



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# PLIGHT OF PARTITION IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

Amena Parvin Tisha<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, University of Scholars, Banani, Dhaka

E-mail: [tisharahman599@gmail.com](mailto:tisharahman599@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

*In August 1947, the British left Indian Subcontinent after almost 200 years. British India was divided into two independent Nations - India and Pakistan. The distribution of human was based on the religion. Pakistan had the majority of Muslims while India having Hindu majority. This division of Indian subcontinent and the formation of two independent nations is known as 'partition' in history. The leaders who dreamt of the partition wanted to free the land from the oppression of British Raj. But they couldn't guess that right after the end of a struggle story, another will start. A huge religious clash emerged throughout the land. Muslims were forced to march towards Pakistan while Hindus and Sikhs were forced to march towards India. Most of them literally had no idea why the English left India, why they are leaving their homes and whether they will ever return or not. Khushwant Singh's novel Train to Pakistan pictures how a peaceful land turns into a death-land after the partition. The paper seeks to shed lights on the plight of Partition detailed in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan and attempts to analyze the horrible experience of puzzled common people.*

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**Corresponding Author:**

Amena Parvin Tisha

Lecturer, Department of English,  
University of Scholars, Banani,  
Dhaka

Email:  
[tisharahman599@gmail.com](mailto:tisharahman599@gmail.com)

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## KEYWORDS

Partition, 1947, Refugee, Hindustan, Pakistan, Sikhs, Riots, British Raj



### 1 Introduction

*Train to Pakistan* was published in 1956, nine years after the partition in Indian Subcontinent. The setting of the novel is a fictional border village named Mano Majra where Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs used to live in harmony and peace; like brothers. After the second world war, England was cash tapped and could not bear the responsibility of India anymore. Right after partition, the whole Indian Subcontinent including present day's Bangladesh, India and Pakistan was in chaos. British government used to follow the infamous 'Divide and Rule' strategy to keep people busy in fighting themselves. Religion is always a sensitive matter and easier to use it to divide people quickly. The trivial religious misunderstanding did not allow them to be gathered to fight against British Raj. As a result, Queen's government ruled the land without much hassle. The leaders who wanted partition, wanted freedom only; not conflict and chaos. But small religious clashes burst out after the partition. Besides being sensitive, religion is one of the purest things that teaches love, brotherhood, mutual respect and peace. If the religion leads towards mass killing, it's sure that something else is playing the game from the back. A group of people was trying to take the advantage of situation. The era was the worst for common Indian and Pakistani people. Rich became poor, helpless and homeless; lost family-friends and most importantly - faith in brotherhood.

### 2 Literature Review:

During the partition, Khushwant Singh himself witnessed the plights closely.

In *Train to Pakistan*, he has used his experience and that's why the novel seems to be so live. Somini Sengupta's article "Bearing Steady Witness to Partition's Wounds" in The New York Times on September 21,

2006, published Khushwant Singh's comment on Partition. "You kill my dog, I kill your cat." is how Mr. Singh described India's history of tit-for-tat violence. He added, "It's a childish and bloody game, and it can't go on." In article "70 years later, survivors recall the horrors of India Pakistan Partition", some of the survivors' experience is found. One of them compares the blood shed on India's earth. He says, "When you broke a branch, red would come out." Another says, "All too often they crossed the border in funeral silence, blood seeping from under their carriage doors".

### 3 Discussion:

During the first few months, Mano Majra had no idea what's going on outside the village. "I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah." - (Sub-Inspector, *Train to Pakistan* 26). They were indifferent of the change as it was a remote village with people of no political knowledge. Village guest, Iqbal Singh, asked Imam Baksh if they are not happy for the freedom. He replied, "Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians- or the Pakistanis" - (*Train to Pakistan* 48). They didn't even know why the English left India. But the sufferings caused by the change touched them brutally.

Everything was okay in Mano Majra until the 'ghost train' from Pakistan came in the village station. People couldn't guess the train was full of dead bodies until the police station burnt the bodies and smell of burning flesh occupied the village air. "Red tongues of flame leaped into the black sky. A soft breeze began to blow towards the village. It brought the smell of burning kerosene, then of wood. And then—a faint acrid smell of searing flesh." (*Train to Pakistan* 80). The outer world finally pressed

in inside Mano Majra. The repeated arrival of the ghost train with dead corpses shook the villagers. The train from Pakistan started to bring so many dead bodies at a time that it was not possible to burn them even. The Magistrate ordered to bring a bulldozer and a trench of almost 50 yards long was dug. "They tipped the stretchers into the pit and went back to the train for more. The place looked like the scar of a healed-up wound." - (*Train to Pakistan* 134). Guards were appointed to protect the mass grave so that it's not attacked by jackals and badgers. Gradually the number started to increase and it was tough to bury them even inside earth.

