

**The Witnessing Train: Memory and Violence in Krishan Chander's
*Peshawar Express***

Dr. Dinesh Panwar

Associate Professor, Department of English, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi

Email-dineshpanwar@dsc.du.ac.in

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Abstract

In *Peshawar Express* (1947), author Krishan Chander tells the Partition story in all its gruesome mass displacement, but offers the voice of an unlikely narrator: a train. In the mechanisation of the train, Chander makes Partition not just into a human tragedy but a systematic tragedy, citing the machinery of modernity for its own violence. This paper's objective is to analyse Story's narrative strategy, imaging and ethics. The paper proposes that the speaking train upends the traditional witness of a human tragedy, produces an archive of suffering that will never be forgotten and lays bare the dehumanising potential of modern technology. The essay places Chander's text into the context of Partition literature and of testimony in general, and delineates the ways the story's persistence is an indictment of the routinization and remembering of violence.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Testimony, Memory, Modernity

Introduction

In August 1947, about fourteen million people were displaced as a result of the Partition of India, with catastrophic massacre throughout the subcontinent. It constituted one of the largest migrations ever undertaken by humans. Refugee trains—the scenes of overcrowded trains with displaced families in inhuman conditions, the trains arriving at the stations with carriages packed with corpses, the railway system that used to be a lifeline, now a life-destroying machine—are among the most enduring images of Partition. Now a symbol of modernity and progress in the era of colonial rule, the train, too, became a witness to a mass of suffering and a means of atrocity during Partition. First of all, the train proclaims

that it was a witness to displacement: “My carriages were jam-packed with passengers, all of them Hindus” (Chander 69). The foreground emphasises the scale of migration, and the train becomes an onlooker of Partition's human tragedy. This paradox is well brought out in Krishan Chander's short story *Peshawar Express*. This story was written immediately after Partition where the journey is told of a refugee train from Peshawar to India. Jones' cool decision is the perspective, or persona, from which it is told: a train talking to itself. This is a narrative approach, which will make readers think and rethink the notions of witness, responsibility and memory. The narrative is neither a simple realist story nor a sentimental tragedy; rather, it is a witnessing filtered through the machinery and requires readers to look at the systemic and infrastructural aspects of violence. In this essay, I wish to suggest that *Peshawar Express* operates in a double mode of imagining as an allegory as well as that of archiving. The train narrator is extra sensitive to the refugees' mourning and admits that “I felt so weighed down under their cataclysmic grief that it slowed down my speed” (Chander 70). The empowerment of the machine through personification gives Chander the ability to be an ethical agent or witness that documents human suffering. The train's voice transforms testimony, the story's images reveal the process of humans being objectified as cargo, and the film's demeanor necessitates an ethical response instead of emotional consumption. Thus, it is Chander's intention to ask questions at the heart of memory studies and trauma theory: who speaks, how trauma gets written down, and what it means to remember violence without recourse to the easy ways of simplification.

Among the leading progressive writers in Hindi & Urdu was Krishan Chander (1914-1977). Saadat Hasan Manto would give a greater focus on the ridiculousness of Partition, whereas Chander was a writer who used to mix reality with allegory. His work includes questioning class oppression in stories like *Annadata* and *Ek Gadhe Ki Atmakatha*, and acts of communal violence in Partition stories like *Peshawar Express* are portrayed with sharp political critique. Where there is Chander's *Peshawar Express*, which foregrounds infrastructure, Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* employs irony and madness to reveal the nonsensical nature of borders. He has opted for a train as narrator, one which compels the reader to face the ways in which colonial modernity - railways, maps, census categories - was complicit with Partition violence. As Urvashi Butalia points out, “Partition was not only about mobs but about systems collapsing, or worse, functioning all too well for the purposes of exclusion” (52). Chander beautifully illustrates just this concept of system and horror. Chander's work deserves to be distinguished from the work of writers like Bhisham Sahni in *Tamas* who look at Partition as individual moral dilemmas and from Rajinder Singh Bedi, who looks at the intimate tragedy. Instead, Chander stages the "magnitude of the

