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Narrating the Nation's Wounds: Trauma and Testimony in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract
The research paper analysis Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* as both a narrative of trauma and an act of cultural testimony about the 1947 Partition of India. Set in the fictional village of Mano Majra, the novel captures how communal harmony collapses under the weight of political upheaval and violence. Using trauma theory, the study analyses Singh's portrayal of both physical atrocities and intangible wounds such as displacement, betrayal, and the loss of coexistence. By focusing on morally complex characters, the work resists simplistic binaries of victim and perpetrator, instead presenting Partition as a shared human tragedy. The novel serves as both a historical record and a moral warning, preserving the memory of Partition as a lasting wound in the nation's consciousness. Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) stands as one of the most poignant literary testimonies of the Partition of India in 1947, a cataclysmic event that witnessed one of the largest forced migrations in human history, accompanied by mass violence, communal hatred, and irreparable social fragmentation. This paper examines the novel as both a narrative of trauma and an act of cultural testimony, foregrounding the complex interplay between personal memory, collective history, and moral responsibility. Singh's fictional village of Mano Majra, initially untouched by the political and communal upheaval, becomes a microcosm of the subcontinent's shared humanity and its violent rupture. The paper also explores the testimonial dimension of *Train to Pakistan*, reading it as an attempt to record not only the visible atrocities of Partition but also the intangible wounds loss of home, betrayal by neighbours, and the erosion of cultural coexistence.

Keywords: Trauma theory, cultural testimony, communal violence, displacement, memory and history, partition

Introduction
Khushwant Singh is an individual who has endured the tragedy of partition and experienced both personal and national anguish. His unsettling experience with partition compels him to author the novel *Train to Pakistan*, which depicts the traumatic act of partition that transpires in August 1947 in its gruesome particulars. Singh articulates the shock, distress, suffering, and anguish experienced by millions during the Indo-Pak partition in the essay. Historian Urvashi Butalia characterises the tragedy as the most terrifying occurrence in India's history. The history of India, encompassing its struggles, independence, and partition, leaves a profound scar on the nation's psyche. The novel *Train to Pakistan* illustrates that, despite the passage of time after the partition, its repercussions continue to resonate in the collective memory of millions in both nations. Roger Luckhurst in his book *Litearay Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide* examine the "trauma with its intolerable presence in the psyche" (505).

Trauma, as a distressing consequence of memory particularly those embedded in the profound depths of the human psyche renders literature that addresses such memories a disturbing reflection of trauma. He defines, "The grief and anguish serve as reminders of troubling past, haunting individuals and, at times, entire nations, including experiences that are both public and historical as well as private and commemorative" (*Litearay Theory and Criticism* 497). This distressing and unsettling remembrance of the suffering self-compels an individual to articulate their own pain and distress by reinterpreting their personal history. India, as a nation, experiences profound anguish and turmoil when the British announce the

partition of the territory into two entities - India and Pakistan. At midnight on 15 August 1947, India attained independence from British dominion; this moment of jubilation is, however, overshadowed by the tragic catastrophe of partition. Jonathan D. Greenburg in his article "Generations of Memory: Remembering Partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine" describes this partition of the subcontinent as "a series of interconnected historical events that carry profound emotional significance for millions who experienced them, as well as their descendants. 'Partition' can be perceived as a collection of associations to which an individual has devoted substantial psychic energy and identification" (90). Trauma is frequently linked to loss and grief due to the numerous fatalities, thefts, sexual assaults, riots, massacres, and displacements that transpired during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. This horrific incident has gained infamy as one of the most agonising occurrences in India's documented history.

The author experiences his own anguish through the depiction of the idyllic village of Mano Majra, located on the border between India and Pakistan. Mano Majra exemplifies a tranquil village that remained unscathed by the communal strife during the split. The village serves as a metaphor for an undivided India, devoid of all barriers, whether physical or otherwise. The community possesses a deity that does not differentiate or segregate individuals based on their religious beliefs. The humanitarian hamlet stands in stark contrast to the partition event, which is predicated only on significant ethnic and religious disparities. According to Singh: "This is a three-foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keekar tree besides the pond. It is the local deity, the deo to which all the villagers-Hindus, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo-Christian-repair secretly whenever they are in a special need of blessing" (*Train to Pakistan* 3).

