



The Trauma of Partition: Memory, Violence and Loss in Train to Pakistan

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Abstract: criminology and criminal law, a victim of a crime is an identifiable person who has been harmed individually and directly by the perpetrator, rather than by society as a whole. However, this may not always be the case, as with victim of white collar crime, who may not be clearly identifiable or directly linked to crime against a particular individual. Victims of white collar crime are often denied their status as victims by social construction of the concept. The concept also remains a controversial topic within women's studies. The Supreme Court of United States first recognized the rights of crime victims to make a Victim Impact Statement during the sentencing phase of Criminal trial in the case of *Payne v. Tennessee* 501 U.S 808 (1991). A victim impact panel, which usually follows the victim impact statement, is a form of community based or restorative justice in which the crime victims (or relatives and friends of deceased crime victim) meet with the defendant after conviction to tell the convict about how the criminal activity affected them, in the hope of rehabilitation or deterrence. Victimology is the study of victimization, including the psychological effects on victims, relationships between victim and offenders, the interactions between victims and criminal justice system—that is, the police and Courts, and corrections officials and the connection between victims and other social groups and institutions, such as media, businesses, and social movements.¹ While we talk about the consequences of crime, emotional distress as the result of crime is a recurring theme for all victims of crime. The most common problems effecting three quarters of victims, were psychological problems, including; fear and anxiety, nervousness, self blaming, anger, shame and difficulty in sleeping.² These problems often result in development of chronic post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Post crime distress is also linked to pre-existing emotional problems and socio demographic variables, This has been known to become a leading cause of the elderly to be more adversely affected. The environmental theory posits that the location and context of the crime bring the victim of the crime and its perpetrator together³. *Ibi jus ibi remedium*- Where is there is a right there is a remedy if any one's right is violated then there is definite remedy available in civil law as well as in form of punishment in criminal law. Victim rights to be informed, present and heard victim criminal justice system. The term crime victim refers to any person, group of entity who has suffered injury or loss due to illegal activity of someone.

Keywords: Partition literature, trauma, memory, communal violence, displacement, Khushwant Singh, Train to Pakistan

Introduction

Vivisected and bleeding, India faced a host of foreseen and unforeseen misfortunes after Partition. The solidarity among its people buckled under the weight of communalism, fanaticism, and disintegration, and in that collapse, violence erupted and spread in every direction. This is the violence — and the forces that shaped it — that Khushwant Singh renders in *Train*

to Pakistan, a novel that mourns the collapse of human values in a peace-loving village even as the nation braced for the enormous task of governing a divided land.

Train to Pakistan sits within a cluster of novels — Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*, and later Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* — written by authors who lived through 1947 and chose fiction as the medium for recording what history books



left out: the everyday texture of communities unravelling under rumour and mob violence, and the way trust between neighbours eroded first gradually, then all at once. While Nahal's *Azadi* traces the Hindu exodus from a Pakistan convulsed by Partition, Singh locates his story on the Indian side of the newly drawn border, in the invented village of Mano Majra, and poses a tighter, more personal question: how does a community bound together for generations turn against itself in a matter of weeks? This paper approaches Singh's answer from three angles — Partition as personal memory, as a record of communal violence, and as a lament for what was lost.

The historical figures are staggering:

The Writer as Chronicler

The division of the nation brought widespread bewilderment and the erosion of human values, and Singh witnessed the tragedy of Partition firsthand and suffered great mental agony as a result; its savagery embittered him toward human nature itself. Singh was, by 1947, already a practising lawyer and had begun a career in journalism and diplomacy that would later make him one of India's most widely read columnists. Still, it was his direct exposure to the killing that autumn — the trains, the refugee columns, the burning villages along the Punjab border — that turned him toward fiction. In a talk for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, he recalled that the beliefs he had cherished all his life — in the innate goodness of the common man and in Indians as a peace-loving people — were shattered by “the most savage massacres known in the history of the country,” and that he became an angry, disenchanted man who decided to try his hand at writing. As he put it elsewhere, “The partition theme was born out of a sense of guilt that I had done nothing to save the lives of the innocent people, and behaved like a coward” (Dhawan 36).

somewhere between ten and fifteen million people were uprooted across the new India-Pakistan divide, and death toll estimates range from two hundred thousand to two million; whole stretches of Punjab and Bengal were emptied of one community only to be resettled by refugees from the other side. But numbers on this scale cannot capture what it actually felt like for a village to watch its own neighbours turn into strangers overnight. It is precisely this distance between the scale of history and the intimacy of lived experience that *Train to Pakistan* tries to bridge, by keeping its lens fixed almost entirely on Mano Majra and the small cast of characters who live there.

