



Violence, Morality, and the Collapse of Humanism: Re-reading Train to Pakistan in the Context of Partition Trauma

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Abstract-- This paper re-examines *Train to Pakistan* as a critical intervention in Partition discourse, arguing that the novel destabilizes binary notions of communal identity by foregrounding the fragility of moral structures under conditions of mass violence. Unlike nationalist historiography that frames Partition as political inevitability, Khushwant Singh situates it within the everyday life of Mano Majra, thereby exposing the gradual erosion of ethical certainties.

Drawing upon trauma theory and subaltern historiography, the paper contends that the novel resists grand narratives and instead articulates violence through localized, embodied experiences. The figure of Jugga emerges as a paradoxical site of redemption, where individual sacrifice momentarily interrupts the logic of communal hatred. Ultimately, the text reveals that in moments of historical rupture, morality is neither stable nor universal but contingent, negotiated, and often salvaged through unexpected acts.

I. INTRODUCTION: BEYOND NATIONALIST HISTORIES OF PARTITION

The Partition of India in 1947 has frequently been represented through macro-historical narratives emphasizing political negotiations and territorial divisions. However, such accounts often obscure the lived realities of violence and displacement. *Train to Pakistan* departs from this historiographic mode by situating Partition within the microcosm of Mano Majra, a fictional border village.

As Ranajit Guha argues in subaltern studies, history must be read from below—through the experiences of those marginalized by elite narratives. Singh's novel performs precisely this function by foregrounding peasants, criminals, and ordinary villagers rather than political leaders.

This paper argues that *Train to Pakistan* is not merely a narrative of Partition but a critique of the very frameworks through which Partition is understood. It reveals how communal identities, often perceived as fixed, are in fact contingent constructions that unravel under pressure.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with *Train to Pakistan* has largely focused on its representation of Partition violence, communal relations, and ethical dilemmas. Critics have consistently foregrounded Khushwant Singh's commitment to realism and his ability to capture the immediacy of human suffering without resorting to overt sentimentality.

Early readings situate the novel within the broader canon of Partition literature, emphasizing its documentary value. Alok Bhalla, in his work on Partition narratives, argues that such texts serve as moral archives, preserving voices that are otherwise erased from official histories. In this context, *Train to Pakistan* is often interpreted as a text that foregrounds the ethical collapse of society under communal तनाव (tension).

Similarly, Urvashi Butalia highlights the importance of personal narratives in reconstructing the lived experience of Partition. Although her work primarily focuses on oral histories, its insights are applicable to Singh's novel, particularly in its attention to ordinary individuals rather than political elites.

From a sociological perspective, Veena Das's theorization of violence as embedded in everyday life provides a useful framework for understanding the transformation of Mano Majra. Her argument that violence "descends into the ordinary" resonates with the novel's depiction of gradual moral disintegration.

Trauma theorists such as Dominick LaCapra have also been employed to analyze the narrative structure of the text. Critics suggest that Singh's restrained prose reflects the difficulty of representing traumatic events, oscillating between emotional detachment and ethical engagement.

However, much of the existing scholarship tends to treat the novel as a realist account of Partition rather than interrogating its deeper epistemological and ethical implications. The emphasis has largely remained on themes of communal violence and harmony, often overlooking the novel's critique of moral frameworks and its engagement with the instability of identity.

III. RESEARCH GAP

Despite extensive critical attention, certain significant aspects of *Train to Pakistan* remain underexplored.

Firstly, while scholars have examined the representation of violence, there is insufficient focus on how the novel interrogates the **fragility of moral structures**. Existing studies often assume morality as a stable category, whereas the novel reveals it to be contingent and situational.



The ethical transformation of characters like Jugga has not been adequately theorized within broader philosophical frameworks of morality and agency.

Secondly, the role of **rumour and affect** in the production of violence has received limited scholarly attention. While critics acknowledge the presence of fear and tension, they rarely analyze how these emotions circulate collectively to generate हिंसा. A more nuanced reading is required to understand violence not merely as action but as an affective process.

Thirdly, although gender has been discussed in Partition studies, *Train to Pakistan* has not been sufficiently examined through a **gendered lens** in comparison to other texts like *Pinjar*. The subtle yet significant ways in which women's bodies are implicated in communal politics remain under-theorized.

Finally, there is a lack of engagement with the novel's **philosophical dimensions**, particularly its exploration of ethical action in conditions of crisis. Jugga's sacrifice is often interpreted as a heroic act, but its implications for understanding morality in extreme situations require deeper critical inquiry.

