

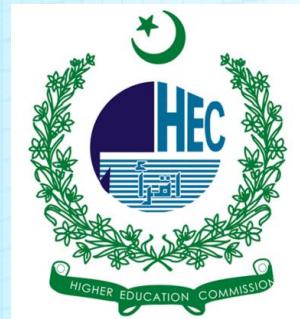
Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

A Postcolonial Study of the Train as a Vibrational Force of Identity, Culture, and Hybridity in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*



Urooj Ikram

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, University of Malakand.

drurooj96@gmail.com

Aziz Ahmad (Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Malakand.

azizahmad@uom.edu.pk

Yasir Akmal Roghani (M. Yasir Ali)

PhD Scholar, Department of Pashto, University of Peshawar
yasirakmal550@gmail.com



Abstract

This paper examines how the train is used as a symbol of vibrating force that shapes and disrupts identity, culture, and hybridity through a postcolonial lens. In *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956), the train is not only a mode of transportation but also a carrier of mixed identity and cultural hybridity. It is employed as a metaphor for the transformation and deconstruction of various communal identities, owing to the movement of passengers from different communities in the same train. The train carries Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, following the same route with multiple mindsets and ideas between Faqiranwalla and Mano Majra. The main purpose of this research is to illustrate how the train, as a postcolonial metaphor, becomes both a unifying and dividing force. It brings together identities and cultures into shared spaces, while at the same time exposing the ruptures and traumas that Partition created. The study revolves around how the involvement of powerful outsiders plays a vital role in shaping the identities and cultures of these communities. It also highlights the trauma vibrating back and forth during the Partition between Muslims and Hindus. The train plays a vital role in harmony and disharmony of various communities. Although, with the passage of time, these trains turned into destructive forces. The train turning highlights the destruction with emergence of modernity.

Key terms: Culture; Hybridity; Identity; Train; Transformation

Introduction

Though superficially the train is a carrying vehicle, in *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956) it becomes a symbol of various constructive strategies. In the beginning, it serves as a tool for blending different ethnicities, cultures, religions, and identities, showcasing peace and unity. But in the later part of the novel, it turns into a symbol of horror, terror, and fear when it is used to transport the corpses of Muslims and Hindus from Pakistan and India respectively after the division of the subcontinent in 1947.

Partition is a recurring theme in the novel, where the train becomes a translational force—different cultures are displaced, leading to the emergence of hybridity. Throughout the novel, the train acts as a dynamic tool symbolizing cultural interaction and identity formation. It connects rural localities like the village of Mano Majra, where identities merge and a hybrid society is formed.

Later, this serene setting transforms into a horrific and disastrous environment when the train carries the dead of different ethnicities, becoming a symbol of fear. The same train, once a symbol of connection, interaction,

love, and hybridity, becomes a symbol of disconnection, disintegration, abhorrence, and segregation.

This transformation—from a symbol of love to a symbol of hate—can be analyzed through postcolonial theories by Bhabha (1994), Said (1978), and Spivak (1988). These theories are used here as the guiding framework: Bhabha's concept of hybridity explains cultural blending, Said's Orientalism highlights colonial exploitation of railways, and Spivak's notion of the subaltern emphasizes the silencing of Partition victims.

Moreover, Said (1978) condemns the worldview that divides East and West into mutually exclusive opposites: the West is ordered, rational, masculine, and "good," while the East is chaotic, irrational, feminine, and "evil." He further suggests that colonizers used railways for their own benefit, labeling Eastern people as the "Other."

When this hybrid society was forcefully segregated, a violent atmosphere was created. Spivak (1988) also criticizes such inhuman behavior, in which the colonized are silenced, marginalized, and often killed—such as those in the trains—without justice being served.

Conclusively, the train in the novel portrays more than peace and prosperity. It also symbolizes the terrifying image of Partition—where people who once lived together and shared meals are violently segregated. This violent force disrupts the peaceful surroundings, transforming them into spaces of fear.

Research Questions

1. How does the train function as a symbolic space reflecting cultural displacement and identity fragmentation during the Partition of India?
2. In what ways does the train operate as both a site of fusion and rupture, facilitating the formation of hybrid identities amidst the communal turbulence of Partition?

Literature Review

Scholars such as Pandey (2001) and Butalia (1998) have shown that the Partition of 1947 was not merely a geographical division but also a deep rupture in cultural, communal, and individual identities. In *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956), the train is not simply a means of transportation but a symbolic carrier of cultural, religious, and communal crossings. The train becomes a metaphorical tool that reshapes and distorts identities.