This confession carries weight, because it changes the way the rest of the story should be read. *Train to Pakistan* does more than document violence from a distance — Singh presents it, in his own words, as a means of making amends for guilt over his own inaction. That underlying guilt and sorrow shape the novel from within: no single community, Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, is allowed to occupy moral high ground, and the novel's real censure falls not on the ordinary villagers dragged into bloodshed, but on the educated and powerful — officials, politicians, even Iqbal, the idealistic revolutionary — who had the means to stop it and did not. Vasant Shahane calls the novel a realistic masterpiece, pointing to its careful construction, thoughtfully built plot, and vividly imagined characters (68), and even now, close to seven decades after it was written, it remains one of the most widely taught fictional accounts of Partition in Indian classrooms.

The Village Before the Storm

The novel is set in Mano Majra, a small village on the Pakistan-India border, and its power lies in Singh's depiction of the changes that overtake the life of its villagers



before and after the great killing begins. Singh opens, however, not in Mano Majra but at a distance, with a cold-blooded account of the violence already underway across the province, noting flatly that both sides killed, tortured, and raped (Singh 1). This opening paragraph functions almost as a frame: before the reader is allowed to meet a single character, Singh insists that neither community can claim innocence. He follows it with a description of an unusually hot, dry, late-monsoon summer that hints at the political weather about to break — the natural world made to mirror the derangement of the human one.

For the villagers themselves, however, Partition at first means nothing: the Sub-Inspector tells the Deputy Commissioner that no one in Mano Majra even knows the country has been divided, or has heard of Jinnah (Singh 22). Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs live in easy amity, prayers to Guru and to Allah answering each other from neighbouring buildings, as Meet Singh tells Iqbal: “Everyone is welcome to his religion” (Singh 36). This bond is reinforced by the daily rhythm of the trains passing through the village — the Delhi-Lahore mail at dawn, the passenger and midday express through the day, the evening passenger that sends the village to sleep — a rhythm so steady that Singh can use its disruption, later in the novel, as the first visible sign that something fundamental has broken. The trains, in other words, are not incidental scenery; they are the clock by which Mano Majra's shared life is kept, which is precisely why their descent into instruments of atrocity carries such force.

This tranquillity begins to crack well before violence physically reaches the village. The murder of the moneylender Ram Lal by a gang of dacoits, and the arrest of the village's own Juggat Singh for the crime, plant the first seeds of mutual suspicion, prompting Meet Singh to lament

that “all morality has left the world” (Singh 40). It is a small, local crime, unconnected to Partition, and yet Singh places it deliberately at the threshold of his narrative: it is easier for a village to absorb the idea that a neighbour might rob or kill for money than the idea that neighbours might soon kill each other for religion, and the novel uses the Ram Lal episode to soften the reader — and the villagers — into that second, harder recognition. The subsequent arrest of Iqbal, a Western-educated youth sent to preach Hindu-Muslim unity, on suspicion of belonging to the Muslim League, further unsettles the villagers' trust in one another and in the world beyond Mano Majra, and prepares the ground for the rumours that follow.

Violence and the Ghost Trains

Singh uses the train, previously a symbol of shared and orderly life, to register the collapse of that order: trains begin arriving at odd hours, and rumours spread of a ‘ghost train’ carrying the dead from Pakistan. As Shahane observes, the train comes to stand for a dual symbolism, “life and action” as well as “death and disaster” (68). When the ghost train arrives, loaded with the hacked corpses of Sikhs and Hindus, the whole village is pulled into a stunned, deathly silence broken only by the smell of burning kerosene and searing flesh (Singh 84); for the first time in the novel, the call to prayer goes unheard in Mano Majra. Singh's description of the train's interior — women and children huddled in horror, bodies crammed against the walls, corpses jammed in the lavatories where young men had fought their way toward safety (Singh 85) — is among the most harrowing passages in the novel, less for its violence, which is described with restraint, than for its stillness: this is not a battle but an aftermath, and the horror lies precisely in how quiet and orderly the carnage has been made to look.



The scene leaves even Hukum Chand, the district magistrate, sickened and unable to fall back on any philosophical acceptance of death; as Joan F. Adkins notes, what he witnesses “is more than a violation against man and society, it is a violation against man and natural law” (5). Hukum Chand is, throughout the novel, a man who has made his peace with the ordinary corruptions of small-town administration, and Singh's decision to route the reader's horror through his eyes — rather than through an innocent bystander's — is telling: it suggests that Partition's violence exceeds even the moral compromises a cynical official has learned to live with. As the delayed monsoon finally breaks, the Sutlej River itself begins yielding hundreds of floating corpses, and a second ghost train worsens the mounting distrust between communities. Pramila Garg notes that Singh's description of the dead in the river “invokes fear and horror in the minds of the villagers,” and that the bulldozer used to bury them becomes “a symbol of oppressing the humanity against which Meet Singh's voice of sanity is lost” (146).

