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Exploring Communal Trauma: A Comparative Study of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*

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Abstract

Numerous literary writers have captured the societal anguish caused by the communal trauma of Partition in their works, including Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bhisham Sahni, Salman Rushdie, Manju Kapur, Taslima Nasreen, and many more. This research paper undertakes a comparative analysis of *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh and *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar. It explores how these texts portray the experiences of Partition, including trauma, violence, abduction, rape, murder, the kidnapping of women and children, migration, and immigration, among other themes.

Keywords: communalism, violence, partition, migration, colonialism.

Introduction

The term "communal trauma" combines two distinct words: "communal," which pertains to a community, and "trauma," referring to deep emotional or physical injury or violence. The word "communal" originates from the Latin term *communalism*, meaning something shared or undertaken collectively by the members of a community (Shaini 01). It primarily focuses on communal activities or interactions. In *India's Struggle for Independence*, Bipin Chandra identifies three fundamental elements or stages of communal ideology that progressively lead to societal discord. According to Chandra et al., these stages form the foundation of communal ideologies and contribute to the destruction of societal harmony through violence and unrest (398).

Communalism refers to the disruption of societal harmony, marked by the erosion of peace, brotherhood, and unity. It often results in the division of communities, states, and nations, and is accompanied by violence, abduction, kidnapping, murder, and rape, leading to the oppression and marginalization of minority groups by dominant majorities. Communal trauma, therefore, emerges as a social phenomenon closely associated with terms like "commune," "communal," and "community."

Derived from the French word *commune*, which denotes an independent state or a federation with lim-

ited powers, communalism does not imply unity or collective welfare. Instead, it highlights antagonism between groups divided by caste, customs, traditions, rituals, cultures, tribes, races, regions, and religions. Such divisions foster negative ideologies, leading to societal disintegration and violent incidents.

Fundamentalist leaders, aiming to control society, often exploit political groups, regional affiliations, cultural practices, and religious sentiments. Among these, religion becomes the most potent tool for advancing their agendas. It serves not only as a means of connection to moral and ethical values but also as a weapon to manipulate emotions and enforce ideological dominance.

Several factors act as obstacles to communal harmony and brotherhood. Cultural differences between communities within the same nation often create diversity, whether based on religion or region. The feelings generated within groups of the same region or religion may neither be entirely antagonistic nor identical in nature. However, when cultural identity becomes the primary basis for political demands, the notion of cultural "personal nationality" can escalate into a political doctrine.

India is home to numerous communal organizations such as the Hindu Mahasabha, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Akali Dal, VHS, and the Muslim League. These organizations often seek dominance over aspects like religion, region, caste, community, culture, traditions, rituals, economy, and administration. The self-serving agendas of such groups propagate divisive ideologies, contributing to societal decline and leading to violence.

Leaders of these dominant groups often embody fundamentalist ideologies and aim to exert control over society. They leverage the support of organizations, political factions, tribal affiliations, regional loyalties, and cultural practices to achieve their goals. Among these, religion emerges as the most powerful tool, serving both as a connection to one's emotions, moral values, and ethics, and as a means to manipulate and fulfill the ambitions of these leaders.

The Impact of Communal Trauma in India

Communal trauma is not a modern phenomenon; it

dates back to the origins of life on Earth. It exists not only within human communities but also among other creatures, though its causes and manifestations vary across time and groups. In human history, evidence of communal conflicts can be traced to ancient epics such as Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

India, as a secular nation, has long experienced clashes and disputes among its diverse communities. The roots and evolution of communal trauma, particularly during the Indian freedom struggle, form a significant and tragic chapter in history. Hindus and Muslims, the two prominent communities in India, have shaped the socio-political landscape since ancient times, often prioritizing their religious identities. As noted by Jayapalan:

The Hindus and Muslims are the pioneer communities in India, who played a significant role in the National struggle right from the Revolt of 1857. The Muslim Communalism was encouraged by the British Government as part of their policy of divide and rule. (Jayapalan, 98)

During the pre-Partition era, modern India frequently attributed communal unrest to the British policy of "divide and rule." Hindu communalists often blamed Muslims for the riots, while Muslims pointed fingers at Hindus, perpetuating a cycle of mutual distrust and conflict.

Several factors contributed to the rise of communalism in India. Historically, numerous events weakened the national movement by the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Communalism gained momentum as fundamentalists within both Hindu and Muslim communities sought to advance their respective interests. The demand for separate electorates and the formation of the Muslim League were tangible expressions of this divisive ideology.

