He asks over and over again whether or not these people are Hindus. Ram Dayal is quite surprised when Aftab Rai tells him, that back where he’s from, everyone dresses the same whether they’re Hindu or Muslim. When Aftab Rai mentions in passing that he will be setting up a mandir in one of the rooms of the seven-bedroom house he wishes to rent, Ram Dayal is both convinced and impressed, and addresses Mirza ji in his comment “*aaaj kal aise dharam karam wale kiraye daar kahan milte hai*”<sup>5</sup> (pg 19). However, on learning that Aftab Rai can’t fall asleep without having eaten non-vegetarian food, that he drinks regularly, listens to qawwali and often has ‘*randi ka mujra*’<sup>6</sup> at his place, Ram Dayal is mortified. He asks the broker to have them taken away immediately and refuses to interact with them further. His reaction to difference once again is to distance himself from it without engaging in a dialogue of any sort beyond that which established the existence of difference.

### **The Friend of a Muslim**

Munnan comes over to meet his old friend Mirza, who is now working as Ram Dayal’s manager for the building Kamalkunj. Munnan asks Mirza to help him look for a house to he can stay as he plans to expand his business to the city. To Ram Dayal’s surprise, Mirza offers his friend ‘*Miyan*’<sup>7</sup> Munnan a flat at Kamalkunj. Ram Dayal intervenes,

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<sup>4</sup>Why on earth would I rent out a flat to a Muslim?

<sup>5</sup>Isn’t it rare to find such pious and practicing tenant nowadays?

<sup>6</sup>A dance of courtesans

<sup>7</sup>Gentleman, (an urdu word often used to refer to men from Muslim communities)

explaining to Mirza that Munnar can't be given a flat at Kamalkunj because "yeh to urdu bolta hai... aap bhi bolte hai... isi liye toh... mai toh sab kuch bata chuka hun, mai kaise logon ko flat deta hun, yeh toh Munnar 'Miyan' hai"<sup>8</sup>(pg 25). He tries to subtly tell Mirza that his Muslim friends can't be accommodated in his building, as has always been clear between them. Ram Dayal also points out that he has noticed Munnar using the phrases "Khuda ki qasam"<sup>9</sup> and "InshaAllah"<sup>10</sup>. Ram Dayal assumes the identity of the other based on his association and the language he speaks. Even after Mirza vouches for the fact that Munnar is Hindu and his full name is Mahesh Narayan Mathur and in spite of Munnar explaining to him that his language sounds Muslim because in Lucknow Hindus and Muslims have lived together for over eight hundred years and every one regardless of his religion uses phrases related to both faiths. Khubchandani in his essay "Language Plurality of South Asia: A Search for Alternate Models in Knowledge Construction" (2012) argues that such a condition where languages merge over time, and the boundaries between them become 'fuzzy' is a natural condition of plural languages and is evidence of a 'collective reality'.

In his interaction with Munnar, Ram Dayal's first instinct is to assume he is being lied to. This is perhaps because of his recent experience with the Muslim couple who had lied to him. He only comes around to believing Munnar is Hindu when he proposes to bring his ID from the Chief Commissioner's office. Ram Dayal then proceeds to list his conditions, which include no non-vegetarian food, not even eggs, no alcohol nor 'randi ka mujra'. For good measure, he also adds that no 'dur-achar'<sup>11</sup> should take place in the house he is given on rent. Munnar, annoyed by all the lifestyle sacrifices he is being asked to make in order

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<sup>8</sup>He talks in Urdu... you do too... that's why... I've already explained everything to you, the sort of people I rent my flats to, this is 'Miyan' Munnar

<sup>9</sup>I swear to God (the word *Khuda* that is used here is of persian origin and is used mostly by Muslims to refer to God)

<sup>10</sup>If God wills (an Arabic phrase, used commonly by Muslims)

<sup>11</sup>Misconduct

to live there, asks why he is being charged any rent at all and at such a high rate for all the conditions that apply and refuses the flat. Munnan calls Ram Dayal a “*dur achari*”<sup>12</sup> for the exorbitant rates he charged.

