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Authors

Anisha Attrey^{1*}, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Humanities and Liberal Arts, NIMS University Rajasthan, Jaipur, Orcid Id: 0009-0000-8980-5697, attreyanisha01@gmail.com

Dr. Suresh Kumar², Associate Professor HOD, Department of English, School of Humanities and Liberal Arts, NIMS University Rajasthan, Jaipur, Orcid Id: 0009-0003-3497-0857, drsureshkumar@nimsuniversity.org

Dr. HarshKumar Chauhan^{3*}, Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences, School of Engineering and Technology, CGC University, Mohali, Punjab, Orcid Id: 0009-0008-0295-2757, harsh.hc88@gmail.com

Dr. Darshan N. Chhaya^{4*}, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Science, Silver Oak University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Orcid Id: 0009-0003-1624-4640, darshanchhaya123@gmail.com

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Unpacking the Trauma of Partition: A Critical Analysis of Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan"

Abstract

The 1947 Partition of India was a devastating event that caused tremendous pain for millions of people, upending communities and identities. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is a chilling literary depiction of this historical catastrophe, encapsulating the horrors of communal violence, relocation, and loss. This research examines the novel through the lens of trauma theory, focusing on how Singh's narrative portrays both individual and social pain. Using qualitative literary analysis, the study looks at significant passages that depict pain, quiet, and the train as a metaphor of death and forced migration. The findings underscore *Train to Pakistan*'s contribution to trauma research by illustrating the unspeakable nature of traumatic occurrences and the deterioration of community cohesion. By drawing on theoretical viewpoints from historians like as Cathy Caruth and Jeffrey C. Alexander, this research emphasizes the novel's lasting relevance as a historical and cultural witness to Partition's impact.

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was a cataclysmic event that left deep scars on the collective psyche of the subcontinent. Khushwant Singh's seminal novel, "Train to Pakistan" (1956), offers a haunting portrayal of this tumultuous period, laying bare the communal violence, displacement, and trauma that defined the era. This research paper delves into the novel's exploration of trauma, examining how Singh's narrative captures the individual and collective suffering inflicted by the Partition. Through a critical lens, this study aims to illuminate how "Train to Pakistan" serves as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of historical trauma on communities and individuals.

Research Gap

Despite the plethora of literary analyses on Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan", there exists a notable gap in the scholarly examination of the novel's portrayal of trauma, particularly in the context of the Partition of India. While previous studies have explored the themes of violence, displacement, and communal tension, a comprehensive analysis of the novel's representation of individual and collective trauma, through the lens of trauma theory, remains understudied.

Methodology

To address the identified research gaps, this study employs a qualitative, literary analysis approach, integrating trauma theory to examine Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan". A close reading of the novel, focuses on key passages that illustrate the themes of trauma, violence, displacement, and communal tension. Application of trauma theory concepts, such as collective trauma, cultural trauma, and the unspeakability of traumatic events, to analyse the novel's portrayal of trauma. In-depth examination of the train as a symbol of death, displacement, and trauma, and its significance in conveying the horrors of the Partition.

Objectives

1. To Examine how Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" depicts the trauma of the Partition of India, focusing on both individual and collective experiences.
2. To analyse the novel within the broader historical and cultural landscape of the Partition, highlighting its significance as a literary response to the era's violence and displacement.
3. To Investigate the literary devices and symbols employed by Singh to convey the trauma and horrors of the Partition, with particular attention to the symbolism of the train.
4. To Discuss how "Train to Pakistan" contributes to the field of trauma studies, particularly in relation to the concepts of collective trauma, cultural trauma, and the unspeakability of traumatic events.

Investigation

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) vividly captures the violence and communal trauma of the

Partition of India in 1947. The line, *Train to Pakistan* marks a crucial moment of rupture in the novel. This moment is deeply symbolic, representing not only the disruption of religious and cultural continuity but also the traumatic silencing of a community in the face of violence and fear.