Brutal scenes of injured people from train created restlessness in everyone including strong minded men like Hukum Chand, the Deputy Magistrate. The eyes of a 'man holding his intestines', eyes 'dilated of horror' of women and children, 'nauseating smell of putrefying flesh, faeces and urine' was hunting him 24/7. "There were bodies crammed against the far end wall of the compartment, looking in terror at the empty windows through which must have come shots, spears and spikes." - (*Train to Pakistan* 81). The number of dead and injured could not be counted as they were too many and most of them didn't have the full of the body. "I think he just calculated how many people could get into a bogie and multiplied it by the number of bogies." - (Sub-Inspector, *Train to Pakistan* 90). The roof, footboards and buffers were covered with layer of blood which suggests that when the train was attacked they were injured and fell from train.

In addition, mysterious human carcasses were floating on Sutlej River. "Limp and their sodden snow-white plumes floated on the water" - (*Train to Pakistan* 130). "There were also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies; little children sleeping on their bellies with their arms clutching the water and their tiny buttocks dipping in and out. The sky was soon

full of kites and vultures. They flew down and landed on the floating carcasses." (*Train to Pakistan* 132).

As loads of dead bodies of Hindu and Sikh people were coming from Pakistan to India, it was risk for the Muslims to stay in India. Angry Hindu and Sikhs were killing and raping Muslims here and there as revenge of corpses coming from Pakistan. "Everyone felt his neighbour's hand against him." - (*Train to Pakistan* 110). "Every Sikh in Mano Majra became a stranger with an evil intent." - (*Train to Pakistan* 113). Only Pakistan could be a safe place for Muslims. Muslims left the village on a very short notice leaving behind the land and houses their forefathers bought and made in Hindustan. They moved to a refugee camp from where they would eventually go to Pakistan

The aggression on minorities in India and Pakistan was not one sided. "According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west: to Noakhali in East Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus; to Bihar, where Hindus massacred Muslims." - (*Train to Pakistan* 08) The game of revenge continued as no party acted wisely. "The Sikhs retaliated by attacking a Muslim refugee train and sending it across the border with over a thousand corpses? They wrote on the engine "Gift to Pakistan!" - (Deputy Magistrate, *Train to Pakistan* 24). Every group was thinking a massacre will stop massacre on the other side. 'They say that is the only way to stop killings on the other side. Man for man, woman for woman, child for child.' - (Deputy Magistrate, *Train to Pakistan* 24)

"By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in arms, in terror, or in hiding." - (*Train to Pakistan* 08). About 14 million people are thought to have abandoned their homes in the summer and fall of 1947. This is the largest

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human migration in the history of man. While tracking to the opposite direction most of the Muslims and Hindus died on religious violence, disease and starvation. Shundori was also gangraped on road. She had henna and 12 wedding bangles in her both hand; all broke during rape. "The mob made love to her. They were all smashed as she lay in the road, being taken by one man and another and another." – (*Train to Pakistan* 162). She got married four days ago. Her husband was killed on spot. They cut his penis. "They held him by the arms and legs and one man cut off his penis and gave it to her." – (*Train to Pakistan* 162). Other passengers were punished as per their religion. "Sikhs were just hacked to death. The clean-shaven were stripped. Those that were circumcised were forgiven. Those that were not, were circumcised. Not just the foreskin: the whole thing was cut off." – (*Train to Pakistan* 162).

As many people were on move at a time, there were shortage of food, water, safety and transportation. The passengers could not stop here and there as they had risk of life. Sunder Singh was one of such unfortunate men. "Sunder Singh's children cried for water and food. So did everyone else. Sunder Singh gave them his urine to drink. Then that dried up too. So he pulled out his revolver and shot them all." – (*Train to Pakistan* 162).

Many tried their best to hold fast the brotherhood they had. "Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here next door is a Muslim Mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah." – (*Train to Pakistan* 38). Sikhs assured, "It is like this, Uncle Imam Baksh. As long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you. We die first and then you can look after yourselves." (Meet Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 117). After seeing the corpses in the river they got to realize that same is going to happen with their Muslim brothers. So, they met Meet Singh's place to pray for Muslims. Deep inside, many of the Hindus and Sikhs wanted safety for their Muslim

brothers. They were afraid of others but helped secretly as much as possible. But many was convinced to attack Muslims. "Some villagers who had only recently wept at the departure of their Muslim friends also stood up to volunteer." – (*Train to Pakistan* 140). The volunteers planned that they'd tie a rope across bridge which will cause an accident. The only justified reason to attack and kill someone brutally was that he/she is from the other religion. "I don't know who the Muslims on the train are; I do not care. It is enough for me to know that they are Muslims. They will not cross this river alive." – (A young boy who proposed train attack, *Train to Pakistan* 139). Their heart was filled with such hatred that they couldn't even think like human. If the train was fast it might cut many people in two like a knife slicing cucumbers. – (*Train to Pakistan* 164). Upon hearing these, Hukum Chand released Iqbal Singh and Juggat Singh from jail in hope that they would save the Muslims on train. And at the end of the novel, we see that Juggat Singh cut the rope but couldn't leave the place as the train was close. He sacrificed his life to save the people in the train. The Muslims were saved and the train to Pakistan crossed bridge over Juggat Singh's body.