The British colonial policy of "divide and rule," which institutionalized separate electorates based on religion, further entrenched communalism in India. This policy exacerbated communal tensions, ultimately culminating in the Partition of the country, which deepened antagonism between the communities. As highlighted by historical records:

There are historical evidence of the riots, caused by Communalism. Hindu-Muslim 'LatBhairo' riots 1809-1811, 'HepHep' riots 1819, Hindu-Muslim 'Banaras' and 'Kanpur'

riots 1931, 'Manzilgah' and 'Sukkur' riots 1940. (Dkshamli)

These incidents underscore the destructive impact of communalism, which fueled societal division and disrupted national unity.

The Depiction of Communal Trauma in Literature

Many writers have portrayed the suffering and joys of society through their literary works, including Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bhisham Sahni, Salman Rushdie, Manju Kapoor, Taslima Nasreen, and others. This research offers a comparative analysis of *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh and *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) by Manohar Malgonkar, examining themes such as the trauma of partition, societal violence, abduction and murder, the kidnapping of women and children, rape and murder of women, as well as migration and immigration.

Khushwant Singh and Manohar Malgonkar both open their respective works with depictions of communal violence. In *Train to Pakistan*, Singh portrays the devastating conditions of the Indian partition, highlighting the drastic changes in communities compared to earlier times. He emphasizes the severity of the situation, where communal riots erupted and thousands of people were displaced between India and Pakistan. Similarly, Malgonkar presents a comparable scenario in *A Bend in the Ganges*. The novel begins with the nationalist call to "Boycott British goods" (Malgonkar 01), echoing Mahatma Gandhi's appeal across the nation. British goods are seen being burned, while people chant "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" (01), expressing their support for nationalism and independence. The image of these fires, "just one of hundreds of thousands of similar fires all over the country" (11), symbolizes the rising aggression within the community, with the act of burning British goods serving as a powerful expression of anger and frustration.

Both novels revolve around the theme of the Indo-Pak partition and depict how independence led to one of the bloodiest massacres in Indian history. The fundamentalists exploited the partition for their own gain. Through incidents of violence, the authors illustrate how communal riots erupted in Calcutta and, within a few months, spread across the entire country.

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. (Singh 02)

Malgonkar mentioned the communal trauma of partition in the preface of *A Bend in the Ganges*:

Freedom came to India...so did violence. Three hundred thousand were slaughtered, a hundred thousand women were raped, abducted, mutilated, twelve million people were rendered homeless.

While Khushwant Singh, as a journalist, portrays the story of Mano Majra, a community initially free from communal violence during the partition, it eventually succumbs to the destructive forces of communal strife. On the other hand, Malgonkar, in his depiction, shows a society that was once free from violence but is later engulfed in the communal fire of partition. This scenario echoes Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1991), where the village of Pir Pindo is also portrayed as a place of communal harmony before being shattered by the horrors of partition. These depictions suggest that the partition not only brought independence but also inflicted deep communal trauma.

In *Train to Pakistan*, violence erupts when the moneylender Ram Lal is murdered for economic gain in Mano Majra. A group of robbers, led by Mali, arrives at Ram Lal's home at night. One of the robbers drags him from under the cot, and the leader scolds him for his resistance, demanding the keys to the safe. Despite the pressure, Ram Lal refuses to hand over the keys and denies them access to the almirah. On the roof of his house, the robbers beat him mercilessly with the butts of their guns, spear handles, kicks, and punches. Blood pours from his wounds, and the leader kicks him as he kneels, crying and spitting blood. Two of his teeth are broken, but he still refuses to surrender the keys.

One of the men tore the moneylender away from the leader and hit him full in the face with the butt of his gun...crying and spitting blood. Two of his teeth were smashed. ...Ram Lal uttered a loud yell and collapsed on the floor with blood spurting from his belly. (Singh10)

The dacoity has a profound impact on Juggat Singh, a resident of Mano Majra. After the robbers

drop bangles in his house, he becomes a suspect in the murder and dacoity case. Juggat's family history is marked by his father and grandfather, who were also dacoits and were hanged for murder. However, they were reported to have never harmed their own village people. Juggat Singh, a tall, handsome, and physically strong farmer, has a reputation for bad behavior, earning him the dubious distinction of being a "budmash number ten" (Singh 43). His actions have brought disgrace to his family, and he is arrested as a suspect in the crime. Alongside him, Iqbal, a young man educated in England and inspired by communist ideology, is also arrested. Iqbal was sent by the People's Party of India to promote Hindu-Muslim unity and halt the violence in Punjab. However, as an outsider, Iqbal is mistaken for a Muslim Leaguer and is also taken into police custody.