displacement", and the train serves as a representation of the fall of human dignity in systemic violence. On doing so, he intimately incorporates the mass misfortune of Partition into the vocabulary of modern infrastructure. Krishan Chander's short story *Peshawar Express* is one of the most arresting portrayals of the Partition violence in literature, in which he replaces the familiar human narrator with a developed character that is a train. The narrative in this work begins with the train's first sentence, which self-identifies as a "witness to displacement": "I heaved a sigh of relief as I pulled out of the Peshawar railway station. My carriages were jam-packed with passengers, all of them Hindus" (Chander 69). The cruelty of Partition and the magnitude of migration are brought into sharp focus in the foreground of the image, and the train becomes a witness to the human tragedy of Partition. A narration voice for a story that is both unprecedented and yet ideologically strong is set here. There's a fact-like, almost machine-like tone to the voice, but it's headlined unmistakably by an emotional weight experienced from the long ballast of human miseries. But in contrast to the embeddedness of human narrators in certain social positions, or connecting to specific communities, or in subjective recollections of certain lives, the situation of the train is liminal, and it exists beyond the human social order. It is not affiliated with any religion or ethnic or racial group, nor does it have personal trauma as in the more typical sense. It is a neutral but very attentive and very sensitive witness; however, the testimony of which is not created by unique experiences, but cannot be limited by them. This is a narrative technique that can be a sideways notion of an 'infrastructural witness', in other words, a form of infrastructure that is not only a moving vehicle to carry things and people, but one that also serves as the documentation of the historical burden of the displacement. The train-as-witness becomes a piece of memory spread out across the landscape, gathering over the years as the train is exposed to violence, migration, and death regularly. According to F. K. Singh, "Chander removes the human buffer that might soften horror and instead allows a machine to catalogue suffering with relentless regularity" (117). This is where the radical aspect of Chander's telling comes into focus. Without the emotional make-up of a human filter, the author confronts readers with violence. The train chugs with only coldness, and it's no surprise that the coldness adds emotional qualities to a story. The train is unable to exaggerate, forget, or selectively remember, which gives its narration of things a kind of ethical dimension which perhaps human narration cannot reach. In this context, the train is not just a material image of many communities; it's an objective document of the brutality of Partition. It does not differentiate between Hindu, Muslim and Sikh suffering. Rather, it measures the losses of humans as a whole with care and accuracy. This neutrality is important as it undermines the logic of communal historiography, which often emphasises one

community's suffering at the expense of another. The train is memory; it's memory built up on top of itself; it's memory that's beginning to grow; one story is not a story, there is only a hundred stories that are like a bunch of fragmented journeys, crying, separation, death. It does so by serving as an allegory for the kind of traumatic reality that lies beyond individual or community stories. It proposes that Partition violence was not simply sporadic, but a structural feature inbuilt in the very process of the movement of people on newly drawn borders.

Furthermore, Chander's images keep this notion alive by complexly merging mechanical and human registers in a disorienting fashion. The train testifies, "The weight on my coaches was unbearable, not of goods but of men, women, and children pressed into every inch" (Chander). By applying the word "weight" to a human being, one of the results is that the human becomes quantifiable cargo, for the displacement systems saw humans as cargo. The slipperiness between the human body and the cargo of physical goods points to the dehumanisation of the migration logic at Partition. Later, the train talks about "like parcels abandoned by careless senders" (Chander). This simile is especially significant because it deprives people of their differences and volition, treating them as stray postcards. According to B. Saha, Chander is a novel that "juxtaposes the mechanical with the organic to show how modernity makes bodies interchangeable, reducing screams to noise and flesh to load" (Contemporary Literary Review India). Taken together, this observation illustrates the political aspect of Chander's imagery, which first critiques Partition violence, but also the structures of modern bureaucratic and technological systems that allow for such dehumanization.

Additionally, all the mentions of cargo, parcels, and burden are a reminder of the colonial history of railway infrastructure in the Indian subcontinent. The railway system was established by the British under their rule with the aim of enhancing the transport of manufactured goods, raw materials and administrative control and all of its underlying principles were geared towards extraction and efficiency, not human well-being. This very infrastructure was later used to transport people during the Partition, many times amidst chaotic and violent situations. The railway in Chander's story is an ironic means of mobility and death. The symbol of colonial modernity and progress becomes a vehicle of human tragedy. In this way, the narrative implicitly challenges the colonial lineage of infrastructures that remained powerful even after liberation. Chander's is a storyteller with precision and not excess. The train does not sensationalise violence but gives it a bureaucratic cool: "At every halt, the soldiers counted the passengers, rifles in hand, their faces stiff as stone" (Chander). It's really uncomfortable, the emotional repression in this description. These practices of

