

## **REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA**

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### **Lecture 11: Understanding Migration through Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on refugee migration and diaspora. We will continue from our discussion in the previous lecture on migration studies. So, we are looking at the impact of migration during the Great Divide or the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Today, we will discuss the partition of the Indian subcontinent through our reading of another new literary work, a novel by Khushwant Singh titled Train to Pakistan.

Train to Pakistan is a very well-known and acclaimed work by Khushwant Singh. Khushwant Singh is an Indian author, lawyer, and journalist. His experience during the 1947 partition of India inspired him to write this novel, Train to Pakistan, which was published in 1956 and adapted into a film in 1998. The novel Train to Pakistan is a historical work by Khushwant Singh. It was published in 1956.

It is Khushwant Singh's third and most famous novel. It recounts the partition of India in August 1947 through the perspective of Mano Majra, a fictional border village. This will make a very good transition from our previous lecture. We were discussing Toba Tek Singh, which is also about such a village, that had its fate and future suspended for some time in the hands of the larger nationalist politics of India and Pakistan.

Many such border villages faced jeopardy and did not know until a certain time where they would belong—in which geopolitical, you know, they would not know for a long time whether they belonged to India or to Pakistan. We have already talked about the death of the spirit of Toba Tek Singh. Similarly, here we would see that Khushwant Singh is looking at the larger historical events surrounding Partition through the lens of Mano Majra, which is a fictional border village.

The novel draws on Singh's own personal experiences during and after the Partition. It details the chaos and violence in the formation of a secular India and an Islamic state, Pakistan. So, rather than taking a macro-lens perspective of the conflict, Singh analyzes it

from within a micro-lens—that is, a lens positioned within this village named Mano Majra, from the view of a small village that is eventually torn apart by the Partition. The peaceful, syncretic village life is disturbed

So, how this peaceful, syncretic village life is disturbed and ultimately jeopardized by the larger political events surrounding Partition. The novel is set in Mano Majra, a fictional village located in India but on the border of Pakistan, where the population is mostly Sikh and Muslim. So, this village comprises mainly Sikh and Muslim populations. At the beginning of the novel, most of the village's inhabitants are unaware of the religious and nationalistic violence happening in India and Pakistan, and so they live in peace across religious lines. This scenario quickly changes when a train from Pakistan arrives in Mano Majra full of murdered Sikh bodies.



Train to Pakistan is roughly contemporaneous with other acclaimed works, such as Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* and R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma*. All these works are momentous in terms of documenting the sentiments, the experiences, the sensibilities of the post-colonial nations, how the cultures, how the complex tapestry of very mixed culture, of a very layered culture falls apart, how it faces a setback once the Britishers actually quit these nations.

So the colonial legacy and the hardship that these post-colonial nations are facing after the British leave their countries is something that resonates across all these novels, things fall apart. So, Fanon's work, although it's not a novel, it is a scholarly intervention and then we have R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma*, All these works put together the sentiments of the masses, the challenges that the masses face after they emerge out of or after they come out of the experience of colonization.

So, *Train to Pakistan* is contemporaneous with other acclaimed works such as Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask* and R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma*. All these works together, if we look at them, some are fictional. Then Fanon's work is contemporary. Not a fiction. It is an academic intervention, a scholarly intervention.

And we see that they're all actually examining how the post-colonial nations, the colored people, deal with the colonial legacy. They resurface and emerge out of the colonial baggage, the baggage that the British have left behind, the jeopardies of a post-colonial nation, the sensibilities, the challenges, the emotional and social difficulties that the people from the post-colonial nations face are something that resonates across all these works. So Singh makes the content of this historical fiction deeply personal in its approach, making it similar to other works of post-colonial literature. The novel was adapted into a movie of the same name, and it premiered in 1998. The film attained critical acclaim at the time of its release.



So, *Train to Pakistan* opens in the imaginary village Mano Majra and depicts how the entire village gets engrossed in the carnage, the bloodshed, and the conflict during the partition. So, *Train to Pakistan* is divided into four sections by entries: *Dacoity*, *Kali Yuga*, *Mano Majra*, and *Karma*. So, Singh introduces the murder of a character called Ramlal by a group of dacoits in the opening section, which is titled *Dacoity*. The era of Kali is, who, according to Hindu mythology, is the mother of death and destruction, has been referred to as the *Kali Yuga*, the name given to the second part of the novel.