"That evening, for the first time in Mano Majra's recollection, Imam Baksh's resounding cry did not rise to the heavens to proclaim God's glory," (Singh Page 88-89). In the context of trauma studies, silence often signifies an overwhelming disruption in an individual's or a community's ability to process and articulate suffering. Imam Baksh's call to prayer, which had been a steadfast and routine element of life in Mano Majra, is absent for the first time, indicating that something deeply unsettling has occurred. This silence is not merely the absence of a sound but a reflection of collective trauma, fear, and loss. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argue that trauma is characterized by an inability to fully process or narrate the traumatic event, leading to gaps, silences, and repetitions in history and memory. The absence of the *adhan* (call to prayer) in this instance functions as a narrative void, pointing to the unspeakable horror that has disrupted the town's equilibrium.

Furthermore, Imam Baksh's silence can be analysed through the lens of cultural trauma. As Jeffrey C. Alexander notes, cultural trauma occurs when a community perceives an event as fundamentally threatening to its identity and continuity. The Partition was not only a political reorganization but also an existential crisis for millions who were forcibly displaced, subjected to violence, and left with fractured identities. Imam Baksh's silence, therefore, signifies more than personal fear; it represents the broader communal loss of security, belonging, and spiritual peace. Additionally, from a psychological perspective, trauma is often marked by disruptions in daily rituals and established routines. Rituals provide stability and a sense of normalcy, especially in times of crisis. The call to prayer, as a repetitive and cyclical act, reinforces collective identity and faith. Its absence suggests that the trauma of Partition has reached a tipping point where even the most fundamental aspects of life can no longer persist unchanged. This aligns with the work of Dori Laub, who argues that trauma can create a break in time and consciousness, leading to an inability to testify to or acknowledge the full extent of suffering.

Moreover, the communal nature of trauma is evident in the phrase "for the first time in Mano Majra's recollection." This phrase highlights that the trauma is not isolated to one individual but is shared by the entire village. The community, which had lived in religious harmony before the upheaval, now faces a moment of existential dread, where even the most sacred expressions of faith are stifled. This reflects the way Partition shattered social bonds and disrupted the interwoven lives of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, forcing them into categories of religious identity that became grounds for violence rather than coexistence. *Train to Pakistan* offers a harrowing depiction of the Partition of India, illustrating the deep-rooted trauma of displacement, communal

violence, and the fracturing of identities. The passage reflects the chaos, uncertainty, and trauma inflicted upon individuals and communities during this period.

“That is what I came to report, sir. Muslims of some villages have started leaving for the refugee camps. Chundunnugger has been partly evacuated. Pakistan army lorries with Baluchi and Pathan soldiers have been picking them up whenever information has been brought. But the Mano Majra Muslims are still there and this morning the lambardar reported the arrival of forty or fifty Sikh refugees who had crossed the river by the ford at dawn. They are putting up at the temple.” (Singh, 102).

The Trauma of Displacement and Forced Migration

One of the most traumatic aspects of Partition was the mass displacement of millions, who were forced to abandon their homes and seek refuge in foreign lands designated for their religious community. This passage highlights this trauma through the phrase, “Muslims of some villages have started leaving for the refugee camps.” The use of “started leaving” suggests that this is an ongoing process, a forced migration dictated not by choice but by fear, violence, and the threat of annihilation. Refugee camps, which were meant to be places of safety, often became sites of further suffering, marked by overcrowding, disease, and loss of dignity. The mention of “Pakistan army lorries with Baluchi and Pathan soldiers” reinforces the notion that displacement was a militarized process. The presence of soldiers highlights how migration was not voluntary but rather imposed and regulated, stripping people of their agency. Many were relocated under the supervision of military forces, yet this did not necessarily guarantee their safety, as massacres and ambushes frequently occurred during these mass movements. For those being “picked up,” the trauma of leaving their ancestral homes, often with little more than what they could carry, left permanent psychological scars. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth argue that such experiences create an ongoing rupture in identity and belonging, leading to long-term generational trauma.

The Psychological and Cultural Trauma of Partition

Partition did not merely redraw political borders; it fundamentally altered personal and communal identities. The reference to “Chundunnugger has been partly evacuated” signifies the erosion of entire communities. The word “evacuated” evokes images of a military operation rather than a natural migration, reinforcing the violent and coercive nature of Partition. Chundunnugger, once a place of coexistence, is now being emptied, leaving behind not just deserted homes but also memories of a lost way of life. For the Muslims still residing in Mano Majra, there is an impending sense of doom. They remain in their village, but the arrival of Sikh refugees (“this morning the lambardar reported the arrival of forty or fifty Sikh refugees”) foreshadows the communal tensions and violence that will soon erupt. The phrase “crossed the river by the ford at dawn” implies a desperate escape, reinforcing the idea that these refugees, too, have suffered. Rivers often hold symbolic meaning in trauma narratives, representing both physical and psychological crossings transitions from one state of being to another. During

Partition, many rivers became sites of horror, with bodies floating downstream as communal violence reached its peak.