Gender and the Body as a Site of Violence

As in much Partition literature, the abducted and violated female body becomes, in *Train to Pakistan*, the clearest sign of how completely communal violence had collapsed the ordinary protections of village life. Rumour hardens into confirmed atrocity on both sides largely through stories of what had been done to women: Muslims recount stories of Sikh men stripping and parading Hindu and Sikh women, some of whom killed themselves rather than be assaulted (Singh 120); Sikhs, in turn, recount stories of Muslim men doing the same to Sikh women, some of whom drowned or burned themselves in response (Singh 121). Singh does not stage either atrocity directly; he lets it circulate as

report, which is itself significant, since it is precisely this circulation of atrocity-narrative — true or exaggerated, it scarcely matters — that does the work of turning neighbour against neighbour. The woman's body, abducted or self-destroyed, becomes the currency in which each community measures its own humiliation and the other's guilt, and it is this logic, more than any single act of violence, that finally drives the villagers to speak of their long-time Muslim neighbours, whom they had “treated like our own brothers,” as having “behaved like snakes” (Singh 123). A shared, generations-old life is undone along religious lines within a matter of weeks, and it is undone in large part through stories about what has been, or might be, done to women.

Displacement and the Politics of Partition

Even as fear and suspicion mount, the Hindus and Sikhs of Mano Majra resist turning on their Muslim neighbours directly; instead, fearing the refugees pouring in from Pakistan, they urge the Muslim elder Imam Baksh to move his people to a refugee camp for their own safety (Singh 126). Imam Baksh's anguished protest — that he and his family were born in Mano Majra, as were their ancestors, and have lived among the Hindus and Sikhs as brothers — captures a grief distinct from the grief of violence: the grief of being made a stranger in one's own home by a decision taken elsewhere, by men the villagers have never met. The departure itself is rendered as a village-wide bereavement — “It was as if in every home there had been a death” (Singh 129) — made bitterer still when the villagers learn that the Muslims have been sent not to a camp but all the way to Pakistan, and that Malli's gang of dacoits has been made custodian of the property they left behind (Singh 139). Yet, as Harish Raizada observes, it is the ordinary



villagers, not their leaders, who behave with restraint and decency through this crisis (qtd. in Dhawan 171).

Singh reserves his real anger for the political class: Iqbal observes bitterly that "the Englishmen have gone, but the rich Indians have taken their place" (Singh 60); the Sub-Inspector complains that the leaders in Delhi "have not lost their homes and belongings" (Singh 21); and Hukum Chand pictures politicians making speeches to admiring galleries while the Punjab burns (Singh 176). Together these moments suggest that Partition was not a solution to the subcontinent's communal problem but its beginning — a settlement that left ordinary people bewildered and devastated while their leaders congratulated themselves on a freedom won at a cost they never had to pay themselves.

Redemption in Jugga's Sacrifice

Into this fragile, grief-stricken village comes a band of young Hindu militants determined to provoke revenge for the atrocities committed against Hindus and Sikhs elsewhere, and they succeed: a plan is set to derail and massacre a trainload of Muslims being evacuated to Pakistan. Hukum Chand releases Jugga and Iqbal from jail in the hope that they might restrain the conspirators, but the two men respond in opposite ways, and the contrast between them forms the moral centre of the novel's final movement. Iqbal, drinking away his despair, concludes that in such circumstances there is no code, human or divine, by which to act, and that "utter indifference to all values" (Singh 172) is the only refuge left to him; his European education and his political convictions, which had seemed at the novel's opening to promise a rational way forward, dissolve on contact with actual atrocity into paralysis.

It is Jugga — the village's disreputable 'badmash number-10,' a man the villagers had earlier been quick to suspect of murder

— who acts instead. Told by Meet Singh that the Guru helps those who do good and stands in the way of those who do wrong (Singh 174), Jugga climbs onto the rope strung across the tracks, cuts it, and dies saving the train — and with it Nooran, the Muslim woman he loves, who is carrying his child. The irony is deliberate and, by this point in the novel, earned: the man the village most readily distrusted becomes the one man capable of an unconditional act of love, while the man best equipped by education and conviction to lead is undone by the very magnitude of what he is asked to face. Where the village elders and the Western-educated Iqbal both fail, it is the uneducated Jugga who places a common humanity above religious division, at the cost of his own life.

Conclusion

Train to Pakistan is thus at once a work of memory, a chronicle of violence, and an elegy for loss. It transmutes Singh's own guilt and grief at Partition into fiction that bears witness to a catastrophe too large for private memory alone; it traces, with unsparing honesty, the precise mechanisms — rumour, the symbol of the train, the circulation of atrocity-stories centred on women's bodies, the sight of the ghost trains and the Sutlej's dead — by which a tolerant community is driven to violence against its own; and it records the loss of homes, of family, and of a shared way of life, while placing the blame for that loss squarely on a political leadership that offered speeches where the people needed protection. Yet in Jugga's final act, Singh allows for something other than despair: proof that even amid the wreckage of a nation's moral order, individual conscience can still assert itself against the logic of communal hatred. It is this combination of unsparing witness and stubborn faith in ordinary human decency that gives *Train to Pakistan* its enduring power as a testimony



to the trauma of Partition, and that continues to make it a touchstone for how Indian literature remembers 1947.

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