Mano Majra is converted into a battleground upon the arrival of the ghost train from Pakistan, laden with deceased Sikhs. The peace-loving peasants turn into adversaries when influenced by the reverberations of partition. Singh states: "Everyone sensed their neighbour's hand upon them and contemplated the pursuit of friends and allies" (*Train to Pakistan* 124). During the Partition, multiple trains carried corpses between India and Pakistan, their bodies no longer identified as Sikh or Muslim but simply as the dead. The gangs on both sides of the border murder the refugees attempting to board trains in their escape to the other country. Religious violence and bloodshed eclipse humanity and compassion. The phantom trains eradicate all feelings, sentiments, and empathy from the hearts of the inhabitants of undivided India, now divided into two territories. Singh notes that on the night Mano Majra receives the train laden with corpses, "That evening, for the first time in the memory of Mano Majra, Imam Baksh's resonant cry did not ascend to the heavens to declare the glory of God" (*Train to Pakistan* 89). The harrowing ordeal of receiving several corpses to incinerate with kerosene and wood, followed by the faint bitter odour of charred flesh, is an overwhelming psychological torment for the inhabitants of Mano Majra.

The echoes of communal unrest obliterate the tranquil atmosphere of the village Mano Majra. Violence and the absurd have now become commonplace in the village of Mano Majra, which was once a sanctuary of calm and tranquilly. Profoundly disheartened by the summer's heat, Mano Majra anxiously anticipates rain. However, the rain, contrary to public expectation, yields only "earthworms, ladybirds, and little frogs... myriads of moths (*Train to Pakistan* 98) and the catastrophic flood of the Sutlej River. Hukum Chand, the District Magistrate, recalls, "A thousand charred corpses sizzling and smoking while the rain extinguished the fair" (*Train to Pakistan* 99). Furthermore, the floodwaters of the river, along by the rain, reveal the horrifying and unwelcome sight of the slaughtered bodies of Sikhs and Hindus. Singh depicts the scene that the inhabitants of Mano Majra witness at the Sutlej River:

An old peasant with a grey beard lay flat on the water. His arms were stretched out as if he had been crucified. His mouth was wide open and showed his toothless gums, his eyes were covered with film, his hair floated about his head like a halo. He had deep wound on his neck which slanted down from the side to the chest. A child's head butted into the old man's armpit. There was a hole in its back. (*Train to Pakistan* 151)

In these distressing conditions, authorities accuse the protagonist Juggut Singh of murder and incarcerate him. When the Muslims of Mano Majra are compelled to evacuate the village for their safety, Juggut Singh loses his beloved Nooran to the divide. As they depart from the village that has been their home for eternity, the anguish of separation resonates in the voice of one Muslim who enquires, "What relevance do we have to Pakistan?" We originated here. Our predecessors were similarly, situated, "We have coexisted with you as brethren" (*Train to Pakistan* 133). The anguish of permanently losing one's home is consequently reflected in the poem. The protagonists are deeply impacted by the abrupt loss of their homeland and the exposure to the severe violence of partition. During this horrific period, at least 10 million individuals were displaced during the Partition, resulting in one million rendered homeless, including the author Khushwant Singh. A multitude of memories resides in the minds of countless exiles on both sides of the divided nation, whose hearts ache at the prospect of permanently abandoning their homeland. One of the refugees in the text weeps: "If we have to go, we better pack up our bedding and belongings. It will take us more than one night to clear out of homes it has taken our fathers and grandfathers hundreds of years to make" (*Train to Pakistan* 135).

