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COMMUNAL HARMONY AND ITS BREAKDOWN IN *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*: A POSTCOLONIAL AND TRAUMA-THEORETICAL APPROACH

Afsar Irshad Khan[1]
Student
B.A. (Hons.) English
Amrita Tyagi[2]
Professor
School Of Liberal Education,Galgotias University

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Abstract: This paper examines the portrayal of communal harmony and its subsequent breakdown in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, using postcolonial and trauma theory as analytical frameworks. Set during the Partition of India, the novel captures how centuries-old interfaith coexistence in a rural village unravels under the pressure of political manipulation, historical trauma, and collective fear. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and "third space," and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the paper explores how Singh uses silence, rumor, and fragmented identities to depict the psychological disintegration of a community. The study also reflects on subaltern experience, gendered trauma, and the ethics of literary witness. It argues that Partition was not merely a territorial or religious rupture, but a profound collapse of human bonds and historical memory.

Keywords: Partition literature, trauma theory, postcolonialism, Khushwant Singh, communal harmony, subaltern voices, gendered silence

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most searing and divisive chapters in modern South Asian history. It was not merely a redrawing of borders but a rupture that cleaved the subcontinent along lines of religion, ideology, and memory. The cost of this political decision was not just territorial-it was profoundly human. Families were shattered, identities distorted, and centuries of coexistence unraveled in a matter of weeks. Over two million people were killed, and more than fifteen million were displaced, making it the largest mass migration in recorded history. But beyond these staggering statistics lie stories of betrayal, silence, fear, and moral failure-stories often drowned out by nationalist rhetoric or forgotten entirely.

Literature has long served as a space to capture the emotional and ethical dimensions of such

historical trauma, and few literary works have succeeded in doing so with the emotional intensity and moral complexity of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956). Written less than a decade after Partition, Singh's novel stands apart from the more panoramic or ideological representations of the event by narrowing its gaze to the microcosm of a single village: Mano Majra, situated on the India-Pakistan border. Through this setting, Singh is able to explore how communal harmony, built over centuries of peaceful cohabitation, disintegrates when it is exposed to the heat of political propaganda, historical violence, and emotional rupture. Singh's literary perspective is informed not only by his identity as a writer but also by his first-hand experience as a witness to Partition. Having traveled between Delhi and Lahore during the upheaval and lost friends and acquaintances to communal violence, Singh was intimately familiar with the horrors he describes. His firsthand knowledge lends *Train to Pakistan* its unmistakable realism-an honesty that does not sensationalize violence but rather confronts its psychological and ethical consequences. The novel does not present heroes or martyrs in the traditional sense; instead, it offers readers a morally grey landscape where individuals must navigate the collapse of ethical certainty.

This paper argues that *Train to Pakistan* can be best understood through the dual lens of postcolonial theory and trauma studies. The novel not only critiques the colonial and political forces that created the conditions for Partition, but also delves into the psychological consequences of that violence, particularly on rural communities. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, third space, and mimicry, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this study explores how Singh's narrative structure, character portrayals, and use of silence contribute to a larger critique of historical erasure, emotional paralysis, and the betrayal of ordinary lives by the state.

The central question this paper investigates is: How does Singh depict the breakdown of communal harmony, not merely as a political outcome but as a psychological and moral trauma? It further asks: How does the novel give voice to the silenced and the subaltern while simultaneously reflecting the limitations of representation itself-particularly in the case of women and the marginalized. Each section integrates textual analysis with theoretical insight, seeking to unpack how Singh navigates the complexities of communal identity, historical narrative, and the lingering aftershocks of collective violence.

In the end, *Train to Pakistan* is not just a Partition novel-it is a moral text, one that resists closure and resolution. It demands from its readers not simply remembrance, but ethical engagement. By foregrounding characters who are often overlooked in nationalist histories-villagers, women, bureaucrats, criminals-Singh not only tells the story of Partition but also interrogates who gets to write history, who suffers its consequences, and who gets forgotten along the way.

