

A Study of Socio-Cultural Aspects of Partition in Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh

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Abstract: *Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan (1956) is among the most important literary responses to the Partition of India in 1947. Set in the fictional border village of Mano Majra during the summer of that year, it depicts a rural community in which Sikhs and Muslims have lived together for generations, and shows how that coexistence is destroyed by forces originating far beyond the village. This paper studies the socio-cultural aspects of Partition as represented in the novel. It examines the composite village culture of Mano Majra, the rhythms of daily life governed by the railway, the role of religion, class and gender, the impact of rumour and political rhetoric, the state's response through the figure of the magistrate, and the ethical significance of the novel's ending. Using historical scholarship on Partition by Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Gyanendra Pandey, Yasmin Khan and others, along with literary criticism by Alok Bhalla and Sukeshi Kamra, the paper argues that Khushwant Singh presents Partition as a human and cultural catastrophe rather than merely a political event. It concludes that the novel's enduring value lies in its insistence that ordinary people's moral choices, not just leaders' decisions, shaped the meaning of Partition.*

Keywords: Partition, Khushwant Singh, Train to Pakistan, Mano Majra, communal violence, composite culture, memory, refugees

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of British India in August 1947 created the independent states of India and Pakistan, and it was accompanied by one of the largest forced migrations and one of the worst episodes of communal violence in modern history. Estimates of the numbers who died vary widely, from roughly two hundred thousand to two million, and it is generally believed that between twelve and fifteen million people were displaced. Punjab and Bengal were divided by the boundary drawn under Sir Cyril Radcliffe, and the Punjab in particular saw massacres, mass abduction and the flight of millions in both directions.

Literature has been one of the chief means by which the subcontinent has attempted to understand this event. The Urdu and Hindi short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander and Bhisham Sahni; the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Amrita Pritam; and the novels of Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni (*Tamas*), Chaman Nahal (*Azadi*), Attia Hosain (*Sunlight on a Broken Column*), Bapsi Sidhwa (*Ice-Candy-Man*) and others have provided a body of testimony and interpretation that complements the historical record.

Khushwant Singh (1915–2014) was born in Hadali in the Punjab, in what is now Pakistan, and practised law in Lahore before moving to Delhi at Partition. He witnessed the upheaval directly, and *Train to Pakistan*, first published in 1956 (in the United States under the title *Mano Majra*), draws on that experience. It won the Grove Press India Prize in 1954 as a manuscript and has been in print ever since, in many languages, and was adapted as a film in 1998.



This paper concentrates on the socio-cultural dimensions of the novel. It asks what kind of society Khushwant Singh depicts in *Mano Majra* before the crisis, how that society is fractured, which social groups act and how they act, and what the novel implies about culture, identity and ethics in the face of mass violence.

1.1 Objectives

1. To examine the composite culture of *Mano Majra* and the social relations among its religious communities.
2. To analyse the impact of Partition on rural society, the family and everyday life.
3. To study how class, religion and gender intersect in the novel.
4. To assess the representation of political and state actors and their responsibility.
5. To evaluate the novel's moral vision and its treatment of memory and trauma.

1.2 Methodology

The study is textual and contextual. It uses close reading of the novel, informed by historical scholarship on Partition and by literary criticism. Attention is given to structure, characterisation, symbolism and setting as means of conveying social meaning.

II. HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Historiography of Partition

For many decades after 1947, the history of Partition was written mainly as high politics: the negotiations of the Congress, the Muslim League and the British, the Cabinet Mission of 1946, the demand for Pakistan, and the decisions of Mountbatten and Radcliffe. Later scholarship shifted attention to the experience of ordinary people. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) draws on oral testimony to recover the voices of women, children and Dalits, whom official histories had marginalised. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* (1998) documents the abduction and "recovery" of women. Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition* (2001) examines how violence has been remembered and narrated, and Yasmin Khan's *The Great Partition* (2007) demonstrates how unprepared the state was for the scale of migration. These works form the historical frame for understanding what Khushwant Singh's novel dramatises.

2.2 Partition literature

Alok Bhalla, in his introduction to *Stories About the Partition of India* (1994), argues that the best Partition fiction refuses to take sides and instead records the collapse of moral order. He notes that the writers were witnesses who felt an obligation to speak. Sukeshi Kamra, in *Bearing Witness* (2002), examines the role of Partition narratives in shaping public memory. Critics have compared *Train to Pakistan* with Sahni's *Tamas* and Manto's stories for their unflinching depiction of violence and their focus on the moral responsibility of individuals.