### **The Perfect Untouchable Hindu**

As soon as Vellu walks in he starts asking if the owner of the building is Hindu and whether or not he is a proper vegetarian. Ram Dayal (quite ironically) finds this interrogation almost insulting and asks in response “*magar tum pochne wale kaun?*”<sup>13</sup> (pg 31). As the conversation progresses, we see that for Ram Dayal, Vellu is the “*asli Hindustani*”<sup>14</sup>. He is a ‘pure’ vegetarian, and a ‘*bal brahmachari*’<sup>15</sup>, who is very successful and so devout that he observes the ‘*Naag Panchami Vrat*’<sup>16</sup>. Ram Dayal merges the identities of faith and nationality, He sees the ideal Hindustani as part of a homogenous culture, and for him, identity becomes somewhat binary, as one either is like him or isn’t, there seems to be no in-between and to him nothing else matters.

Vellu is willing to take up all the remaining flats in the building and is found to be an extremely fitting tenant for Ram Dayal in terms of the religious and cultural criteria he has for his tenants, that is, until Vellu recognises a South Indian worker among Ram Dayal’s workers. Ram Dayal’s regret at having touched Vellu is very evident once he finds out that Vellu is the son of a cobbler, and hence untouchable. Vellu too is shooed away for he no longer fits the criteria that Ram Dayal is looking for in tenants. On seeing Vellu leave, Ram Dayal says “*Khas kam, jahaan pak*”<sup>17</sup> (pg 37) which is once again ironic coming from him, as it is a

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<sup>12</sup>A person guilty of misconduct

<sup>13</sup>But who are you to ask?

<sup>14</sup>True Indian

<sup>15</sup>One who has followed the ways of devotional celibacy since childhood

<sup>16</sup>An auspicious fast celebrating the snake deity (a fast generally only observed by women)

<sup>17</sup>Less litter makes a cleaner world (a common idiom meaning ‘good riddance’)

phrase adapted into Indian culture from the Persian language, which has long been associated with Muslims in the country.

### **The Christians**

In this encounter, Kamalkant first meets the doctor's daughter when Ram Dayal steps away for a while. As they cordially (and almost flirtatiously) talk, Kamalkant agrees to give Isabella a flat in the building and takes her to see the flat as well. When Ram Dayal returns, he is shocked to see that his son has rented out the flat to Christians. He complains "*hae! Bhagwan! Mera dharam bhrasht hogaya*"<sup>18</sup> (pg 46) and goes as far as saying "*mai mar jaunga. Magar jeete jee kabhi inhe apni building me ghusne nahi dunga*"<sup>19</sup> (pg 46) and by the end of this encounter, he does end up having a heart attack. Even when Dr Coelho tells Ram Dayal that he'll file a court case against him for discrimination, Ram Dayal says he would prefer that, and even a fine for up to ten lakhs, over letting them stay in his building. When Ram Dayal has a heart attack, he is saved by the Doctor, but only after Kamalkant begs Dr Coelho to help.

### **Heteroglossia in the Play**

Bakhtin in his 1935 essay "Discourse in the Novel", talks of a multilingual situation where many languages exist in the same space. Heteroglossia, defined by Bakhtin as "another's speech in another's language", where what seems like a space occupied by a single language, is in fact compromised of multiple languages interacting and, in some cases, competing with each other for authority. This condition seems to be very apparent in this play. Each character has a distinct accent which is carefully incorporated into the dialogues, the spellings of words are also

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<sup>18</sup>Woe! Oh God! My faith has been corrupted

<sup>19</sup>Even if it means I must die. I won't let them into my building for as long as I live



adjusted where required, to make sure we read it in an accent as close to that which is being indicated.

- Muslim Couple: When they introduce themselves as Kriparam and Savitri, and they pretend to be Hindus, their dialogues have more Hindi words than Urdu words, words like '*dhanyawad*'<sup>20</sup> and '*dharampatni*'<sup>21</sup>, and after their identity is revealed, and we learn that they are Karimullah and Sajida, their remaining dialogues are in Urdu, and the use of Hindi words is suddenly missing.
- Peshawari Hindu Pathans: Aftab Rai and Iqbal Diya's dialogues are written with a strong North-West Frontier accent, the spellings and syntax of Urdu words and sentences have been adjusted so that the dialogues are read with a slight accent even by those who don't speak it.
- Friend of a Muslim: Munnan speaks fluent Urdu and uses phrases often associated with Muslims like "*Khuda ki qasam*" and "*InshaAllah*", like Mirza does, as he is from Lucknow, which is what confuses Ram Dayal of his identity, as it is only based on the language he hears, that he assumes Munnan is a Muslim.
- Perfect Untouchable Hindu: Vellu's dialogues are written so they sound like a South Indian is talking in Hindi when read aloud. A dialect that is sometimes confusing. As if to support this, his character and the Peshawari couple, have brokers who come along with them in the scene that act as casual translators when their language gets confusing or some unbelievable comment is made and needs clarification.
- Christians: English phrases and words are used in the dialogues of the Coelhos. Some English words are written in the Urdu script in the natural flow of an Urdu dialogue, words like 'daddy',

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<sup>20</sup>Thank you

<sup>21</sup>Lawful wife

‘overcrowded’ and ‘gaiety’, while some other dialogues are written entirely in English, like Isabella’s dialogue “it is very surprising” (pg 38) and the doctor’s dialogue “you wicked old man” (pg 44).