So, the second part of the novel is titled *Kali Yuga*, after the goddess of destruction, Kali. Khushwant Singh shows how the incipience of racial hatred and suspicion has turned the lives of the residents of Mano Majra into deep miseries. So, there is an abysmal pit that

the entire rural community is hitting. They are hitting a new low in terms of animosity, in terms of losing faith in the

Fellow village men, and so the peace, the order, the harmony is all gone. The hatred, the conflict has penetrated into a very remote village which used to enjoy inter-communal brotherhood and inter-communal coexistence, peaceful coexistence. So we see that the culture of Mano Majra during the partition hits a new low with every event, and it almost reaches an abysmal pit where fellow village men from different communities don't trust each other anymore. There is animosity, there is hostility that has seeped in, and so the peaceful life, the inter-communal faith and harmony are all gone. So, these people used to live contentedly and peacefully for generations before their idyllic universe descended into violent anarchy as a result of the stigma and instability of the division, this great divide that partition was.

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- Singh introduces the murder of Ramlal by a group of dacoits in the opening section, titled "Dacoity"
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So, this socio-political critique remains remarkably relevant, prompting readers to reflect on the enduring lessons that it holds for contemporary society. So, what can we learn from the experiences that Mano Majra undergoes? It is even relevant to contemporary society—how different communities should coexist peacefully, how communities should try to understand each other's ethos and each other's sentiments, right? So, novels such as *Train to Pakistan* are timeless; their impact in terms of readership, and their contribution, the humanitarian aspects they convey, that they represent, can never be denied—that travels down the generations. A work such as *Train to Pakistan* is considered timeless.

So, Singh's portrayal of the human impact of partition captures the essence of the era's suffering. The mass migration, violence, and disruption of lives are not merely backdrops, but these activities, these events are central. They are the mainstay of the narrative. The novel confronts characters with moral dilemmas stemming from the chaos

of partition. We see that Hukumchand, who is the magistrate, grapples with the weight of making difficult decisions for the so-called greater good, even if it means sacrificing the lives and the interests of individuals.

Then we have the character of Jagat Singh. Jagat Singh's moral ambiguity poses questions about the nature of guilt and innocence during times of upheaval, as he is accused of a heinous crime that he has not even committed. So, these moral dilemmas highlight the ethical complexities that individuals face in times of crisis. So, *Train to Pakistan* is a brilliant examination of the deep topics of intercommunal conflict and the rich human tapestry against the turbulent background of India's partition.

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- The intense tension and horrifying violence that envelop the made-up community of Mano Majra are poignantly captured by Khushwant Singh
- Singh through his notable writing style creates a striking and unsettling image of the sectarian differences ripping across the society, resulting in disastrous consequences for the village's residents



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The intense tension and horrifying violence that developed in the made-up community of Mano Majra are poignantly captured by Khushwant Singh. Singh, through his notable writing style, creates a striking and unsettling image of the sectarian differences that rip across society, resulting in disastrous consequences for the village's residents. So, commenting on the theme of this novel, Prasada Pala Rao and Nirupa Kandula Rani comment, I quote them at length. It is a touching tale of a village, Mano Majra, struck down by the hate and the violence that came with the division of the subcontinent when a trainload of massacred men, women, and children arrive in the village.

It reveals with pitiless precision a picture of the bestial horrors that were enacted on the Indo-Pakistan border during the days of 1947. The predominant features of the novel are its stark realism, its absolute fidelity to the truth, and above all, its trenchant exposure of the partition horrors. In her reading of Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, feminist partition scholar Urvashi Butalia suggests considering partition as an event that is best understood as a battlefield of conflicting memories, not paying special attention to just one specific point of view.

In other words, she urges the readers to consider and examine the different facets of partition memories, the different layers in the partition memories, so that the acts of remembering and forgetting are not biased towards any specific community. In the novel, Singh does not focus on communities that were fierce enemies but on groups that had actually been on good terms with each other for centuries. In his novel, we see that Khushwant Singh describes the deterioration of relationships, which went from long-lasting brotherhood to suspicion and then rapidly drifted towards violence, and the right to take each other's lives.

And soon we see, just before the partition, things change for the worse. The British withdraw from India very abruptly, very hastily, leaving India, you know, leaving the Indians to cut each other's throats, crossing daggers, the different communities crossing daggers, and so there is a kind of animality that emerges and that soon, you know, drowns any kind of humanitarian feeling, any kind of, any scope of for humanity to step in and override all kinds of negative feelings. So humanity is completely throttled in these disturbed times.

The story is propelled by the murder in August 1947 of the Hindu moneylender named Lala Ramlal, who is executed in his home by a group of dacoits or bandits led by a man. During their flight, the killers drop some bangles in the courtyard of this villager called Jagat Singh, who is also known as Jagga, and thus we see that Jagga is arrested for this murder and dacoity very wrongly. The police's mishandling of the case combines with the anxiety that is generated by the rumors of the gruesome killings of people, you know, moving in search of security all around the village. So people that are being displaced, the people that are trying to escape, shift their ways, move their ways, are being rampantly killed, plundered, looted, raped, and abducted.