2.3 Critical response to the novel

Critics have generally praised the novel's economy, its narrative pace and its balance. Some have criticised what they see as its sentimentality in the ending, or its portrayal of women, who are peripheral to the action. Others have argued that the novel's pessimism about political leadership is justified by history. Still others have pointed out that the novel's depiction of a Sikh-Muslim village reflects the specific Punjabi context and should not be generalised to the whole subcontinent. This paper builds on these debates by concentrating on the social and cultural texture of the narrative.

III. PLOT AND STRUCTURE IN BRIEF

The novel is divided into four parts: "Dacoity," "Kalyug," "Mano Majra" and "Karma." The action opens with a dacoity, in which the local moneylender Lala Ram Lal is murdered in *Mano Majra* during the summer of 1947. The murder is committed by outsiders, but suspicion falls on Juggut Singh (Jugga), a village *badmash* (ruffian) who has



been meeting Nooran, the daughter of the Muslim weaver Imam Baksh, at night. Also arrested is Iqbal, a young, Western-educated social worker who has arrived in the village and who is, in the police's confused view, either a Muslim League agitator or a Communist.

Meanwhile, the Partition violence reaches the region. A train arrives at the station carrying the corpses of Sikhs and Hindus killed in Pakistan. The bodies are burned in haste, and the smoke and smell mark the village. Later, further trains arrive. The village's Muslims are moved to a refugee camp, and outsiders, including a group of Sikh refugees and a local young man, plan to ambush a train carrying Muslims to Pakistan by stretching a rope across the bridge over the Sutlej. Jugga, released from custody, learns of the plan, and in the novel's climax he climbs on the bridge and cuts the rope at the cost of his own life, allowing the train to cross into Pakistan.

The structure moves from the local (the murder) to the national (Partition) and back to the local (the individual sacrifice). It gives the novel a shape in which small events and large events are connected.

IV. MANO MAJRA: COMPOSITE CULTURE AND ITS RHYTHMS

4.1 The village as a community

Khushwant Singh's presentation of Mano Majra is one of the most striking features of the novel. The village is located near the Sutlej, at a railway bridge, and is described as a small place of about seventy families. It is inhabited by Sikhs, who are mostly landowners, and by Muslims, who are largely tenants and artisans, along with a few Hindus, including the moneylender. There are only three brick buildings: the moneylender's house, the gurdwara and the mosque. This detail is symbolically economical. Religion and money are the only material structures that stand out in the village.

The village's most notable trait is its tradition of coexistence. Sikhs and Muslims share festivals, greet each other with familiar terms, and rely on each other's labour and services. Because there is a common village identity, the religious difference is not the primary marker of belonging. Khushwant Singh does not idealise this coexistence, and there are tensions and hierarchies, but he demonstrates that a real syncretic culture existed. The Punjabi historian Ishtiaq Ahmed and others have noted that such composite village cultures were common in the pre-Partition Punjab, where shared language, kinship and agricultural life often outweighed religious identity.

4.2 The railway and the regulation of time

The railway is the dominant structural device in the novel's depiction of daily life. The villagers' routines are organised by the arrival and departure of trains: the morning goods train, the mail train and the evening express. Time in Mano Majra is told by trains and not by clocks. The railway represents modernity, the colonial state, and the wider world that will eventually break into the village. Its regularity contrasts with the irregularity of what it will bring. When the "ghost train" arrives, silent, carrying corpses, the shattering of the routine is also the shattering of the village's sense of order.

The railway also carries symbolic weight as a technology of connection that becomes a technology of death. The trains that once carried commerce and passengers now carry refugees and the dead, and the novel's title itself refers to a train that is going to Pakistan, both in a literal sense and as a figure of the undoing of the old community.

4.3 Religion in everyday life

Religion in Mano Majra is embedded in ordinary practice. The gurdwara and mosque calls, the prayers and the rituals form part of the soundscape of the village, and villagers pay respect to both. The characters of Bhai Meet Singh, the Sikh priest, and Imam Baksh, the Muslim cleric, represent different religious traditions but similar moral seriousness. The novel shows that religion as lived by villagers is not identical to the political religion of communal ideologues. The former is a matter of habit, devotion and neighbourliness, and the latter is a matter of exclusion and mobilisation. Partition, in the novel, converts the first into the second, and this conversion is depicted as a social tragedy.



