

In-operative Community to Imagi-nation: Commitments in the Times of Partition in Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the narrative representation of the aftermath of the 1947 Indo-Pakistan partition with special reference to the nature of communal cooperation and violence in Khushwant Singh's novel Train to Pakistan. The Mano Majra community represents the shift in multiple ethnic groups' relations with each other before and after the partition. Using Jean Luc Nancy's concept of inoperative community and Benedict Anderson's concept of nation as an imagined community, this paper studies pre-partition community as presented by Singh as in-operative (Nancy's definition) which in the imminent wake of partition becomes imagi-nation (elaborating upon Anderson's concept of imagined community). This claim is substantiated by discussing how the village residents celebrate unity in diversity before partition but get enflamed in the chaotic indoctrination of nationalism. However, in the new state, love of Jugga and Nooran which unflinchingly resists communal distancing is the only relic of Nancy's inoperative community. The study concludes that the spirit of nationalism is powerful enough to create an imagined community at the cost of sacrificing previously existing inoperative communities but individual commitments and ethics can survive even under the umbrella of grand political narratives.

Keywords: Partition, nationalism, imagined community, heteronormative love, Khushwant Singh, *Train to Pakistan*

.....deploring a loss of familiarity, fraternity and conviviality. Our history begins with the departure of Ulysses and with the onset of rivalry, dissension, and conspiracy in his palace. Around Penelope, who reweaves the fabric of intimacy without ever managing to complete it, pretenders set up the warring

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and political scene of society—pure exteriority' (The Inoperative Community, p. 10).

1. Introduction

As Khushwant Singh had witnessed the 1947 Indo-Pak partition events closely, he depicted the same in his novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956). *Train to Pakistan* echoes the personal life of Singh by narrating the nostalgia he felt about his peaceful past. The predicament he faced was a double edged sword, firstly the end of centuries old values by transforming community into nations perturbed him and secondly a shift in the sense of identification brought a split in his sense of identity. Singh was born in Pakistani Punjab and migrated to Delhi because he was a direct affectee of the partition being a Sikh as the demarcation thrust him towards India. The Punjab he was born in became Pakistani Punjab and he had to migrate to India. However, he always remained nostalgic about his birthplace Hadali. Singh was well aware of the loyalties changing all of a sudden because of borders and political adjustments of the newly emerged nations and remained nostalgic about the past as well. He depicts on how nation is an imagined community and borders are cemented by political interest. Human heart has its own sense of belonging, and personal loyalties, be they to persons or places, cannot be shifted very easily.

The paper focuses on the concept of community as presented in *Train to Pakistan* using a theoretical framework based on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community and Jean Luc Nancy's concept of inoperative community (1991). The partition divided the subcontinent nationalism into Indian and Pakistani nationalism and within days the newly formed imagined community ensued in heinous brutality to the people who supposedly belonged to the cross border nations. This brings an end to centuries-old cooperation even in the villages whose inhabitants were neither politically active for the partition movement nor were interested. Mano Majra is one such community depicted by Khushwant Singh and this study discusses how an inoperative community comes to an end by becoming an imagined community through political intervention.

2. Literature Review

Jadeja (2015) considers the partition of the subcontinent as one of the most tragic events in its history. He expresses his uncertainty whether to celebrate

1947 as independence year or lament it for mass massacre during involuntary migration. He also mentions the variations in the Partition narrative perspectives as natural. While comparing Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, he compares their treatment of the Partition violence. Similarly, Khan (2016) considers Partition a complex phenomenon which continues to puzzle those who try to comprehend the strands that shaped it and write about it. He compares Singh's *Train to Pakistan* with Sahni's *Tamas*, to trace the profundity of both Singh and Sahni's imagination in creating texts which represent partition happenings by encompassing the complexities of occurrence, highlighting the consequences borne by common masses.

Daiya (2014) appreciates *Train to Pakistan* for documenting geographical and socio-political developments after 1947 through sketching the nitty-gritties of human and landscape behavior. Chopra (2010) focuses on the real Indian society in the times of partition as represented in *Train to Pakistan* through the portrayal of characters and situations. Zubair, Qureshi and Khuwaja (2018) find the novel a description of troubles and anxiety of partition times. In the communal riots the Sikhs and Hindus joined hands against the Muslims and both tried to decimate opposite communities. They find the novel articulating silence by presenting silent subjectivity of the partitioned subject as well as a national narrative.

