

**The Anxiety of being driven to the Periphery in Khushwant Singh's
*Train to Pakistan***

Poonam Charan

Assistant Professor (English) ,Government Dungar College, Bikaner, Rajasthan

Article Received: 02/06/2026
Article Accepted:03/07/2026
Published Online:04/07/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.98

Abstract:

Literature as an art form projects and reflects varied nuanced experiences of a writer dealing with and making sense of the changing socio-cultural space around him. Such experiences carry a burden and a responsibility- the load due to the loss of home and hearth and accountability due to expressing them uncontroversially. The final decade of British colonization witnessed a decline in Hindu-Muslim relationships, with the rising demand for Pakistan growing more intense. This paper attempts to analyse marginalised groups' psyches and comprehend the ruins of civilizational values. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is set in that period of History when communal riots spread all over the country and divided it into two parts. The novel depicts how the peaceful life changed into a nightmare. It describes the plight of helpless Muslims forced to migrate to a land that was not theirs. The novelist has discussed the meaning and significance of home. What happens when you are asked to leave not only your home but also your motherland?

Keywords: British Colonization, Hindu-Muslim relationship, Marginalization, Migration.

Introduction:

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* deals with the gruesome picture of the human tragedy in the wake of Partition. Like many other villages, Mano Majra fails to sustain peace and harmony. It yields before violence and bloodshed despite being unaffected for a long time. Before the summer of 1947, it had been the epicentre of communal harmony where people of different religions shared strong values and customs. The novel's dominant theme is the innate goodness of some individuals who try their level best and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of loved ones.

Mano Majra has been portrayed as a microcosm of Indian society where people of different cultures and religions coexist. Singh has tried to explore what the common folk thought about the event and how they reacted. It is evident that in the beginning, the multicultural society of the village has little to do with the Hindustan and Pakistan thing.

When Iqbal arrives in the village to stop the bloodshed and raise awareness, some villagers query about the Partition: "Well Babuji, tell us something. What is happening in the world? What is all this about Pakistan and Hindustan? (51) The Subinspector's report regarding the situation in the village proves that the common folk are devoid of the fact that the British have left and India is partitioned. Suvir Kaul comments:

The novel opens by describing a time when people's identities had been polarized into a simple, murderous opposition: you were Hindu, or you were Muslim, and you belonged to India or to Pakistan. Except for a few tiny villages like Mano Majra, where the Sikh peasant landlords lived in amity with their Muslim tenant farmers. (2001, 14)

The social and the traditional structure of pre-partition India constituted of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus existing together despite differences. Culture, language, and customs contributed to the larger Punjabi identity though religion divided them into communal groupings- almost separate identities at a certain level. Another identity- tense emotional belongingness to the village also operated at the immediate level, which subsumed even the separate religious identities. The popularity of the text lies in the narrative skill and a sincere belief in the social, moral and traditional framework of the Indian rural society.

When the ghost train arrives at Mano Majra, it brings about a drastic change in the existing harmony of the village. It makes people acutely conscious of the religious differences that have been dormant in their minds. Sikhs and Muslims who shared the same land and lived under the same sky began looking at each other with mutual distrust and hatred. The new political realities have vitiated the atmosphere so much so that Sikhs and Muslims of the village crave for each other's blood. Until the arrival of the 'ghost train' for the people of Mano Majra, their village was their only world. They drew their physical, religious, and ideological sustenance from no outside place but their world. It defined their social and spiritual being.

No doubt, the Muslims of Mano Mazra are a worried lot. The thought of leaving a place where they are born and brought up, where they have been living since time immemorial in perfect harmony and the feeling of brotherhood- is beyond comprehension. The notion of becoming a refugee in their land shattered the age-old rituals of Mano Majra. They never expected this to happen. They feel a sense of belonging to the place. How, pathetically, they express their feelings can be seen in the following lines: "What have we to do with Pakistan! We are born here, and so were our ancestors." Khushwant Singh also projects this loss of ease. People grow pale with fear of the unknown. Tension mounts and the atmosphere is surcharged with revenge and hostility. The pace of the narrative in *Train To Pakistan* picks up momentum. So, with the situation deteriorating every day the Muslim refugees of Mano Majra decide to go. They sense the hatred in the air.

Subaltern Studies emerged as a countertheory against the existing dominant history writing from the perspectives of Colonial, Nationalist and Marxist historiography. It is believed that mainstream historical writings have ignored various stories from the margins; they started concentrating on and bringing out the unwritten history of the oppressed and exploited class. The fundamental aim of Subaltern Studies is to find out the real history of the masses, whose history has not been written. Hence the studies strive to bring out the neglected version of mainstream historiography. Ranajit Guha argues that even after Independence, Indian Historiography is mainly bourgeois historiography that tells the upper class's stories and the histories of the oppressed and downtrodden are not considered.