### **Contrasting Encounters with Difference**

Ram Dayal asks his prospective tenants to leave immediately when he finds them unsuitable, and his disgust towards them is apparent, but we see him working with and employing people of similar backgrounds to those that he turned away from being tenants. In a work setting, he engages with difference without showing any such disgust. With Mirza Irshad Hussain, his manager, Ram Dayal seems to be very comfortable and amiable, until it comes to pointing out the similarities between him and Munnan. Employing a Muslim in his office, and spending almost all day with him seems not to be an issue whereas having a Muslim tenant was a very obviously unacceptable thought. Besides the Muslim manager there are Bengali, Punjabi and Madrasi people working for him, from the engineer to the carpenter and the labourers, even when getting the electric connections from the Board, Ram Dayal prefers to write an application the new *Isai*<sup>22</sup> official to get the job done. The position of relation with the other seems to affect how much difference matters to him. A professional relation with the different other seems acceptable, but letting the different other rent space or enter the house seems out of the question. The metaphoric meaning of the title “*Darwaze Khol Do*” seems to fit here, as professional relationships do not require one to open up to the other, whereas letting the other into personal spaces, even on rent requires some level of opening up to the other, even if it only in terms of providing them with the physical spaces where they can be themselves.

### **Kamalkant’s Attitude to Difference and the Moral Message of the Play**

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<sup>22</sup>Christian

Either during or right after each encounter of Ram Dayal's with a prospective tenant, Kamalkant is present to criticize the way his father has dealt with difference, which has often been to shun it and to refuse to engage with it. Kamalkant in each encounter seems unbothered by any difference. In fact, he doesn't seem to look for difference at all. He continues to engage with the other while Ram Dayal withdraws once the presence of difference is evident.

Buber in his book *I and Thou* (1923) proposes two ways of relating to others. The I-It relation where one meets the other as an object that is distinct from their own reality in their experience, and the I-Thou relation where one meets the other without judgement and objectification but with a willingness to engage and understand. The difference between father and son in their approach to difference, in the light of Buber's proposition of relations, is that Kamalkant has an I-Thou approach to encountering difference, while Ram Dayal sees it as an I-It relation. Ram Dayal objectifies the other from the position he sees them and does not allow for any subjectivity or intersubjectivity in his relationship with them. Ram Dayal's approach to difference also seems extremely binary, while Kamalkant seems to have a more pluralistic view of difference. For Ram Dayal the other is either like him or not, and nothing else seems to matter, while Kamalkant doesn't look at others in relation to how similar or different they are to him, instead, he acknowledges the multiple axes where difference can be found.

Towards the end of the play Ram Dayal experiences a heart attack and recovers a changed man, not because it was a Christian who saved him, but because of his near-death experience. The "*building ki atma*"<sup>23</sup>, that he meets in his near-death experience, tells him that his approach to difference won't take him anywhere and that the only way forward is by opening the doors, a very symbolic and metaphorical statement that in the context of the story can also be very literal. On his return from a near-death experience, Ram Dayal hands the keys of the building over to

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<sup>23</sup>Spirit of the building

Kamalkant and tells him “*ab is ghar ke saare darwaze khol do*”<sup>24</sup> (pg 49), thus agreeing at the end to open a space for engagement and dialogue with the other and their differences.

It is only after this incident that Ram Dayal agrees to engage with the other, to enter in an intersubjective space of dialogue with this other. He has managed to shift his approach with the other from an I-It approach to an I-Thou approach (Buber), by becoming willing to follow his son’s lead in the matter.

In the play *Darwaze Khol Do*, Krishan Chander describes the way difference is perceived and engaged with in a society that is historically plural – this results in varied ways in which such difference is seen and experienced. He also resolves the conflict of difference in the play by connecting plurality to progress, keeping his story well within the horizon of expectations set by the writers of the PWA movement and setting the tone for progress and tolerance in society.

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<sup>24</sup> Now, open all the doors to the building

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