Mili (2019) defines nationalism and partition as interrelated concepts because partition is a result of nationalism. In *The Shadow Lines* and *Train to Pakistan*, nationalism and partition are presented from different perspectives. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh focuses more on the feeling while *Train to Pakistan* depicts Khushwant Singh's point of view about partition riots.

Ilame(2020) dissects the quad segments "Dacoity", "Kalyuga", "Mano-Majra" and "Karma" in *Train to Pakistan*, describing partition as the gloomiest occurrence in British India. The study records Khushwant Singh's anger over the violation of the long-cherished Indian values in the form of communal riots inscribing criticism on bestiality of mass massacres. Rituperna (2010) considers the novel written in a matter to fact tone, stark style with impersonal narrative realism which is stark but gripping.

3. Research Methodology

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) describes nationalism embedded on the notion of 'imagined community', which means that nationalism is not something material or comes naturally but exists due to cultural or political connections. A national community becomes "imagined" because its members do not personally know each other but are connected through some sort of ideological or political affiliations.

The concept of imagined community propagates a sense of belonging under the banner of a nation. However, this sort of unity achieves unified existence at the cost of silencing differences and contradictions. Thus it aims at creating undifferentiated groups that share understanding of those political ideologies that serve as a foundation to national unity. This insistence on unity determines values in such a community while claiming it to be a harmonious existence wherein conflicts are not superfluous. However, when multiple affiliations are closed down, violence ensues because a community will efface differences through multiple means one of which could be ethnic cleansing to achieve a unified whole by any means which may be ideological, hegemonic or even violent.

In contrast to Anderson, Jean Luc Nancy in *Inoperative Community* (1991) recuperates the potential of a community by presenting the concept of a "community without community" (Nancy, 1991, p. 71). This sort of community does not force ethnic cleansing in the name of unified selectivity. Such a community creates a shift in a fixed sense of belonging and identity through a democratic focus based on fluid and open relations to foster a sense of "being with" (Nancy 1991, p.33) instead of "being in" (Nancy 1991, p.71). As a result, relations are formed with multitudes of races, classes, religious and cultural groups without insisting upon representing a unified whole. This sort of community minimizes the politics of othering.

The paper explores how the Mano Majra community which is close to Nancy's concept of community without community which at the time of Partition is metamorphosed into Anderson's concept of imagined community based on political and ideological affiliations.

4. Discussion

The main theme of the novel *Train to Pakistan* is the predicament of leaving one's homeland where one was born, bred and spent most of one's life time further aggravated by the communal violence metamorphosing friendships into enmities. Through presenting this theme the novel questions the concept of communal and national identity. Earlier all Hindu-Muslims had their affiliation to the subcontinent. Partition transformed them into Indian or Pakistani nationals. Religion got entangled with the spirit of nationalism that ensued imagined communities, so all Hindus and Sikh became Indians and all Muslims were supposed to be Pakistani. These ideological discourse strengthened the imagined community and made communities rift apart, therefore, both the communities committed hate crimes in the name of imagined community or nationhood.

Nancy's concept of community calls for an unworking of the totalizing based on exclusionary ideologies upon which imagined communities are based. This sort of community builds potential networks of relations. Sing sketches such a community in the form of the village named Mano Majra. The majority of the inhabitants of Mano Majra are Muslims and Sikhs with very few Hindus and Quasi-Christians with farming as their major occupation. The only Hindu family living there amongst 70 houses of Sikhs and Muslims is that of Ram Lal. The village communities are closely tied in spite of their multiple faiths and beliefs. There is mutual respect for each other as well in all matters which results in religious tolerance. For example, there are worship places for both Sikhs and Muslims i.e., Gurdwara and a mosque which are the two prestigious brick buildings out of the three, the third one being the mansion of Ram Lal. As they lived together for centuries they care for each other's pleasures and pains. Status wise Sikhs were superior as they owned lands on which Muslims worked as tenants. Some Muslims had their own shops, others worked as artisans. Some garbage collectors or sweepers lived in the outskirts of Mano Majra and nobody was concerned about their religion. They were most probably the lower caste Hindus who converted to Christianity when the Christian missionaries preached. The residents are too naive to know whether the British had left or not, simply counting time by resorting to the coming and going of trains. They love each other and are strongly committed to each other in Mano Majra. This community is a "community without community" as Nancy

presents because there is no forceful conversion or exclusion in the name of religion.