The passage indicates that, in addition to the victims of riots, rape, and murder, there are others who are also victimised by their circumstances. The valiant Sikh Sunder Singh, an army officer in Sindh, escapes to India with his wife and three children. Aside from the women, the displaced Sikhs and Hindus of Sindh emerged as the second most grievous victims of partition, unable to identify with either India or Pakistan. During their migration from Sindh to India, the refugees encounter insurmountable obstacles and challenges, a fate that also befalls Sunder Singh. Their train, accommodating nearly five hundred individuals in a compartment designed for "40 sitting, 12 sleeping" (*Train to Pakistan* 187), is halted at a station for four days, and the anguish of a parent witnessing the hunger in his children's eyes renders Sunder Singh susceptible. Khushwant Singh delineates:

… but there was no shade- not a shrub within miles. Only the sun and the sand … and no water … Sunder Singh's children cried for water and food … Sunder Singh gave them his urine to drink. Then that dried too. So he pulled out

his revolver and shot them all … and Amro, four months old, who tugged at her mother's dry breasts with her gums and puckered up her face till it was full of wrinkles, crying fanatically. Sunder Singh also shot his wife (*Train to Pakistan* 187).

However, the merciless machinations of fate do not conclude here, as the instant Sunder Singh attempts to take his own life, the stationary train begins to move, compelling Sunder Singh to endure a lifetime of remorse and regret. The split, therefore, not only divides the nation into two territories but also fragments numerous lives, families, and relationships into countless parts. Silvia Schultermandl in her article "Writing Rape, Trauma, and Transnationality onto the Female Body" asserts, "Trauma is not readily communicable; in fact, it is frequently incomprehensible to the individual who endures it, let alone to others" (84). Hukum Chand becomes incommunicado as his terrible past often manifests as nightmares. Although Hukum Chand holds the highest authority in the village of Mano Majra, the arrival of the train from Pakistan and its subsequent events render him weak and vulnerable. Having experienced the authority of power, Hukum Chand feels paralysed by the anguish of partition. The author depicts, "Hukum Chand slid from his chair, obscured his face with his arms, and commenced to weep." He then lifted his face towards the sky and commenced praying" (*Train to Pakistan* 188).

The brutality of humanity contrasts with the benevolence exemplified by Juggut Singh, whose personal and societal suffering compels him to sacrifice his life to save many others. The profound sense of loss envelops the nation: the loss of country, home, dignity, honour, family, love, and life. Women, as subalterns in a violent society, are regarded as property that can be purchased, sold, bestowed, confiscated, and assaulted by men. In such circumstances and amidst significant turbulence, the characters either act or respond. At times, Iqbal's behaviour is passive; in contrast, Juggut Singh instinctively intervenes to safeguard a train transporting refugee Muslims to Pakistan. Singh reflects on his memories to illustrate the psychological agony and upheaval experienced by the characters amid the division of the Indian subcontinent.

The study situates the novel within trauma theory, drawing on the works of Cathy Caruth in his book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* analyse how "the text registers the unassimilable shock of Partition violence through fragmented perspectives, silences, and acts of bearing witness" (45). Singh's prose refrains from overtly sentimentalizing the tragedy; instead, it allows the horror to emerge organically through stark depictions of corpses on incoming trains, fractured communal bonds, and the gradual collapse of trust. By focusing on characters like Juggut Singh, Iqbal, and Hukum Chand, the novel interrogates moral agency in times of crisis, showing how individuals oscillate between self-preservation and altruism.

Singh's narrative resists a simplistic binary of victim and perpetrator, instead portraying the tragedy as a shared human failure rooted in fear, manipulation, and political opportunism. In doing so, the novel becomes an enduring witness to the costs of divisive politics and the fragility of communal harmony. Ultimately, this study argues that *Train to Pakistan* operates as both a historical record and a moral reckoning. Through its layered narrative structure and emotionally charged yet restrained storytelling, the novel preserves the memory of Partition as an open wound in the nation's consciousness one that demands continual engagement, reflection, and ethical responsibility from its readers. Singh's work is not merely about a past tragedy; it is a cautionary narrative, urging vigilance against the recurrence of sectarian hatred in contemporary times.

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