Khushwant Singh's decision to set *Train to Pakistan* in a small, seemingly insignificant village like Mano Majra is neither accidental nor merely aesthetic. On the contrary, it is one of the novel's most powerful postcolonial gestures. In choosing a rural

Punjabi settlement-unremarkable in scale, tradition-bound, and often bypassed by political attention-Singh shifts the narrative focus away from elite national leaders and urban centers, and toward the everyday experiences of postcolonial subjects. Mano Majra is not just a setting; it is a symbol of India's hybrid identity, and a metaphor for the fragile balance between communal coexistence and inherited colonial divisions.

To understand the collapse of Mano Majra as a postcolonial moment, it is essential to engage with Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical concepts, particularly his notions of "hybridity," "mimicry," and "third space." According to Bhabha, postcolonial identities are not pure or stable; rather, they are always in flux-constructed through negotiation, repetition, and displacement. He defines hybridity as the in-between condition of cultural interaction, where meanings are constantly shifting and no identity is fixed. In *Train to Pakistan*, Mano Majra embodies this hybrid space-a "third space" that does not conform to the dominant narratives of Hindu nationalism or Muslim separatism.

The villagers, regardless of their religious affiliations, live by a shared rhythm of life dictated by seasons, harvests, festivals, and local spiritual beliefs. Muslims and Sikhs pray at their respective places of worship, yet they participate in one another's lives with little friction. For example, Imam Baksh and Meet Singh, two religious figures from different communities, coexist in mutual respect, and the villagers' collective reaction to the murder of Lala Ram Lal is marked more by confusion than by communal accusation. However, this hybrid cultural space begins to rupture as external political narratives begin to seep in, infecting Mano Majra with fear and suspicion. The arrival of government officials, the introduction of nationalist rhetoric, and the circulation of communal rumors start to overwrite the village's shared reality with the violent binaries of Partition. This transformation exemplifies Bhabha's theory that colonial power does not just impose foreign rule-it reconfigures the very language and categories through which the colonized understand themselves.

Singh's depiction of this shift is subtle but devastating. The police fabricate a narrative that blames Muslim gangsters for a local crime, despite knowing the truth. This act mirrors the British colonial tendency to control subject populations through categorical simplification-dividing them into "types" based on religion, loyalty, or threat potential. In postcolonial India, the same logic persists. Muslims are increasingly constructed as a suspect community-not because of any specific crime, but because of their religious identity in the newly imagined Indian nation-state.

This shift in perception reflects what Bhabha calls "mimicry"-the process by which the colonized imitate the forms of the colonizer (law, governance, identity politics), but in doing so, reveal the absurdity and fragility of those very forms. The Indian state, supposedly free from colonial rule, repeats the same oppressive mechanisms of surveillance, scapegoating, and forced migration. Thus, Partition is not simply an aftermath of colonialism-it is its grim legacy, still echoing in the decisions of magistrates and the

prejudices of villagers.

The construction of communal boundaries in Mano Majra is also deeply linguistic. When the villagers begin to use phrases like "they should go to Pakistan," Singh exposes the tragic success of nationalist discourse in rewriting religious identity as national allegiance. A man like Imam Baksh, who has lived his entire life in India, suddenly becomes "Pakistani," not through choice but through rhetorical and political force. In Bhabha's terms, this is the collapse of the third space-the moment hybridity is no longer tenable, and the colonized are forced into reductive identities they do not recognize. The transformation of the physical space of Mano Majra further illustrates its postcolonial disintegration. Initially, the train station is a site of continuity-a place where life unfolds predictably. Trains come and go, villagers gather for gossip, and the rhythm of the outside world is synchronized with village life. But as Partition progresses, the train becomes a symbol of horror. It brings not people, but corpses. What was once a channel of connection becomes a carrier of death. This is a powerful metaphor for postcolonial disillusionment: the modernity promised by trains, clocks, and bureaucracy collapses into violence and betrayal.

In this context, the arrest and exile of Mano Majra's Muslim population becomes a literal act of de-hybridization. It is an erasure of history-a denial that these people ever belonged. The village, once rich in shared rituals and interdependence, becomes mono-religious, and by extension, spiritually and culturally impoverished. Singh shows that the cost of national purity is not just political-it is deeply human. Postcolonial theory also forces us to consider Singh's own position as a postcolonial writer-not just recording events but critiquing the inherited structures of identity and power. In many ways, *Train to Pakistan* resists the grand narratives of nationhood. It does not glorify the birth of India or the formation of Pakistan. Instead, it laments what is lost-the plural, hybrid, everyday worlds that get crushed between ideological walls. Ultimately, Mano Majra's collapse is not inevitable-it is engineered, through political fear, colonial residue, and communal manipulation. Singh's portrayal of this breakdown through the lens of a small village makes a larger argument: postcolonial independence does not guarantee moral freedom. If anything, it reveals how unfree and unstable identity can become when it is defined only through exclusion.