For Nancy, community represents being in common that denotes a shared existence. This shared existence can be found in *Train to Pakistan*. The first instance of unrest in the *Train to Pakistan* is the murder of Lala Ram Chand which simultaneously conveys the unity between people belonging to different religions. Although Jugga, the village rogue is suspected for murder, the communal sense amongst the villagers make them anxious because of the disruption in their peaceful existence. Meet Singh, the custodian of the Sikh temple, is perturbed how can two persons belonging to the same village be the murdered and the murderer. If he had committed any crime in the neighboring village, Meet Singh would have stood by him. Thus Singh clearly mentions that the community was least bothered about big political decisions or happenings around and communal love irrespective of different religions was intact. However, this community and unity in diversity was soon to be toppled down by the newly emerging nationalism. The dominant season in the narration is summer with many references to monsoon and floods. Floods are symbolic of destruction of community without community. The time period is the early days after partition and the events last over a few months, therefore, destruction took place in a few months only.

The novel depicts nostalgia for the community without community that existed in pre-partition and pre-violence days. This is explicitly conveyed through the railway line of Mano Majra which not only connects India and Pakistan but also determines the daily routine of the inhabitants of Mano Majra. Connecting Delhi and Lahore the train is a connecting point between India and Pakistan and a constant reminder of the unified past. The railway line is also a representative of the movement from an inoperative community to an imagined community through presenting the tropes of borders and border crossing. While the novel depicts a community without community through representing the closeness of the communities it gradually unleashes the death of this community as the newly created nation changes its schedule as the routine of trains depicts.

The shift from unflinching affiliations to rethinking solidarities is not easy for the villagers. Initially, the characters in the novel and inhabitants of

Mano Majra fail to believe that friends would become enemies in the name of religion or nationalism which, however, becomes the case. Still in this 'kalyug' as Singh names one of the parts of his novel meaning chaos, there are personal commitments that not only continue but go to the extent of higher order commitments as Juggut Singh, a Sikh saves Nooran, who is the daughter of the Muslim Imam of Mano Majra, by sacrificing his life. Personal commitments are unflinching but the insensibility spread by chaos overcomes communal love because migrations as well as mass killings take place under the banner of nationalism. This led to an ambivalent state of mind especially for those who had to migrate. The newly formed nations which were created in the name of ideologies and the members of each had no personal affinities for each other but joined hands together against the supposed cross-border fellows who were to be treated as enemies or others now.

Sing artfully presents this gradual shift through subdividing the novel into four parts entitled Dacoity, Kalyug, Mano Majra and Karma. The first part dramatizes robbery, the second chaos, the third the hatred getting dominant and fourth the nature's act of saving the Muslim train. If analyzed minutely these four parts systematically reflect the development of nationalism or transformation of inoperative community into imagined community. The initial anarchy represented in *Train to Pakistan* is of small scale level. It begins with the murder of Lala Ram Lal, the only Hindu family's head in Mano Majra. Malli leads the gang who killed Lala Ram Lal while in search of a fellow gangster. Juggut Singh also known as Jugga is the village rogue and is arrested as a suspect along with Iqbal who just landed Mano Majra. Both Jugga and Iqbal are innocent because Jugga was busy making love to Nooran - the Mullah's daughter at the time of murder and Iqbal arrived Mano Majra after the murder. Iqbal Singh is an educated atheist who arrived at the place to organize the villagers for a communist People's Party of India. Both of them were arrested on the orders of Hukum Chand, the magistrate. It is a gradual unleashing of the spirit of nationalism in the newly created state. For example, Iqbal is representative of a party that would aim at a different agenda – a communist party – and continue working along the new national ideologies. So a nation has its own internal politics. Hukum Chand represents bureaucracy and his arrest of Jugga and Iqbal is a simple effort of maintaining order in the newly created state. It is noteworthy that Hukum Chand represents a new administration just handed over by the

British to the Indians. The Civil Service of the British was also partitioned at the time of partition. As Anderson considers newly emerged postcolonial nation states a reflection of their colonial masters, we see new power structures emerging within India where the bureaucracy is more powerful and has agency over ordinary citizens. However, the new administration may not be as organized as that of the British. The new Indian bureaucracy represented through Hukum Chand is quite a disappointment as he is a lecherous drunkard and a pragmatic coward with the capability of manipulation. His style of smoking represents bureaucrats' easy upward movement from their class through means of earning like bribery and enjoyment of privileges like the free rest house near Mano Majra. His philosophy of tolerating corruption for personal safety foregrounds the future system of the newly formed nation which would eventually result not only in social and political classes but also in deep rooted corruption in the imagined community.