Similarly, Manohar Malgonkar illustrates the origins of communal violence through the seemingly ordinary issue of a property dispute in Piploda Land between the "Little House" and "Big House" families. At the time, Piploda was a small, untidy piece of scrubland with a sluggish, weed-choked nullah running through it. A court case over the land concludes in favor of Hari, leaving Vishnu Dutt despondent. Unable to accept the decision, Vishnu Dutt kills Hari with an axe:

Hari lay just inside the doorway, his face downwards, his arms stretched over his head. And on his shoulder-blade, there was a deep gaping wound from which the blood had already stopped gurgling out. (Malgonkar 49)

The comparative analysis reveals that communal identity serves as a tool that contributes to communal trauma. This identity becomes a curse for minorities, leading to their subjugation and exploitation. Both Khushwant Singh and Manohar Malgonkar address these issues in their respective works. In *Train to Pakistan*, as Muslims prepare to migrate at night, robbers come to Imam Baksh's house to abduct Nooran. In her absence, one of the robbers marks Imam Baksh with a knife, changing his identity from Muslim to Hindu. A similar situation is presented in *A Bend in the Ganges*, where Debidyal, disguised as a Muslim, is returning from Lahore to Bombay under the name Karim Khan. He is later identified and murdered by a Muslim mob:

"He is my husband!" Mumtaz said defiantly.

"Karim Khan!" The crowd already forming around him, making a circle. "Then can he prove that he is Muslim?" (Malgonkar 368)

Khushwant Singh addresses the communal trauma experienced by women during the partition period in *Train to Pakistan*. The Sikh refugees describe the harrowing conditions faced by women, highlighting their tragic choices in the face of violence. Many women, rather than be subjected to the hands of Muslims, chose to jump into wells or burn themselves alive. The Hindu women, in particular, are portrayed as symbolizing purity, willing to take their own lives rather than endure such humiliation. Singh conveys that when it was reported that Muslim mobs attempted to molest Hindu women, the women responded by killing their children and then throwing themselves into wells, which were filled with the bodies of the dead. The women were paraded naked through the streets, raped in public, and then murdered.

"Our Hindu women are like that: so pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them. We Hindus never raise our hands to strike women, but these Muslims have no respect for the weaker sex." (Singh, 06)

Debi Dayal, his sister Sundari, and their parents become tragic victims of the relentless communal violence that sweeps through their lives. Shafi Usman, a key figure in the carnage, targets Sundari with the intention of kidnapping her, attacking the Kerward family. In this violent upheaval, Sundari's mother, Radha, is brutally murdered. As she lies dying, *"there was a bubble of pink blood on her mouth, and her moans were getting less and less audible"* (Malgonkar, 379). This scene represents the countless innocent lives lost during the communal violence. We are reminded of numerous other victims, like Debi Dayal and Sundari, who were mercilessly killed in the course of this brutality.

In another instance, *"Mali's gang and the refugees then unyoked the bullocks, looted the carts, and drove the cows and buffaloes away"* (Singh, 145). Mali, a leader of a hooligan gang, is portrayed as someone who exploits the chaos, while Shafi, a young terrorist influenced by communist ideology, is equally ruthless in his actions.

Through these characters, Manohar Malgonkar illustrates the devastating impact of communal

trauma, where communities that once worked together toward shared goals suddenly find themselves at odds, their relationships fractured by violent ideologies. The explosion of violence in the novel is a stark reflection of the broader upheaval taking place in the country:

"The bomb explosion in Bombay dockyard accelerated the process of quitting... the empire was ready to fall like a ripe mango... Never had their rule been more abhorrent to the people of India; freedom was closer at hand than at any time since the Revolt of 1857." (Malgonkar, 282-284)

Malgonkar explores the origins of communal violence by referencing the Bombay explosion and the racial superiority that fueled the conflicts during Partition. The Muslim League's sense of egotistic racial pride, stemming from the Mughal rule over India, played a pivotal role in sabotaging the independence process and deepening the communal divide.

At the start of the narrative, the protagonist takes pride in his Indian identity. However, the influence of his communal-minded friends leads to his moral corruption. Initially, he betrays his Hindu comrades by turning a blind eye to the brutality of a British policeman. Although he perceives his actions as coincidental, he is troubled by the betrayal but refuses to acknowledge the influence of Hafiz, his communal-minded friend. Over time, he abandons his earlier beliefs, embracing communalism and seeking revenge on Hindus in general, and Debi Dayal in particular.