While *Train to Pakistan* is often recognized for its stark depiction of communal violence during Partition, its real emotional force lies in what it refuses to show outright-in the gaps, silences, and emotional paralysis that follow catastrophe. One of the novel's most powerful achievements is its articulation of trauma not through spectacle, but through subtle disruption. This aligns closely with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which argues that trauma is not a wound that can be simply narrated, but rather an experience that defies immediate comprehension and resurfaces as a haunting, deferred realization.

In Caruth's terms, trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event... but rather in the way it's precisely not known in the first instance" (Caruth 4). In *Train to*

Pakistan, the arrival of the ghost train is such a moment. When a train pulls into Mano Majra carrying hundreds of dead bodies-mutilated corpses of Sikhs and Hindus returning from Pakistan-it marks not just a moment of horror, but a collapse of understanding. The event is so overwhelming, so absurd in its cruelty, that the villagers are left speechless-not because they have nothing to say, but because language itself fails them. This moment fundamentally transforms the village psyche. Before the ghost train, the communal identity of Mano Majra is based on trust, habit, and shared existence. Afterward, paranoia replaces familiarity, and fear erases memory. The train's cargo is not just dead bodies-it is the return of the repressed, a physical embodiment of a historical trauma that no one is prepared to confront.

Singh captures this trauma not with graphic description, but with narrative stillness. The reactions of the villagers are muted. They gather. They observe. Then they fall silent. This refusal to dramatize grief mirrors Caruth's insight that trauma often resists representation-it cannot be made legible because it fractures the structures of meaning and time. The villagers do not fully comprehend what they are seeing. The ghost train is a fact, yes-but its emotional and moral implications arrive much later, or not at all.

The ghost train also functions as a symbol of cyclical trauma. Trains, often associated with colonial modernity and progress, are inverted in Singh's novel. Instead of movement toward development or national unity, they become vehicles of death, returning again and again with new corpses, new shocks, new silences. These recurring arrivals mirror Caruth's notion of "belatedness"-trauma returns, not because it seeks resolution, but because it was never properly absorbed in the first place. Importantly, the villagers never truly speak of the train's meaning. It becomes a ghost in the collective memory, lingering in the background of every conversation, every glance. People change their routines, alter their prayers, avoid certain places-but they never name their fear. This is what makes the trauma collective but unspeakable. It is embedded in actions, not in discourse. One of the most poignant depictions of this unspoken trauma is seen in Meet Singh, the Sikh priest of the village. Though nominally a religious leader, he finds himself at a loss-not only for answers, but for words. His sermons become quieter, his influence wanes, and his belief in the moral order of the world is visibly shaken. His inability to offer comfort or clarity reflects the spiritual disorientation that trauma induces. Religion, community, and tradition-all the frameworks that once gave Mano Majra its moral center-prove inadequate in the face of trauma's enormity.

Even more telling is the emotional journey of Jugga, whose transformation into a sacrificial figure is precipitated by the ghost train. For Jugga, the train does not just carry bodies-it threatens the life of Nooran, his lover and an embodiment of all that connects him to humanity. His final act of self-sacrifice is not a political statement or religious gesture-it is a trauma response, a desperate attempt to reclaim agency in a world that has stripped him of voice, future, and moral direction.

In this sense, trauma in *Train to Pakistan* is not confined to memory-it becomes a

force of action, pushing individuals toward ethical decisions that exceed ideology. Caruth's trauma theory emphasizes that trauma, when confronted honestly, can become a site of ethical engagement. Jugga's leap onto the rope to save the Muslim refugees is such a moment. It is not framed as heroism, but as a necessary interruption of violence-one man's refusal to let history repeat itself.