Bhabha (1994) introduces the concept of hybridity and liminal space, where new cultures, values, and identities emerge through the interaction of the colonized and the colonizer, Eastern and Western. This theory applies directly to both the train and the village of Mano Majra in Singh's novel. The train's motion signifies that identities are not fixed; they are constantly reshaped by the flux of migration, cultural contact, and violence.

Boehmer (2005) has described trains as "vehicles of modernity," which colonial powers often hijacked and corrupted for their own ends. In Singh's portrayal, trains turn from carriers of people and ideas into vessels of violence and silence—filled with widows, corpses, and angry survivors. The harmonious coexistence of identities before Partition collapses under colonial pressure.

Kumar (2002) also highlights how the Partition train "operates simultaneously as a site of communal formation and destruction," reflecting its dual role in connecting and disconnecting Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. These trains, symbols of movement and progress, become channels of mass murder and communal hatred.

Through Said (1978), the British used trains to exploit India economically, framing their intervention as civilizing while dehumanizing Indians as irrational and uncultured. This orientalist framework justifies the transformation of trains into tools of violence. Spivak's (1988) critique of subaltern silence reveals how the dead in these trains were not merely victims but silenced voices—their narratives erased, identities unrecorded, and justice denied.

Shafique et al. (2025) portray the role of societal burden that stigmatized and labeled the main character, Juggut Singh, in Singh's novel. The study shows how Juggut Singh was forced by institutional authorities as well as society to confirm his criminal identity. The theories used for constant labeling are Becker's (1960) Labelling Theory and Goffman's (1963) Stigma Theory, demonstrating that continuous labeling led Juggut to accept his fate as a criminal.

He cherished strong inner values to resist this stigma. However, the police played a vital role in enforcing it. At the end, he broke this label and died a hero. Although that study highlights the failure of institutions in granting equal rights, it does not explicitly address the responsible actors. This research, however, focuses on the colonizers as the controlling powers of these institutions, who played a central role in the unequal distribution of rights among communities.

Gulalay et al. (2025) argue the description of power, state control and higher authorities in Khushwant Singh's Novel *Train to Pakistan* by using Althusser's theory as theoretical framework. By using the method of textual analysis, it highlights how the dwellers of Mano Majra were controlled physically and psychologically by magistrate and police. The study analyzes pivotal scenes that show how disgusting threats, physical violence and vulgar threats are used to control people. The research findings are highly focused on how police use soft tactics to turn people into vulgar threats and physical punishment. The objectives of this research also formulate that how colonizers use tactics and form institutions to overcome colonized people. This research

goes hand to hand in the procedures used to control people psyches through use of soft language to manipulate them and turn them into vulgar threats and physical punishment.

The research article of Ahmad et al. (2025) argues about the mixing of local languages with English language called language hybridity in Khushwant Singh's Novel *Train to Pakistan* by using postcolonial theory to examine the idea of language as proposed by Homi K Bhabha. To create language hybridity, the researcher uses different techniques such as code switching, code mixing, and multilingualism in English. Research aims to examine how the blending of local and colonial language represents the struggle between tradition and modernity, and how English is used is the language of authority and indigenous languages have significant culture, economic and social value. The same findings match with this research that how colonizers use English language as a source of economic and political dominance. Through better use of the English language, they take control of and everything in colonized society.

Goffman (1963) analyses how stigmatized people protect their identities when they are unable to fulfill the criteria of standards. They adopt other impressions to maintain their identities. Stigma is shame and a fear of discreditation for one's own identity when one fails to meet other people's standards. The same case is highlighted in the behavior of different communities living in Mano Majra. They conceal their real identity due to the fear of corpses brought in trains. This scenario of horror started after the colonizers took control of this place.

Theoretical Framework

The study applies Bhabha's (1994) theory of cultural hybridity, particularly the concept of liminal space, to explore how the train and Mano Majra serve as spaces of identity reconstruction. It also draws on Said (1978) to explain how colonizers exploited railway systems to manipulate identities and incite division for political gain. British colonialism introduced trains to India as tools of economic benefit, but over time, they became symbols of mobility, violence, and hybridity.

The train in Singh's (1956) novel reflects the complex duality of colonial modernity—representing both interconnectivity and disintegration. After the Partition, it transforms into a traumatic tool, carrying corpses and despair rather than people and hope. Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern further enriches this reading, as the dead remain unnamed and voiceless, excluded from history and discourse.

To understand the issue at hand, the study uses three textual instances from the novel as case studies to illustrate the train's shifting role:

1. Its initial function of peaceful coexistence,

2. Its transformation into a liminal space dismantling hybridity,
3. Its ultimate use as a mobile tomb.

Research Methodology

This research is conducted through close reading techniques, using *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956) as the primary source. The analysis is qualitative, focusing on the author's depiction of the train and its symbolic role in cultural transformation. Secondary sources include the theoretical frameworks of Bhabha (1994), Said (1978), Pandey (2001), Butalia (1998), and others, derived from academic books, articles, and scholarly journals.