While both Jugga and Iqbal were in custody, conflicts started in the village. This is the time when nationalism starts shaping itself on the community level. The reason was the arrival of two trains full of Sikh dead bodies which were burnt and buried respectively. Therefore, it was decided to send the village Muslims to Pakistan on a train. Meanwhile, a Sikh group full of anti-Muslim sentiments decided to sabotage the train. Jugga at this time was in the Chundan Nuggar jail. Chand, who was corrupt yet felt guilty for his sins, released both Jugga and Iqbal to stop this massacre. Iqbal stayed drunk while Jugga sacrificed his life to save Nooran, his beloved, who was on the train.

The story begins with the dead bodies of Sikhs in the train coming from Pakistan and ends with a Muslims-full train going to Pakistan with the anticlimax of the train being saved due to the love of the one and the trick of the other. The mutual love and tolerance between Mano Majra's different religious communities gets a shock with the arrival of the first ghost train. The silent train moves along the track with a lot of dead bodies. People watch the scene from their rooftops. When the second ghost train brings mutilated dead bodies, people are even more upset. It is a simultaneously real and surreal situation that is developing. Nobody expected national hatred to overcome communal love but the surreal becomes real.

According to Nancy, death plays a significant role in community. It works on two levels in an inoperative community. The first one while focusing on unity rejects any disparate elements. At its extreme, this rejection paves way for purification through violence or ethnic cleansing. This rejection is depicted in *Train to Pakistan* through the dead bodies in the trains. Singh describes how women and children were huddled in a corner of the train, their mouth open with the last shriek yet to be uttered even after their death. The bodies were crammed against the far ends of the compartments looking out at windows with horror of spikes, spears and shots that could come from windows and kill them. Many rushed to lavatories considering them safe places but there was no escape. And the mass massacre resulted in intolerable smell coming out of blood, urine and faeces. There is also a reference to the gang rape of Sundari, the daughter of Hukum Chand. Thus violence was extreme and gradually became insurmountable. This violence makes them force Muslims to leave the village which on a symbolic level represents leaving India for Pakistan with no second option except getting killed at the hands of Indian nationals. Trains symbolically become national spaces through their coding of India and Pakistan, thus paving way towards aggression resulting from nationalism. It is because of them that the village comes out of its putative harmoniousness and gets a wakeup call towards the newly emerging nationalism.

Train to Pakistan traces the beginning of riots in the new imagined community in these words: “Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. 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” (Sing, 1957, p. 8). Singh describes the migration predicament of displacement across borders in these words: “They travelled on foot, in bullock carts, crammed into lorries, clinging to the sides and roofs of trains. Along the way – at fords, at crossroads, at railroad stations – they collided with panicky swarms of Muslims fleeing to safety in the west. The riots had become a rout. By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people – Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs – were in flight. 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 (Sing, 1957, p. 8).” Thus the imagi-nation becomes an inoperative community based on propositions spread by the propagandists.

Khushwant Singh tries to trace the causes of violence in a very neutral manner. People in India got the news that Sikhs were being tortured and murdered in Pakistan and women were being stripped, paraded naked and raped in the streets. People in Pakistan got the same sort of news about what happened in Patiala, Ambala and Kapurthala to retaliate. Sikhs also started committing atrocities on Muslims in Punjab. At this point, religion is subsided by nationalism. India and Pakistan become the new identities. The government or administration of the newly formed nation also moves to action. To avoid any massacres of Muslims in Mano Majra, Hukum Chand plans for a peaceful evacuation of Muslims to Julludhar and eventually to Pakistan. Singh tries to balance down the role of communities in triggering violent activities by alluding to the news of Muslims killing Sikhs and Hindus and vice versa. However, he does not depict any event directly but narrates it through storytelling by people. He presents humane attitudes coming to an end in the times of crisis or anarchy or kalyug and communal violence catching fire. The enormity of violence was not only beyond expectations, it was beyond reason too. But it happened was the only reality like the reality of unflinching love and commitments that got narrowed down to personal ones. Thus a nation even if an imagined community is a real entity and a national policy can have impact on its nationals as well as neighbours due to exclusionary ideologies.