The novelist captured well the nuances of the feelings and the emotional response of the Muslim refugees when they were instead compelled to leave their homes for good. The rural population of Punjab was not at all prepared for the big holocaust which the Partition proved to be and "it came as a big destabilizing factor in the smug and contended self-sufficiency of the Indian rural life." (78). They were caught in a disaster beyond their understanding. They sat and moped in their houses. They had heard of the atrocities committed by Sikhs on Muslims and of "mosques being desecrated by the slaughter of the pigs on the premises and of copies of the holy Koran being torn up" (103). They came to know that the Muslims from other villages had been evacuated to the refugee camps and arrangements had been made for their crossing the border. With heavy hearts, they decided to go away. However, the decision created scenes of gloom and pangs of separation. Imam Baksh broke into tears observing: "we have lived amongst you as your brothers" (110). It was extremely shocking to go away from what they knew to be their home. The women sat on the floors hugging each other and crying. It was as if in every home there had been a death.

The chapter entitled 'Mano Majra' projects the dividing loyalties of villagers, further worsened by the Head Constable's visit. The identity of Muslims as brothers and tenants were converted into others and refugees. The tales of atrocities committed by Muslims in the past were recalled, making them more anxious about Muslim's ungratefulness. Imam Baksh's heartfelt outpouring at current affairs is bitter and dismal. Leaving a land of forefathers or being thrown away from the land of upbringing takes no such time as settling and building land of their own: "all right, if we have to go, we'd better pack up our bedding and belongings. It will take us no more than one night to clear out of homes it has taken our fathers and grandfathers hundreds of years to make". (135)

A post-colonial reading of the text emphasizes that the concept of freedom and morality is of little importance to those who cope with the challenges of daily life. Politically, we gained freedom from the oppressive regime, but the poor and unprivileged conditions are still the same. Even after seven decades, people are still dying from hunger. The idea expressed by Lambardar is relevant in the present context. For the poor, freedom means

nothing. It is beneficial for educated people who will get jobs and money. Independence will not bring more lands and more cattle to these poor folk. Their distressed life will not change, and the barriers will be the same. S. Ravindranathan and R. K. Jacob comment: "Colonizers from without have gone back. Colonizers from within continue to colonize. When will this colonization end? Should there be another war of Independence? (2001, 80)

Ashcroft states that the literature written in the colonized countries is all postcolonial because they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the Imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. (1989, 2) The psychological impacts of colonialism were raised in the works of Frantz Fanon such as *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched Of The Earth*. Fanon observed that colonialism created deep scars in the psyche of the native. Fanon states:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all the forms and content. By making use of a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (1963, 169) A post-colonial reading of the text focuses not only on the state of the colonial regime but also on the power politics of the nation. It has been highlighted that those in power always marginalize the poor and oppressed. The bureaucratic officials can be seen distorting the facts and framing innocents as guilty. They don't even hesitate to manipulate the facts according to their will and choice. The ironic and satiric representation of the police officials in the text is rendered visible when the real culprits of the murder Malli and his gang, are set free. Further, they have been given authority and rights to look after Muslim property and homes.

Singh attempts to persuade the reader to remember the past and learn a lesson lest he should forget. The future generations must remember the price of independence and must not take it for granted. The long-awaited freedom resulted in the vivisection of a country. Kamra mentions: "one of the effects of reluctance to face this past has been that when the partition is acknowledged in the genres of collective memory (popular culture in particular), it is distanced in time and space from the present, and remains a story about the eyewitness generation, its participation, victimization, dislocation and trauma"(2015, 159).

The significance of reading such narrative texts is to guide future generations to the real difference between patriotism and jingoism. We have been reading tales of Gandhi and Nehru, but the voice of the refugees is limited to facts and figures. Our young students must acknowledge the relevance of sacrifices, not only of nationalistic leaders but also of common person.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2004.
- Guha, Ranajit, editor. *Subaltern Studies*. Vols. 1–6, Oxford UP.
- Kaul, Suvir, editor. *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*. Permanent Black, 2001.
- Kamra, S. “Engaging Traumatic Histories: The 1947 Partition of India in Collective Memory.” *Partition: The Long Shadow*, edited by Urvashi Butalia, Zubaan, 2015.
- Ravindranathan, S., and R. K. Jacob. “Khushwant Singh Writes at Home: A Postcolonial Reading of *Train to Pakistan*.” *Khushwant Singh: The Man and the Writer*, edited by R. K. Dhawan, Prestige Books, 2001.
- Singh, Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Penguin Books India, 2002. Originally published 1956.