The Temple as a Temporary Refuge and a Site of Communal Tension

The fact that the Sikh refugees are “putting up at the temple” is also significant. Temples, like mosques and gurdwaras, were traditionally places of worship and spiritual solace, yet during Partition, they became sites of both sanctuary and conflict. On one level, the temple offering shelter suggests a sense of communal solidarity, but it also hints at the underlying tensions will this new influx of displaced Sikhs alter the fragile peace in Mano Majra? Historically, refugee settlements in religious spaces often became catalysts for further violence, as displaced individuals carried with them stories of loss, grief, and vengeance. Dori Laub, a psychoanalyst specializing in trauma, argues that witnessing violence or displacement creates an internal rupture that is difficult to articulate. The refugees in this passage have likely experienced massacres, lost family members, and witnessed unspeakable horrors, yet their suffering is presented in a stark, factual manner, mirroring how trauma often numbs individuals to their own pain. Their presence at the temple is not just about finding physical shelter it is an attempt to find stability in an unstable world.

Collective Trauma and the Fear of the Unseen Future

The passage also underscores the collective trauma experienced by all groups involved. While Muslims are leaving in search of refuge, Sikhs are arriving, both groups carrying their own scars. The narrative does not explicitly depict violence at this moment, but the tension is palpable the reader understands that Partition has set into motion events that will likely lead to conflict. The absence of detailed descriptions of individual suffering reflects what trauma theorists call the unspeakability of trauma events so horrific that they defy verbal articulation. The text instead relies on fragmented reports, brief observations, and the steady buildup of dread. The trauma of Partition is not confined to a single religious group; rather, it engulfs entire communities. The people of Mano Majra, whether Muslim, Sikh, or Hindu, are all subject to the disintegration of their shared way of life. The transformation of a once-cohesive village into a space of uncertainty and fear reflects the broader historical reality of Partition, where neighbours turned against each other, and coexistence gave way to suspicion and hostility. It is a powerful narrative that captures the brutal realities of the Partition of India in 1947. This passage, depicting the violent death of a man attempting to sabotage a train bound for Pakistan, is a deeply traumatic moment that encapsulates the horrors of communal violence, the desperation of resistance, and the ultimate helplessness of individuals caught in historical turmoil. The language and imagery used in this passage create a harrowing scene that reflects both personal and collective trauma, reinforcing the novel’s central theme of loss, betrayal, and the breakdown of humanity during one of the bloodiest upheavals in history.

“The leader raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He hit his mark and one of the man's legs came off the rope and dangled in the air. The other was still twined round the rope. He slashed away in frantic haste. The engine was only a few yards off, throwing embers high up in the sky with each blast of the whistle. Somebody fired another shot. The man's body slid off the rope, but he clung to it with his hands and chin. He pulled himself up, caught the rope under his left armpit, and again started hacking with his right hand. The rope had been cut in shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. The engine was almost on him. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.”
(Singh Page 157) Train to Pakistan

The Dehumanization of Violence: A Body Reduced to an Object

One of the most striking elements of this passage is its depiction of violence in a way that renders the human body almost mechanical. The phrase “He hit his mark and one of the man's legs came off the rope and dangled in the air” immediately strips the victim of his personhood, reducing his body to disjointed parts. The leg is no longer part of a living, breathing human but an object subjected to brutal forces. This reflects what trauma theorist Elaine Scarry discusses in “The Body in Pain” (1985) that extreme violence leads to the destruction of the individual's agency and identity, reducing them to mere flesh, an entity to be acted upon rather than an autonomous being. The gruesome details of the victim's final struggle the way he “slashed away in frantic haste” and “went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth” underscore the primal desperation of survival. His frantic attempts to sever the rope, even using his teeth, evoke the loss of dignity that often accompanies traumatic experiences. The fact that he keeps fighting, despite the inevitability of his fate, highlights the human instinct to resist annihilation, even in the face of certain death. However, his efforts are ultimately futile, illustrating the overwhelming power of historical forces that render individual resistance insignificant.