enumerating passengers dehumanise the human beings counted, and by having soldiers around, the apparatus of the state is introduced to an already precarious situation facing the displaced. The soldiers' faces appear stiff and unsympathetic, furthering the notion that Partition violence was not always chaos regarding its use of violence but well-planned and monitored. The plot develops at the same rate as the train does. The repetition of the tedious journeys to and from the camps is interrupted by unexpected terror scenes, which is a rhythm that the refugees actually experience. This construction compels the audience to occupy the space of displacement in their temporal exhaustion, leaving uncertainty and fear as companions. The most chilling part of the Partition was, notes Veena Das, "the most terrifying aspect of Partition was the normalisation of cruelty" (189). In Chander's tale that is demonstrated, violence is reduced to a mere element of routine and not ruptured by extraordinary circumstances. Mechanical and procedural narration of the banality of suffering exposes how atrocity is inscribed in the simplicity of mobile and constitutional systems. The most disturbing moment of the story is when the dead are brought up in front of the train: "They stood before me like passengers demanding entry, their silence louder than any scream" (Chander). The images here serve to collapse the boundary between the living and the dead and indicate that bodies can still be bureaucratized, even after death. The corpses' silence becomes more powerful than any verbal expression of suffering, to make people understand how incomprehensible mass violence is! The refugees are dehumanised, like the dead. The guards "were forced to throw them out of the carriages" because of the malodour of decomposing bodies (Chander 72). People's lives are treated as a second-rate inconvenience for logistics. This moment is not here as a feeling, but rather as the archived memory of the train, which serves as a witness in this context: the train is as dehumanised and impersonal as historical trauma itself, neither grim nor sad but simply a recording machine. Chander presents a metaphor of moral accounting in condemning the nature of communal violence. Whenever there is information around that lots of people have been killed, there is a measurable level of grief, and there are numbers to pinpoint suffering against other communities. On the contrary, that "communal arithmetic replaces moral arithmetic: what counts is not life itself but the number of dead each group can claim" (118), Singh states. This turning of grief into numerical contestation shows the instrumentation of death in the Partition Politics. Mourning becomes specific, and sympathy depends upon the community affiliation. Under this prism, Chander uncovers the moral decay that permeates any mass violence: The lives of men and women become statistics when they are the object of melting down in a process of "justifying violence". The train itself is seemingly transformed emotionally by the end of the story: "My wheels burned, not from speed but from shame. I

longed to shut my eyes of iron, but I had none” (Chander). It makes a mechanical object to moral witness. The act of giving shame to a machine makes object/subject distinction unstable, under the possibility of ethical memory of non-human systems. This failing to close its eyes calls attention to the train's ever-present role as witness, a status that means trauma engrained in the infrastructure cannot be forgotten or defaced. Memory Studies critics would undoubtedly side with Pierre Nora, who, from a different angle, talks of "sites of memory" where memory would also be found "in things, their layout, shapes, and spatial organisation," as Chander's is. In the *Peshawar Express*, the railway becomes just such a place: it carries with itself the histories of migration, violence and colonial modernity. The train becomes an archive that cannot be forgotten, holding the memory of sufferings that memories might not hold. In the end, *Peshawar Express* will not dichotomise Partition along the lines of victim/perpetrator. Rather, it frames violence as a condition of history, shared with other things like systems, structures, and infrastructures. Revenge logic is most disturbing when the narrator attributes, “The population parity between India and Pakistan must be maintained” (Chander 74). Human beings are reduced to being equated to numbers in a macabre formula for communal retribution. The moral ambiguity of the story is highlighted by the fact that it doesn't demonise the fate of one community over another. It draws attention to how contemporary systems of governance and mobility can make themselves molecularly complicit in mass killings. This puts Chander's story in a much larger context of global displacement. The train almost becomes a symbolic symbol for all modern moving systems of forced migration: colonial railway systems, slave ships of the Atlantic slave trade and also refugee ways up to this day. *Peshawar Express* is a historical document and a moral warning as well for the contemporary readers. It requires awareness of violence in the system that seems neutral or as if it is functioning efficiently. A story that argues that memory cannot be limited to human survivors, but should also take into account the infrastructures that transport, carry, and sometimes reproduce violence. In this way, Chander's work is still very much relevant, and a strong reflection of how history can be recalled, passed on and etched onto the body and the machine.

Conclusion

Peshawar Express is one of the most disturbing tales of Partition from the hands of Krishan Chander. Chander animates the train and replays the infrastructure as both witness and victim, compelling readers to look face-to-face with the facilitation of systems towards atrocity. Even though the train sees acts of the most unspeakable brutality, at the end of the train, each prisoner imagines a future free of communal divisions: “Then there will be no Hindus and no Muslims. They will all be workers and human beings” (Chander 77). This is

one of those moments that ultimately brings a humanist message, far beyond the brutality of the Partition, providing a recolonisation of communal possibility and social solidarity. Both his sober voice and his dehumanising imagery and startling tableau show the moral breakdown in terms of communal mathematics. The bottom line of the story is that suffering isn't sentimentalised. Rather, it requires political reflection and historical accountability. Finally, in the age we live in, where displacement and communal woes have become the norm, the call from the *Peshawar Express* is still coming, and its cast in iron is asking us to listen.

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