V. THE FRACTURING OF COMMUNITY

5.1 The arrival of the outside world

The initial disturbance is external. Refugees from the other side of the border, carrying tales of atrocity, arrive at Mano Majra and bring the emotions of communal hatred with them. The novel emphasises the role of story and rumour in this process. Accounts of massacres and rapes are exchanged and exaggerated, and the villagers, who have not themselves suffered violence, begin to imagine it. Pandey has noted that the circulation of atrocity narratives was a major element in escalating Partition violence: stories of what "they" did to "us" created the moral justification for retaliation.

5.2 The ghost train and the burning of the dead

The arrival of the train of corpses is the moment when the village is confronted with the scale of the catastrophe. The pile of bodies and the hasty cremation that follows are described in graphic detail. Khushwant Singh's restraint in describing the events, and his refusal to sensationalise, enhance their impact. The villagers, some of whom watch, some of whom help, are shaken. After this event, a community that had felt itself outside history is drawn in.

5.3 The displacement of Muslims

The most poignant social change is the departure of the village's Muslims. The authorities decide that they must be moved to a refugee camp for their own safety, and the villagers are told to prepare. The exchange of farewells between neighbours is one of the most moving passages in the novel. The Sikh villagers promise to look after their neighbours' property and assure them that they will be welcomed back. Yet the reader knows, and to some extent the characters suspect, that these promises will be difficult to keep. The scene shows how displacement operates as a social process: a community that has lived together is separated by the decisions of authorities that are remote from its life.

5.4 The moral pressure to retaliate

After the Muslims have left, the village is pressured by outsiders to take revenge. A group of young men, including an aggressive refugee, urges the villagers to demonstrate their manhood and their loyalty to their co-religionists by attacking the train of Muslims. The appeal is made in the language of honour and retribution, and it works on the villagers' shame and fear. The novel shows how collective identity is manufactured through an appeal to masculinity, and how easily neighbourliness can be dissolved by such an appeal. The villagers' inability to resist is one of the novel's bleakest observations.

VI. CLASS, CASTE AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

6.1 Landowners, tenants and moneylenders

Mano Majra's social structure is hierarchical. The Sikh landowners occupy a position of local authority, Muslim tenants and artisans have less power, and the moneylender holds an economic influence that others depend on. The murder of Lala Ram Lal, the moneylender, at the start is therefore a disruption of the economic order. Some villagers, the novel implies, are relieved at his death, since it reduces their debts. This detail is a small example of the way class interests coexist with religious identity in rural society.

6.2 The poor and the unattached

Jugga, the *badmash*, is from a family of landowning Sikhs but lives on the margin of respectability. His criminality is petty and, in the village view, forgivable. Nooran, the Muslim weaver's daughter, is poorer and more constrained. Their relationship crosses religion and class, and it is the emotional centre of the novel. The novel does not give it a political meaning explicitly, but its implications are clear: love between people of different communities is possible, and it is the first casualty of communal politics.



6.3 The educated outsider

Iqbal, the social worker, represents the urban, English-educated intellectual. He is ideologically committed to reform but detached from the villagers. His arrival is met with suspicion, and his attempts to influence events are ineffective. The novel is critical of this figure. It suggests that abstract ideals, without courage and rootedness, are inadequate to a moral crisis. Iqbal's failure to intervene when it matters, and the way he rationalises his inaction, is an implicit criticism of the intellectual class.

6.4 The privilege of the state official

Hukum Chand, the magistrate, is a representative of the state and of the upper social stratum. Cynical, self-indulgent and cautious, he manipulates events in an attempt to maintain order and protect himself. His relationship with a young prostitute, Haseena, shows his moral compromise. His eventual decision to release Jugga and Iqbal is motivated by expediency rather than principle. He hopes that the train massacre may be prevented, but he does not act openly to prevent it. The novel presents him as a figure of the colonial-era bureaucrat who serves the state but lacks moral courage.

VII. GENDER IN *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*

7.1 The absence and presence of women

Women are peripheral to the plot of the novel, and this has been noted by feminist critics. The major actions are taken by men, and women appear mainly as objects of concern, love or violence. Nevertheless, the novel indirectly reveals the role of gender in Partition. The historians Butalia, Menon and Bhasin have shown that women were the principal targets of Partition violence: abducted, raped, forcibly converted and sometimes killed by their own families to protect "honour." An estimated seventy-five thousand women were abducted, according to figures cited by these scholars, and the state's recovery operation, which returned women to their "proper" nation, often ignored their wishes.