"The Sikhs were sullen and angry. "Never trust a Mussulman," they said. What Muslims had they done to the Sikhs? Executed two of their Gurus, assassinated another and butchered his infant children; hundreds of thousands had been put to the sword for no other offense than refusing to accept Islam; their temples had been desecrated by the slaughter of kine; the holy Granth had been torn to bits. Sikh women jumped into wells and burnt themselves rather than falling into the hands of Muslims. Those who did not commit suicide were paraded naked in the streets, raped in public, and then murdered." – (*Train to Pakistan* 113). In Pakistan the torture was sparked by the participation of police and army. In Sheikhpura and Gujranwala, "Pakistan police

and the army took part in the killings. Not a soul was left alive. Women killed their own children and jumped into wells that filled to the brim with corpses.” - (*Train to Pakistan* 25). Sikhs and Hindu extremists did same to Muslims. They attacked Muslims women in marketplace. “They had heard of gentlewomen having their veils taken off, being stripped and marched down crowded streets to be raped.” Women committed suicide in fear of being raped publicly. The angry Hindus slaughtered pigs on Mosque premises, destroyed holy Quran. This was the level of extreme anger about other religions at that time.

There was no proper judiciary, crimes were overlooked making it a part of clash. The only Hindu family in Mano Majra was Lala Ram Lal’s. He was killed by a group of dacoits. But the focus was not in murder rather the religion of the victim. “No one knew who had killed him, but everyone knew Ram Lal was a Hindu” - (*Train to Pakistan* 113). The police were trying to prove Iqbal a Muslim because they could use this identity to cover up other cases. “Fill in the warrant of arrest correctly. Name: Mohammed Iqbal, son of Mohammed Something-or-other, or just father unknown. Caste: Mussulman. Occupation: Muslim League worker.” - (Deputy Magistrate, Hukum Chand, *Train to Pakistan* 63). The full description was made in instance by the Magistrate. The police and administration did not try to stop the conflict at that time. They were just watching silent audience. ‘Well, Inspector Sahib, let them kill,’ said Hukum Chand wearily. ‘Let everyone kill. Just ask for help from other stations and keep a record of the messages you send.’ - (Deputy Magistrate, Hukum Chand, *Train to Pakistan* 142). They kept the record to pretend that they tried their best to stop the conflicts. Deputy Magistrate commented, “What is a few hundred out of for hundred million anyway? An epidemic takes ten times the number and no one even bothers.” - (Deputy

Magistrate, *Train to Pakistan* 143). If we go through the history, the cheapest thing during such political unrest is human life. “We may not even need the bulldozer if this time it is going to be on the river. Just throw the corpses in the water.” (Deputy Magistrate, *Train to Pakistan* 143). Instead of giving safety to the minority, administration helped them to flee from the land. The whole of corrupted administrative body including police and Magistrates, political party leaders took advantage of the situation. The refugees were leaving behind all they had. All they could carry was gold and cash but not land and infrastructures. It was sure that they’ll never come back. The wealth had no owner so was ceased by the people in power. Although they were carrying cash and gold with them but on the way they’re dying; great chance for dacoits and thieves wearing costume of police and administration. “Let them get out, but be careful they do not take too much with them. Hindus from Pakistan were stripped of all their belongings before they were allowed to leave. Pakistan Magistrates have become millionaires overnight. - (Deputy Magistrate, *Train to Pakistan* 25) Right after the Muslims moved from the village, their houses were looted by local gangs. “Malli’s gang and the refugees then unyoked the bullocks, looted the carts, and drove the cows and buffaloes away.” - (*Train to Pakistan* 127). And a group of religious agitators came to Mano Majra and instilled a hatred for Muslims and convinced Sikhs to attempt massacre. They said, “If you are men, this train should carry as many people dead to the other side as you have received.” - (*Train to Pakistan* 139). The agitators were not obeying law and order rather the administration was puppet of powerful would-be political powers. “Magistrates were responsible for maintenance of law and order. But they maintained order with power behind them; not opposing them.” - (*Train to Pakistan* 160). And just like any other political transition or change of power, the struggle of life and death didn’t

touch political party leaders whose decision caused all these. "What is happening on the other side in Pakistan does not matter to them. They have not lost their homes and belongings; they haven't had their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters raped and murdered in the streets." - (*Train to Pakistan* 25)

#### 4 Conclusion:

The plight of partition is a huge topic to study and discuss. The history of such partitions and bloodshed can be seen in almost every independent nation. Unfortunately, in every story, common people are the only class that go through the consequences. It is true that through struggles, come freedom. But, humanity should be uphold. No matter the situation. Changes are necessary but that should not come through blood of innocent people. The leaders guiding a revolution should have a pre-plan of providing safety of people supporting his quest and should act accordingly.

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