Malgonkar also critiques the role of organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, which played a significant role in West Bengal's communal strife. The Mahasabha's leaders sought to increase their influence by adding more people to their ranks, often using forceful tactics such as strikes to achieve their goals. This aggressive push for dominance and the drive for communal superiority were key factors that led to the escalation of communalism and violence.

Conclusion

In the research, both selected novels present a vivid portrayal of the communal trauma caused by the partition. The Hindu and Sikh refugees who sought refuge in Mano Majra shared horrifying accounts of the violence in West Pakistan. In one scene, a train with a "ghostly quality" (Singh 67)

arrives at the Mano Majra railway station. Unlike any ordinary train, it is empty—no passengers are seen clinging to the roof, bogies, or footboard. However, this train is different. It has come from Pakistan, carrying the lifeless bodies of many Hindus and Sikhs who were murdered by the brutal violence of Muslims. Among the dead are women and children, huddled together in a corner, their eyes wide with terror and their mouths frozen in a scream that can no longer be heard (Malgonkar 90).

The arrival of the train at Mano Majra station is a stark representation of horror and tragedy. It is not just the train's appearance that paints a grim picture, but also the larger factors contributing to the complete communal breakdown in the village. Members of the Muslim League, carrying skulls and bones in boxes as evidence of Muslims killed in India, add to the tension. Nocturnal visitors, who preach violence to the once peaceful residents of the village at the Gurudwara, intensify the growing distrust. The communal violence exacerbates the mutual suspicion between the Sikhs and Muslims of Mano Majra. The situation is further complicated with the arrival of young Sikh extremists, who have witnessed the bloodshed firsthand and are eager for revenge. At a meeting in the Gurudwara, the villagers decide to kill all passengers traveling to Pakistan on the next train.

Additionally, a natural disaster adds to the chaos. The rains cause the Satluj River to overflow, and the floodwaters carry a mass of dead bodies, both human and animal, floating downstream. The bodies are cremated outside the village, symbolizing the destruction and loss caused by the partition. The text portrays the division of families, the survival of friendships across borders, and the ways in which people cope with trauma—rebuilding their lives physically and mentally in the wake of dislocation. Despite the brutality and loss, there is little reflection on the event in historical accounts.

The communal image created in this scene is one of devastation and death: "The land of the five rivers had become the land of carrion. The vultures and jackals and crows and rats wandered about, pecking, gnawing, tearing, gluttoned, staring boldly at their train" (Malgonkar 360).

The comparative study frequently highlights the intense antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims, as both communities engage in looting, theft, rob-

bery, and murder against one another. This mutual animosity reflects a larger backdrop of communal trauma, shaped by socio-economic, political, religious, regional, caste, and community identities. The communal violence in the novels is portrayed through various incidents such as the dacoity at Ram Lal's house, the dispute over Piploda Land, and the political struggle of Hukam Chand to protect the train to Pakistan. Additionally, religious tensions are evident in the Sikh mob's actions in Mano Majra, encouraging the non-Muslim community to take revenge for the abductions and rapes that occurred during migration. The murder of Debidyal at Lahore station and the social revenge involving the exchange of gunny bags filled with dead bodies further underscore the depth of the violence and retribution.

Both *Train to Pakistan* and *A Bend in the Ganges* set the stage for these horrific communal riots. The comparative analysis of these works reveals that the roots of communalism lie in fanatical interests tied to religion, politics, and economic motives. Nationalism and communalism are intertwined, with both being fueled by these deep-seated causes of division.

The partition, driven by community and religious divisions, sparked widespread violence, and its devastating effects were felt by the innocent. The subaltern groups, such as the elderly, women, children, and minorities, were especially vulnerable and bore the brunt of the suffering. In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh depicts how the Muslim minority in Mano Majra, along with Ram Lal's only Hindu family, experienced communal tensions after the creation of Pakistan. Before the partition, the Hindus and Sikhs had coexisted, but the partition left the Muslim minority exposed to the wrath of communal violence. Similarly, in *A Bend in the Ganges*, Manohar Malgonkar illustrates how individuals like Basu, Shafi, and the Kerward family, who belong to minority communities, also faced the brutal consequences of communal strife. The rise of communalism led to mass migrations, forcing people to flee their native lands. This critical period left communities tortured and displaced, further deepening the scars of the partition.

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