The novel's structural silence around trauma also mirrors its narrative strategy. Singh does not explain the ghost train's effect in psychological terms. He does not offer internal monologues or therapeutic insights. Instead, he leaves the trauma unfinished, unprocessed. The reader, like the villagers, is left to sit with it-to feel its weight without the release of resolution. This mirrors Caruth's idea that trauma "cries out in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 5). In *Train to Pakistan*, that truth is the incomprehensibility of communal hatred, and the fragility of the human psyche when faced with its consequences.

Moreover, Singh refuses to grant the reader catharsis. There is no clear restoration of order, no narrative closure. Even after Jugga's act, the novel ends not with redemption, but with a sense of deep moral exhaustion. This is deliberate. Trauma, Singh suggests, is not something one overcomes-it is something one learns to carry.While *Train to Pakistan* is often praised for its depiction of communal breakdown and moral ambiguity, its engagement with gender-especially the experiences of women-is both subtle and haunting. Singh does not center female narratives in the traditional sense. Yet, through the silences, absences, and muted presence of characters like Nooran and Haseena, the novel presents a chilling portrait of gendered trauma during Partition-one that mirrors historical reality, even in its omissions. In many Partition narratives, female voices are not only marginalized-they are erased. The trauma of women is often consumed within the larger rhetoric of national shame, honour, and sacrifice. Feminist scholars such as Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon have argued that the Partition discourse often rendered women as symbols-of honour, of community, of purity-while neglecting their lived, bodily, and emotional experiences. *Train to Pakistan* does not sensationalize this trauma, but it evokes it through what it leaves unsaid.

Nooran, the young Muslim woman in love with Jugga, never directly speaks for herself in the novel. Her presence is filtered through Jugga's gaze, her fate tied to his moral evolution. When she is sent away with the other Muslims, her grief is implied but never voiced. This silence is not an authorial oversight-it is a literary echo of how real women were denied agency during Partition. As villages erupted into violence, women were raped, abducted, forcibly converted, or even killed by their own families to "protect" honour. Their stories were not told in nationalist histories because they complicated the heroic narrative of liberation. Nooran's role becomes even more tragic when we consider her pregnancy-a detail Singh plants with restraint. Her unborn child represents both hope and vulnerability, but this potential is brutally interrupted by displacement and the threat of genocide. Nooran becomes a vessel of trauma-a living, silenced memory of love destroyed by communalism. That she survives due to Jugga's final act of sacrifice does not redeem the narrative-it sharpens its

pain. She is saved, but never empowered.

Similarly, Haseena, the young Muslim girl entangled with Hukum Chand, is another site of gendered trauma. Her role in the novel is ambiguous: she is not a lover, not quite a prostitute, and certainly not a willing participant. She is a symbol of male guilt and hypocrisy, reduced to a sexual object by a man who holds political and legal power. Hukum Chand's interactions with her-marked by self-disgust, nostalgia, and moral collapse-expose the emotional emptiness of those in power. Unlike Jugga or Iqbal, Haseena is not given a narrative arc. She is used, pitied, and forgotten. This mirrors a historical truth: Partition was a war on women's bodies. Both Hindu and Muslim women were abducted, trafficked, and traded. And after the violence ended, many were forcibly "recovered" by the state, with little concern for their consent or psychological state. Their trauma, layered with shame and societal pressure, was often buried under nationalist agendas.

Singh's refusal to give these women loud voices may at first seem like a narrative flaw-but it can also be read as a form of respectful restraint. He does not pretend to speak for them. Instead, he leaves their pain to resonate in the background-in absences, unfinished conversations, and haunting gestures. This strategy aligns with trauma theory's recognition of silence as a legitimate response to overwhelming horror. Cathy Caruth suggests that trauma is often encoded in "missed encounters" and "haunting repetitions," where meaning resists being fully grasped or spoken. In Nooran and Haseena, we see this: they are the ghosts of a nation's shame, too painful to narrate, too central to ignore.

Moreover, their marginalization also reflects the patriarchal nature of communalism itself. Women are rarely the instigators of Partition violence-but they are often its first and worst victims. They become markers of boundary, honour, and revenge. In *Train to Pakistan*, their stories do not unfold-they are folded into the decisions of men. This structural silencing makes Singh's depiction all the more unsettling-and, in some ways, more accurate than the overblown heroism found in nationalist fiction.