So, it's completely a situation gone out of control. Sikhs of Mano majra start to suspect and fear the Muslims with whom they had never had any problems before. From the title Train to Pakistan itself, it is clear that trains play a key role in this novel. The two trains that regularly stop serve as a type of clock for Mano Majra villages. So, the village life is not really driven by or it does not function around the calendrical sense of time.

It does not function around calendar and clock. As the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, it signals to the villagers that it is time to get up. So when the mail train is rushing through on its way to Lahore, it makes some sound which harbingers the

daybreak. which harbingers the morning time for the villagers. They get up and go to work and it marks the start of the day.

Similarly, when the final goods train comes in at night, everyone knows that it is time for bed. It is the, they have to call it a day. It's the night time. So, the train's departure and arrival harbinger the day and the night. They announce the day time and the night time, the starting and the closing of a day.

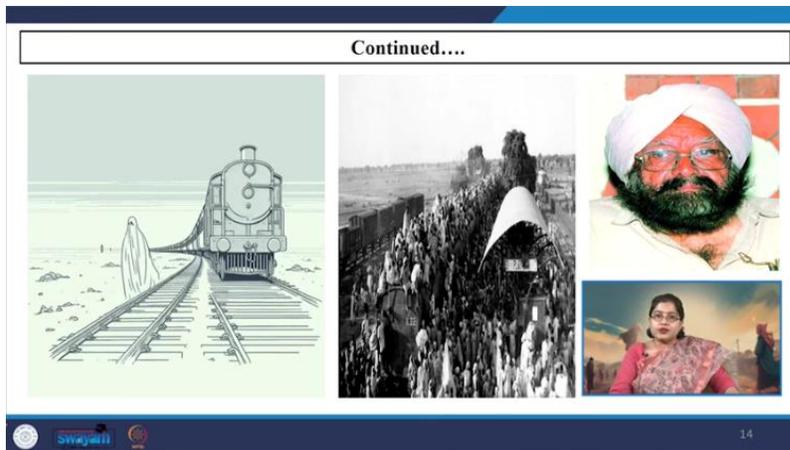
So, life is a very localized one. Science and technology have not stepped into the lives of people, the villagers in Mano Majra in a very significant way. They are away from the mainstream, updated urban life, right. So, in this narrative, we see that the train symbolizes technology, order, and structure, and the people of Mano Majra have a very remote interface with this technology and



And this symbol of urbanity, this symbol of development, right? They associate with this concept of the train in a very remote fashion. It is not something very close to them, not something very familiar to them. So, we see that the train symbolizes a sense of connection with the mainstream political happenings. And it is a bearer; it carries with it a sense of urbanity and development within the microcosmic space of the village.

So, here we have, you know, two pictures here. One is a very common picture, almost, you know, something that defines partition in a nutshell. The railway station has a horde of refugees. The train is overcrowded with refugees on its rooftop, hanging through its doors because they are desperate to cross the border.

They don't find themselves safe on the wrong side of the border, right? And soon these people are to become the displaced people, the refugees, right? This is a scene of desperation. This is a scene. Where people are clinging on to some sort of survival.



They are desperate to somehow stay alive and leave a country where they have become a minority, where they are recognized as a minority, and where their lives are not deemed safe anymore. So this is the picture of a railway station at the time of partition. The other picture we see is the train running on the rail tracks and the ghost of homeland, you know, loaded with nostalgia, loaded with memories, loaded with joy. Everything that is part of one's identity is almost traveling with the refugee. So a part of oneself remains in the homeland, whereas the person is physically forced to cross the border and become a refugee.

A migrant in the new host land. This is the ghost from the past that accompanies the train journey and that never seems to go away. The phantasm from the past stays with the refugee forever. So this train as a metaphor—the metaphor of the train—has long existed. It has been a prominent and recurring motif in Indian partition stories.

In the context of partition, the symbol of the train refers to time, and it is associated with uncountable refugees who were uprooted from their origins and forced to move to a new land in order to start life from scratch. When religious separation became a possibility in 1947 and even before that, Most individuals concluded that moving to their respective safer zones was the only option to stay alive. So, this journey to cross the border was not without dangers. Assaulting hordes attacked the fleeing masses who were traveling by rail, truck, bullock cart, or on foot.

The bulk of migrants are thought to have traveled by train. And why train? Because the train was the main means of transit owing to its accessibility and low cost. Not many people could afford buying flight tickets at that time. So the train became the main means of transit.

However, it made the migrants victims of frequent attacks, from members of opposing communities, the opposite communities, the rival communities would derail the tracks. They would attack the travelers and kill them within the train bogies. So the trains would often arrive loaded with corpses. And the rail bogies took the brunt of the rioters.