How this Paper Addresses the Gap

This paper seeks to address these gaps by:

- Reframing the novel as a critique of **unstable moral frameworks** rather than merely a depiction of violence
- Analyzing **rumour and fear as affective forces** that produce communal conflict
- Introducing a **gender-sensitive reading** of the text
- Interpreting Jugga's sacrifice through **ethical and existential perspectives**

By doing so, the paper moves beyond descriptive readings and offers a more theoretically grounded understanding of the novel.

The Village as Ethical Microcosm

Mano Majra initially appears as a space of communal harmony, where Sikhs and Muslims coexist without overt conflict. Religion functions as a marker of identity but not as a basis for antagonism. This fragile equilibrium is disrupted not by inherent hostility but by external forces—state machinery, rumours, and the arrival of ghost trains carrying corpses.

Khushwant Singh thus challenges the essentialist notion that Partition violence was inevitable. Instead, he suggests that violence is produced through specific historical and political conditions.

The transformation of Mano Majra from a peaceful village into a site of impending massacre illustrates what Hannah Arendt terms the “banality of evil”—the idea that ordinary individuals can become complicit in violence under certain circumstances.

The villagers do not begin as perpetrators; they become so through fear, manipulation, and collective pressure.

Gendered Violence and the Politics of Honour

While *Train to Pakistan* does not foreground female subjectivity to the same extent as other Partition narratives, it nonetheless registers the gendered dimensions of violence. The abduction and vulnerability of women reflect the broader logic of honour that governed communal relations during Partition.

The relationship between Jugga and Nooran complicates communal binaries. Their (love) exists outside the rigid frameworks of religious identity, suggesting the possibility of an alternative ethical order. However, this possibility is constantly threatened by the larger forces of communal hatred.

Drawing on feminist scholarship, one may argue that women in the novel function as both subjects and symbols—caught within a patriarchal system that equates their bodies with community honour. Thus, violence against women becomes a means of asserting dominance over the “other.”

Rumour, Fear, and the Production of Violence

One of the most significant aspects of the novel is its depiction of how violence is produced through rumour and anticipation rather than direct provocation. The arrival of trains filled with dead bodies transforms perception into paranoia.

Rumour operates as a powerful social force, shaping behaviour and justifying (violence). As information circulates in distorted forms, it generates fear, which in turn legitimizes preemptive aggression.

This aligns with Veena Das's argument that violence often emerges not from immediate causes but from accumulated anxieties embedded in everyday life.

Jugga as Ethical Paradox: Redemption in a Violent World

The character of Jugga (Juggut Singh) is central to the novel's moral vision. Introduced as a criminal, Jugga undergoes a transformation that culminates in his ultimate act of sacrifice. By risking his life to save a train full of Muslim refugees—including Nooran—he disrupts the cycle of revenge.

Jugga's act can be read through the lens of existential ethics, where meaning is created through action rather than predetermined moral codes.



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 05, May 2026)

In a world where institutional morality has collapsed, individual agency becomes the only site of ethical possibility.

However, this redemption is neither absolute nor systemic. It does not undo the violence of Partition; it merely offers a fleeting moment of resistance. As such, the novel resists closure, leaving readers with an unresolved tension between despair and hope.

Narrative Strategy and the Representation of Trauma

Khushwant Singh employs a restrained, almost journalistic narrative style that avoids melodrama. This stylistic choice is significant, as it mirrors the numbing effect of trauma. Violence is described with stark simplicity, making it all the more disturbing.

Unlike texts that rely on emotional excess, *Train to Pakistan* derives its power from understatement. The horror of Partition is not amplified but normalized, reflecting how extraordinary violence becomes part of everyday reality.

From a trauma-theoretical perspective, this narrative strategy reflects the difficulty of representing extreme events. As Dominick LaCapra suggests, trauma narratives often oscillate between acting out and working through. Singh's novel inhabits this tension without resolving it.

IV. CONCLUSION: ETHICS IN THE TIME OF CATASTROPHE

Train to Pakistan ultimately challenges readers to reconsider the nature of morality in times of crisis. It demonstrates that ethical behaviour is not guaranteed by social structures but must be continually negotiated.

Through its portrayal of Mano Majra, the novel reveals how quickly humanism can collapse under the pressure of fear and violence. Yet, through Jugga's sacrifice, it also suggests that the possibility of ethical action persists, even in the darkest moments.

Thus, the novel occupies a complex position within Partition literature: it neither offers consolation nor succumbs entirely to despair. Instead, it presents a nuanced vision in which humanity is both fragile and resilient.

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