7.2 Nooran

Nooran's position illustrates the vulnerability of women. When the Muslims of the village are told to leave, she is pregnant with Jugga's child and, as a Muslim, must depart. Her choice is limited by circumstance. Her father, Imam Baksh, has little power over the situation. Her love for Jugga has no place in the categories that Partition creates. The novel's use of her pregnancy adds a further dimension: the child represents the unborn future of a mixed community, which is now being denied.

7.3 Haseena and the commodification of women

Haseena, the prostitute brought to Hukum Chand, is a minor character but an illuminating one. She is treated as a commodity, and her fear of the magistrate is described with unsentimental brevity. Her presence shows the extent to which women's bodies can be used in exchanges of power, an aspect of gender relations that Partition intensified.

7.4 Masculinity and honour

The novel's dramatisation of the plot to attack the train emphasises the role of masculinity. The young men who urge revenge speak of honour and of the women who have been dishonoured on the other side. The villagers are taunted with the charge of being unmanly. This shows how male honour and female bodies are linked in communal discourse, and how the protection of "our" women becomes a justification for violence against "their" women. Jugga's final act is thus also a reclaiming of a different masculinity, based on love and courage rather than on aggression.



VIII. THE STATE, POLITICS AND RESPONSIBILITY

8.1 The failure of the state

One of the novel's persistent themes is the inadequacy of the state's response. The local authorities are unprepared, ill-informed and, in some cases, complicit. The police act arbitrarily. The magistrate acts in his own interest. The refugee camp is a hurried arrangement. This portrayal is consistent with the historical evidence. Yasmin Khan shows that the British departure was hasty, that the boundary commission's decisions were not announced until after independence, and that the new governments lacked the administrative capacity to protect their populations.

8.2 Political ideology and its limits

Iqbal's political ideas, with their reference to communism and reformism, are ineffective. The communal politics of the Muslim League and the Hindu and Sikh organisations, on the other side, are shown through their consequences rather than through a direct portrayal of their leaders. The novel is interested in how ideology reaches the village, through rumour, refugees and organised gangs, more than in how it originates. In this respect it can be described as a novel about the reception of politics by ordinary people.

8.3 Mahatma Gandhi and the ideal of non-violence

The novel refers to Gandhi and his ideals through the characters' discussions. The characters are aware of the appeal to non-violence, but it appears distant and unrealistic in the crisis. Whether this constitutes a criticism of Gandhi or a lament for the failure of his message is a matter of interpretation. The novel's ending, in which a single individual acts, without ideology, to prevent violence, may be read as a redefinition of non-violence as a personal moral act rather than a political programme.

IX. MEMORY, TRAUMA AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

9.1 Witnessing

Khushwant Singh writes as a witness, and the novel's style, plain, controlled and unsentimental, is appropriate to the task. He depicts the violence without explicit moral commentary, letting the events speak. This restraint has been praised by critics such as Bhalla as an ethical stance: the writer does not exploit the suffering of others or offer facile consolation.

9.2 The problem of the ending

The ending, in which Jugga sacrifices his life, is the most debated aspect of the novel. Some critics regard it as melodramatic or unearned, since Jugga is not a conventional hero and his motivation is ambiguous. He may be acting out of love for Nooran, or out of a sudden and inarticulate moral impulse. Others argue that this ambiguity is the point: moral action in the midst of communal hysteria may not be the product of ideology or reasoning. The novel suggests that goodness is possible but that it is rare, individual and costly.

The novel's final lines describe the train passing over the bridge, and the ambiguity of tone is important. The rescue is real, but it saves only one train, and the scale of what has already happened is not diminished. The ending offers hope without consolation.

9.3 Partition and the memory of violence

Butalia has argued that the memory of Partition was long suppressed in both India and Pakistan, in favour of nationalist narratives of independence. Literature was one of the few forms in which the pain could be expressed. *Train to Pakistan* helped to establish the memory of Partition in Indian public discourse, and it remains a standard text in schools and universities. By presenting the event as the destruction of a specific community, it made the abstract history concrete and personal.



X. SYMBOLISM AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

10.1 Setting and symbols

The village, the river, the bridge and the railway are the principal symbols. The Sutlej, a river that flows through the Punjab, is the natural feature that will soon be a border. The bridge is a link between the two sides that becomes a site of violence. The trains, as we have seen, are the agents of change. The seasons, the monsoon delay and the heat, mirror the tension in the narrative, and the arrival of rain before the final events has a symbolic function.