The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Witnessing Brutality

Partition-era violence was not just about the physical destruction of bodies but also about the psychological trauma inflicted on those who witnessed such events. The passage's use of detached, almost clinical narration mirrors how trauma often numbs emotional responses. Instead of overtly expressing the horror of the situation, the text factually reports the man's death: “The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.” The starkness of these lines reflects how trauma often renders both victims and witnesses speechless. As Cathy Caruth suggests in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), trauma is often characterised by an inability to fully process or articulate the event, leading to gaps, silences, and emotional detachment in its narration. The train, an impersonal and unstoppable force, becomes a metaphor for the relentless tide of history. The fact that it went on to Pakistan without stopping symbolizes how history moves forward,

indifferent to individual suffering. The train does not pause to acknowledge the life it has just taken, just as the broader historical narrative of Partition often glosses over the individual tragedies that comprised its horror.

Collective Trauma and the Horror of Partition's Violence

While the scene primarily focuses on the fate of the man, it is crucial to recognize the broader implications of this moment within the novel's depiction of Partition-era violence. The execution of the man is not just an act of individual cruelty but part of a larger cycle of communal revenge. The people attacking the train see themselves as retaliating against past violence, turning the wheels of an ever-escalating conflict where morality is overshadowed by the desire for vengeance. The volley of shots fired at the man as he desperately tries to sever the rope illustrates how collective violence operates it is not the act of one person but of many, reinforcing the idea that communal trauma fuels mass atrocities. This aligns with trauma theorist Jeffrey C. Alexander's concept of ‘cultural trauma, in which an entire group perceives itself as a victim and, in response, enacts violence to reaffirm its identity and reclaim its sense of power. The Sikh and Hindu mobs attacking the train are themselves responding to massacres committed by Muslim groups elsewhere, demonstrating how trauma begets more trauma in an endless cycle of suffering.

Symbolism: The Train as a Carrier of Death and Displacement

Throughout *Train to Pakistan*, the train itself functions as a powerful symbol of both displacement and death. In this passage, the train becomes an instrument of execution, its mechanical momentum unstoppable. Its role in crushing the man beneath it reflects the broader historical reality of Partition, where trains carrying refugees often became moving graveyards, with entire carriages arriving at their destinations filled with corpses. The fact that the train “went on to Pakistan” without interruption mirrors the forced migration of millions, many of whom did not survive the journey. The imagery of the engine throwing embers high up in the sky with each blast of the whistle evokes a scene of destruction and chaos. Fire, often associated with both purification and devastation, suggests that this moment is not just an execution but a larger symbolic burning away of past identities, relationships, and humanity itself. The embers rising into

the night sky could be seen as a visual representation of souls lost to the violence of Partition.

The Inevitability of Death and the Futility of Struggle

Despite his immense will to survive, the man ultimately succumbs to the combined forces of the bullets and the train. His fate is sealed from the moment the leader raises his rifle, making his frantic attempts to free himself all the more tragic. The passage's emphasis on his gradual weakening "The man shivered and collapsed" captures the physical and symbolic exhaustion of those caught in the violence of Partition. Whether victims or perpetrators, no one emerges from this conflict unscathed. This moment in the novel can be read as an allegory for the helplessness of the common people during Partition. Just as the man struggles against the rope but ultimately falls beneath the train, ordinary citizens are caught in the violent machinery of political decisions and communal animosities beyond their control. His death is not just his own it represents the countless nameless individuals who were swept away by the tides of history, their stories lost to time.

Conclusion

Khushwant Singh's "Train to Pakistan" stands as a poignant literary testament to the devastating trauma inflicted by the Partition of India. Through its vivid depiction of communal violence, displacement, and the silencing of communities, the novel underscores the profound impact of historical trauma on individual and collective identities. This analysis has demonstrated how Singh's masterful use of literary devices, particularly the symbolism of the train, effectively conveys the horrors of the Partition. As a contribution to trauma studies, "Train to Pakistan" highlights the importance of considering the cultural and historical contexts in which trauma occurs,

emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of collective and cultural trauma. Ultimately, the novel serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring legacies of historical violence and the imperative of remembrance and healing.

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