Data Analyses and Discussions

This section presents analysis of the data under the following three headings:

Data 1: Colonial Legacy and the Railway

In *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956), the railway station at Mano Majra connects the village with the outside world. It was also strategy of colonizers that they take trains in their control. Those trains which were carriers and have specific timings, become deviated from their timings as it is mentioned in the text "Train become less punctual than ever before and many more started to run at night" (Singh, p. 50). After partition, these trains were running on those railway lines on the strategies of colonizers. After partition, these trains were running on those railway lines on the strategies of colonizers. When it was discovered that train had bought a full load of corpses, a heavy breaded silent descended on the village" (Singh, p. 74). It highlights how trains became carriers of corpses after involvement of colonizers. It also portrays a horrible scenery that how bustle hustle vanished and colonized people were controlled psychologically by colonizers by inculcating fear and horror in their minds. Before Partition, trains vibrated daily with the rhythm of life. Over time, these lines began bringing trains full of corpses; their rhythmic flow became more haunting than their whistle. This instance shows how the colonial railway system, originally introduced as a symbol of progress, was transformed into a postcolonial reminder of ethnic violence.

Data 2: The Train as a Journey of Identity and Hybridity

"The train had disappeared mysteriously as it had come" (Singh, p. 74). The rhythmic movement of the train reflects identity formation and hybridity. Departing from Lahore with stops at border towns like Kasur, Ferozepur, and finally Mano Majra, it carries passengers of diverse cultures—such as a Muslim widow with her children, a sick farmer, and a British missionary. Each compartment bears lamentation: the widow clutches her children and memories; the farmer mourns lost friendships.

As the train nears the border, anxiety rises as mentioned in the novel "when it was discovered that the train had bought a full load of corpses a heavy boarded silence descended in the village" (Singh, p.74). Mano Majra,

served, a hybrid liminal space where different communities of people like Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were getting culturally transformed here. As a result of this, new identities were reconstructed due to train stations to where trains were coming and going to different places. However, after colonization this hybrid space was destroyed, and stations were deserted, and people observe no sign of life in those trains again. Soldiers halt it at Ferozepur to search for weapons. Rumors of mass killings spread faster than the train. This instance illustrates Bhabha's liminal space, where identities once fluid and hybrid become fractured into rigid categories.

Data 3: Train—A Postcolonial Killing Agent of Colonized People

Transformation occurs from progress to genocide due to the interference of colonizers who disrupt the train's movement. Once a symbol of progress, the train becomes a mobile tomb. This instance reflects Spivak's subaltern silence, as the corpses carried by the train remain voiceless victims, excluded from history and justice.

The imagery aligns with Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness (Bhabha, 1994) a dislocation that is both physical and psychic. Colonized people are haunted by the loss of home, culture, and identity, trapped in a "liminal space" between belonging and alienation.

The stairwell, which Bhabha (1994) describes as a liminal space as:

The connective tissue of the process of symbolic identity that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The passage that it allows prevents identities at either end from settling into primordial polarities. This intermediate space between fixed identities opens the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (p. 3)

Mano Majra, a place which was playing a vital role of gathering of different tribes become a place of killings and murders. It was totally changed after colonizers come here and take the control of those train which were coming and leaving that place. In the same manner, it is elaborated in the text "U will find Mano Majra somewhat changed, 'the sub inspector remarked, casually addressing the table in front of him (Singh, 1956, p.94).

In the same manner, Mano Majra in the novel is an intermediate or liminal space that serves the role of cultural hybridity and opens the possibility of constructing and transforming new cultures. It also prevents identities of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims—coming from different communities and places—into primordial polarities. This place is considered an interstitial space for forming and reconstructing new identities and cultures.

Conclusion

The analysis illustrates that the train functions as both a site of unity and disunity. Colonial powers indirectly turned it into a destructive force.

Hybridity, though present in *Mano Majra*, collapses under the weight of Partition violence. Singh's (1956) portrayal of the train forces us to see that with the emergence of modernity; progress can turn into destruction. The train stands as a haunting reminder of how human connection can be violently transformed into human division.

In *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 1956), the train is not merely a means of transportation but a powerful postcolonial, vibrating symbol of unsettled identities, cultures, and displaced certainties—creating spaces for hybridity. It portrays Partition as both a connector and divider, carrying movement and death, hope and horror. The journey through partitioned India mirrors shattered lives, collapsed shared cultures, the reassertion of religious identities, and the tragic cost of lost hybridity.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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