10.2 Point of view

The narrative is in the third person, with an omniscient narrator who moves between characters, from the magistrate to the villagers to the outsiders. This provides a comprehensive view of the social structure. The narrator's tone is detached and occasionally ironic, and the effect is a kind of clarity that avoids partisanship.

10.3 Language and dialogue

The novel uses simple English, with a sprinkling of Punjabi and Urdu words and idioms, to represent the speech of the villagers. This gives the dialogue a sense of authenticity while remaining accessible to English readers. The use of common speech contributes to the sense that this is a story of ordinary people and not of leaders.

10.4 Realism and moral fable

The novel combines the detailed social realism of its setting with the shape of a moral fable. The plot's coincidences and the final act of sacrifice are characteristic of the fable. The combination allows Khushwant Singh to address both the particular circumstances of 1947 and the universal question of moral responsibility.

XI. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

11.1 Comparison with *Tamas*

Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), set in a Punjab town in the run-up to Partition, focuses on how a communal riot is deliberately provoked by a political manipulator. In contrast to *Train to Pakistan*, which is set in a village and concentrates on the effects of external violence, *Tamas* explores the internal mechanics of provocation. Both novels demonstrate the moral responsibility of ordinary people and the manipulation of religion for political purposes.

11.2 Comparison with *Manto*

Saadat Hasan Manto's stories, such as "Toba Tek Singh," "Khol Do" and "Thanda Gosht," treat Partition through short, sharp incidents of madness, cruelty and grief. Manto's style is more compressed and more shocking than Khushwant Singh's, and he is more concerned with the psychological effects of violence. What the two share is a refusal of easy moral categories.

11.3 Comparison with *Ice-Candy-Man*

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) views Partition through the eyes of a young Parsi girl in Lahore and focuses on the fate of women, especially the abducted Ayah. Where Khushwant Singh's perspective is largely male, Sidhwa's is female, and the two novels together provide a more complete picture of Partition's gendered dimensions.

XII. RELEVANCE AND CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

The novel remains relevant because the dynamics it describes have not disappeared. Communal violence has recurred in South Asia, and the pattern of rumour, mobilisation and revenge is familiar. The novel's warning about the fragility of coexistence and the ease with which it can be destroyed is a continuing one. At the same time, its portrayal of ordinary people who refuse to participate in hatred offers a counter-example.



The novel is also relevant to contemporary debates about memory and history. As the generation that experienced Partition passes away, literary accounts have a growing role in preserving the memory. *Train to Pakistan* offers an emotionally powerful and intellectually honest account that continues to shape how Partition is understood.

XIII. FINDINGS

1. Mano Majra represents a composite rural culture in which religious difference coexisted with shared language, labour and neighbourliness.
2. Partition is presented as a social and cultural catastrophe that destroys such communities through rumour, external violence and political manipulation.
3. Class, gender and religion interact in the novel: economic hierarchies, patriarchal notions of honour and communal identities all shape behaviour.
4. The state's failure and the moral inadequacy of its representatives are central concerns.
5. The novel's ending affirms individual moral agency without claiming that it can redeem the larger catastrophe.
6. Through restrained realism and symbolic structure, the novel makes the historical event humanly comprehensible.

XIV. CONCLUSION

Train to Pakistan is a work of literary witness and moral inquiry. Khushwant Singh's presentation of Mano Majra shows what was lost at Partition: a way of life in which people of different faiths lived side by side, bound by work, language and habit. His account of how that way of life was broken shows the power of rumour, fear and manufactured hatred, and the failure of the institutions that should have protected the community. His depiction of the individual choices of Jugga, Iqbal, Hukum Chand and the villagers shows that history is made and unmade by the moral decisions of ordinary people.

The novel's socio-cultural insight is that Partition was not simply a cartographic event. It was the tearing of a social fabric, and its effects were felt in the family, the village, the marketplace and the heart. Its ethical insight is that even in the worst circumstances, individuals retain the capacity to choose. The ending does not undo the tragedy, but it affirms that the choice matters.

Seventy years and more after the events it describes, the novel continues to speak to readers in India, Pakistan and beyond. It stands as a reminder of what communal hatred destroys, and as an argument for the values of coexistence, courage and human solidarity.

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