Jennifer Yusin (2009) contends that partition was a phenomenon which was beyond the understanding of the ordinary people. The same is experienced by Iqbal when the lambardar, Banta Singh, told him that the English were better army officers than the Indians. The wives of the officers used to send them gifts and he was apprehensive whether that practice would be continued by Indian officers' wives. Also the people of Mano Majra were simply ignorant of the fact why India and Pakistan came into being and whether the British had left by that time. Iqbal was surprised at this state of affairs because he believed that these people should fully use this political freedom to get economic freedom. For Lambardar or the Muslims, freedom would be useful for educated people like Iqbal, the poor men like them were slaves of the English and now would become servants of the Indians. Similarly when the Muslim minority in Mano Majra is asked to migrate, Imam Baksh is upset and says: "What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors. We have lived amongst you as brothers (Singh, 1956, p. 117)." Iman Baksh highlights the community that

centred on shared experiences as conveyed by Nancy's community without community. The communal love is gradually coming to an end with trauma as a result. The Muslims are told to leave because whereas the Mano Majra fellows would protect them, people from all over are walking in and no guarantee can be given of their lives. So, with no options left, the Muslims decide to migrate. Thus an imagined community or nation is a political entity that ends a community without community. The political decisions trickle down to ordinary people's lives and harm them in one way or the other.

The second type of death in an inoperative community is the death of a community member which is "the infinite fulfilment of an immanent life" (Nancy, 1991, p.13). This fulfilment can be seen in Jugga's death. The last chapter of the novel portrays how a religious agitator group enters Mano Majra, and allures the villagers to take revenge from the Muslims around. The villagers, initially hesitant, get trapped. This is how communal love is devoured by political propaganda. They plan to take revenge by attacking the train in which Muslims were travelling to Pakistan through the route of Mano Majra in the late evening. All the villagers stay united except Meet Singh and Lumberdar. The whole community is instilled with the new national spirit. When Hukum Chand gets to know about this conspiracy, he immediately gets Jugga and Iqbal released, as they could be helpful in revoking the conspiracy. Iqbal Singh, however, stays on the safer side. But Jugga, who loved Nooran and knew that she would be in the train to be attacked, plays his final act successfully by sacrificing his life to avert the attack. His personal love for Nooran passes the test of commitment which communal love fails in. Jugga's act of sacrificing his life for Nooran and other Muslims travelling on *Train to Pakistan* makes him the protagonist of the novel. Jugga's sacrifice proves that individual commitments remained more powerful during post partition violence.

The novel depicts the power of personal commitments in anarchic times. It is reflected through the young blood heteronormative love of Juggut Singh for Nooran. Jugga loses his life to save Nooran. Thanks to Nooran, other Muslims on the train are saved too. Thus, Jugga who is presented as a village rogue in the beginning of the novel becomes the protagonist of the story. He is much better than the police or the magistrate who represent structure, power and discipline of an imagined community. His poverty had

led him to commit minor crimes but he was not a murderer. Also he remains unflinching in his faith in love, and irrespective of the fact that Nooran is a Muslim woman, tries his utmost to save her and their child. He is bullied by his own community, is trampled over by the train, but the train goes to Pakistan. The new nationalities are achieved over the dead bodies of millions as well as through the demise of the unified community. The hate crimes win under the flag of nationalism. It is only the personal love that does not forget ethics in the times of crisis and becomes the relic of Nancy's concept of inoperative community.

5. Conclusion

Anderson presents a notion of community that is unified and closed. This notion might appear quite egalitarian from political point of view because of creating horizontal affiliations for the sustainability of a nation but nationally sanctioned affiliations may disrupt potential forms of association. These affiliations are disrupted in *Mano Majra* and inoperative community is transformed into a closed imagined community with no room for differences. Community as an active idea is the interruption in the belief that community "resists itself as much as it resists the individual" (Nancy 1991, p. 7). Jugga's decision to save the train full of Muslims is a resistance to search a collectivity mind set by creating a discourse for "community without community" (Nancy 1991, p.7). His act challenges the notion of an imagined community by confronting the violence which is a result of such community's foundational believes and discourses. Therefore through his unworking the destroying the train plan he temporarily restores the fictive harmony of Nancy's community repressing the contingency of Anderson's community. Therefore, our communities are in need of a renewal on working of totalitarianism based on exclusionary politics in the name of nationalism through opening up potential networks of a sense of being with as demonstrated by Jugga. He undertook a battle to retain linkages in the schism of partition riots.

In *Train to Pakistan* Muslims and Sikhs affiliations are disrupted by exclusionary politics under the banner of imagined community because fraternity is redefined to a sense of belonging to India. The only relic of a community celebrating differences is Jugga and Nooran's love for each other. To conclude, personal commitments speak louder than communal commitments in the times of anarchy, especially that created by border

divisions. Jugga saves the train and his love as well as prestige of his community while the rioters had plotted the massacre. In the times of lawlessness, or newly emerging bureaucratic structures, personal love poses resilience to national imagined community's political discourse and love remain the method in madness; madness being the communal hate crimes under the influence of national slogans.

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