On its rails, members of the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities committed genocide against the rival community members. A writer like Swarna Iyer has written extensively on these trains of death in her essay, *August Anarchy, The Partition Massacres in Punjab, 1947*. Another novel, *Freedom at Midnight* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, reproduces tales of train massacre survivors that parallel these accounts of violence. According to eyewitnesses, The mob severed the train from the engine and passengers were thrown onto the platform where they were slaughtered by the perpetrators.



Those who attempted to flee were hunted down and killed or thrown into wells. So, in Sindh, such types of incidents occurred. would be rampant. So, in Sindh which borders Punjab, such attacks would be rampant. They would occur on a sporadic basis where humans were found either as dead or their body parts amputated and disfigured.

We see that in September 1947, non-Sindhi Muslim refugees, most likely the Muhajirs, attacked and plundered a train that was transporting the Hindus from Punjab travelling through Nawab Shah. The Grand Trunk Express, also known as the Great Indian Peninsula Express, was assaulted by rioters after partition in September 1947. Aziz Ahmed's Urdu story, *Kali Raat* or *Black Night*, depicts the tragic journey of a Muslim family traveling by this train from Delhi to Hyderabad. So the kind of rampant killing, massacre, brutalizing of people, vandalizing and incendiary, all these have been depicted through literary writings, through fiction and non-fiction by a number of authors that recount the disturbed times of partition.

So, all these horrendous events have been documented. Through works of fiction and non-fiction by partition scholars, by writers who look back at the watershed and the kind of violence it carried as baggage, as an aftermath. The personified train in Krishan Chander's Urdu fiction Peshawar Express narrates its horrendous tale of a corpse-laden voyage, unleashed by killings en route at Taxila, Rawalpindi, and Wazirabad. Similarly, the story The Train Has Reached Amritsar, in Hindi, also translated as We Have Arrived in Amritsar, written by Bhisham Sahani, has a setting and plot inspired by the author's own experiences of travelling by train from Peshawar to Delhi on the eve of independence.

So now, coming back to our discussion on Train to Pakistan, we see that the scenario of Mano Majra changes drastically when the first train of dead Sikhs rolls into Mano Majra. Until then, the chaos affecting the rest of the country was only rumors. The train makes the distant tales of violence a harsh reality in the village itself. Even Hukumchand recounts a story he heard about Sundar Singh, a colleague who fled Pakistan via train with his family. So, we see

that these extreme narratives, these extreme tales, are being recounted, are being told. Either people have experienced it or they know someone who has eyewitnessed something bloody, something extremely gory. So we see that the conditions on the train were so horrific, so grisly, that Sundar had ended up executing his own family to spare them from further suffering. So suddenly, at the turn of this narrative, when this train arrives with the corpses of the Sikhs, the train becomes a symbol of the horrors of religious persecution, religious hatred, government instability, and mob violence.

Rather than being a vehicle that brings fleeing people, displaced people to safety and rather than a symbol of connection, train becomes a symbol of death trap. Train is almost like a dead end. It is leading to nowhere. So, Khushwant Singh relates the mass migrations of the hundreds and thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs

**Train as a symbol in *Train to Pakistan***

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- Even Hukum Chand recounts a story he heard about Sunder Singh, a colleague who fled Pakistan via train with his family
- The conditions on the train were so horrific that Sunder ended up executing his family, to spare them from continued suffering
- Suddenly, trains become symbolic of the horrors of religious persecution, government instability, and mob violence. Rather than being a vehicle that brings fleeing Sikhs and Muslims to safety, and representing connectedness, trains become death trap



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whom partition had made foreigners in their own homeland, the ones in which they had lived for generations. According to scholar Veena Das, Khushwant Singh's primary concern is the fact that in the social production and circulation of hatred during partition, the reversal of the images of perpetrator and victim is frequent depending on the perspective from which the traumatic memories of violence are relived. Just to iterate what I had been saying previously, there is no one memory that authenticates the events of partition. Depending on the side where one belongs, the nature of memory also changes.

We see that there is a reversal of the image of the perpetrator depending on whether the narrative is coming from Indian side or from the Pakistani side. If it is a narrative generating from the Pakistani side, usually the Hindus are considered as the aggressors and the stories that we have written from the Indian side point to the Muslims as the problem-making community or the hot-headed community, right? So, we see that very few artworks subscribe to a neutrality or they encompass the complexity of the events where all the communities partook in violence and all the communities were stakeholders as far as the decision of partition and the ensuing violence were concerned. So, through the narrative Singh helps the reader understand during the partition how rural India which was not generally plagued by communal violence, which was not concerned with the mainstream politics with the larger politics actually ended up being swallowed up in a swirling climate of conflict, hostility and violence.

So, with this, we come to the end of our lecture here today. Let us meet for further discussion in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.