Even in Jugga's final act-where he sacrifices himself to save the train carrying Muslims-Nooran is not part of the moral conversation. She is the reason for his redemption, but not a participant in it. She is saved, yes, but without knowing it. Her life continues without agency, without acknowledgement. In this, Singh dramatizes one of the most cruel legacies of Partition: survival without resolution, memory without meaning. By positioning women as silent figures surrounded by chaos, Singh engages in a form of ethical witnessing. He does not appropriate their voice, but he ensures their pain is not erased. In doing so, *Train to Pakistan* joins a small group of Partition novels that acknowledge the gendered dimensions of trauma, not through spectacle, but through emotional honesty.

Conclusion

In a literary landscape crowded with accounts of Partition-some nationalistic, some romanticized, some brutally honest-Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* continues to stand out as a work of rare moral clarity and emotional restraint. What makes this novel so enduring

is not its historical scope, but its willingness to remain small, specific, and intimate, focusing on a single village and a handful of lives to speak to a cataclysm that affected millions. In doing so, Singh not only tells a story of a fractured nation, but also offers a profound reflection on human vulnerability, moral paralysis, and the cost of forgetting.

This paper has explored the collapse of communal harmony in *Train to Pakistan* through the intertwined frameworks of postcolonial theory and trauma studies. It has argued that Singh's portrayal of Mano Majra is not a nostalgic fantasy of coexistence, but a postcolonial third space-a zone of hybrid identities and shared histories that is violently dismantled by the forces of nationalism, bureaucracy, and inherited colonial divisions. Using Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and mimicry, we have seen how communal identity in the novel is always already precarious-threatened not just by external events, but by internal contradictions and unresolved histories. The ghost train, analyzed through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, emerges as a central symbol of collective shock and belated understanding. It is not just a vehicle of corpses, but a haunting interruption of the village's sense of normalcy-a traumatic event that resists meaning and silences those who survive it. The novel does not offer closure or catharsis. Instead, it leaves the reader in the same disoriented emotional state as the characters-unable to explain, to justify, or to forget.

Further, this study has highlighted how Singh addresses the silenced and often invisible gendered dimensions of Partition. Through characters like Nooran and Haseena, he presents women not as side characters, but as embodiments of silenced trauma-figures whose suffering cannot be narrated within the dominant political discourse. This form of representation, though understated, aligns with feminist trauma theory by recognizing silence not as absence but as a testament to the unspeakable.

Khushwant Singh's achievement lies in his ability to refuse neat binaries. There are no heroes and villains in *Train to Pakistan*-only people, trapped by history and trying to make sense of it. Iqbal, the intellectual, fails to act; Hukum Chand, the magistrate, drowns in guilt but does nothing; Jugga, the village gangster, redeems himself not through ideology but through an act of unspoken love and spontaneous moral courage. These characters, with all their flaws and contradictions, offer a deeper insight into Partition than any political slogan or historical report could provide. The novel also forces us to confront the question of historical memory. Who remembers Partition? Whose stories are told, and whose are erased? Singh's work is a literary answer to that silence. By focusing on rural voices, subaltern grief, and emotional fracture, he writes against the grain of nationalist history. He does not claim to speak for the millions displaced or killed-but he insists that we do not forget them.

Train to Pakistan is not just a story of the past. In the context of today's rising communal tensions, state-led polarization, and manufactured hate, it reads like a moral warning. The mechanisms that destroyed Mano Majra-rumor, bureaucracy, silence, ideological rigidity-are still very much alive. And the human capacity for cruelty, as Singh

reminds us, is only ever a step away when empathy fails. And yet, the novel is not entirely bleak. In Jugga's final act of sacrifice, Singh suggests that even in the ruins of morality, there remains a flicker of conscience. It may come from the least expected person. It may not be recognized. But it exists. And that, perhaps, is Singh's deepest message: that history, however brutal, is also shaped by individual choices-by people who, even for a moment, choose love over hate.

As a work of literary witness, *Train to Pakistan* does not offer solutions-it offers questions. It asks what it means to belong, to act, to suffer, and to remember. It demands that we read not just with our minds, but with our consciences. In a world eager to forget the difficult past, Singh's novel stands as a stubborn act of remembrance-an insistence that literature must speak where politics stays silent.

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