



Indian Trains & the Persistence of the Communal Holocaust as Portrayed in Films by the Indian Diaspora: An Analysis of the Film *Train to Pakistan* by Pamela Rooks

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Article History

Received: 24 October 2019

Reviewed: 26/October/2019 to 09/December/2019

Accepted: 14 December 2019

Prepared: 18 December 2019

Published: January 2020

Citation

Manju Sharma. Indian Trains & the Persistence of the Communal Holocaust as Portrayed in Films by the Indian Diaspora: An Analysis of the Film *Train to Pakistan* by Pamela Rooks. *Discovery*, 2020, 56(289), 44-49

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General Note



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ABSTRACT

Indian trains are the mode of transportation for the common masses in India. Trains also harbor the culture of mobility. They represent a microcosm that is representative of the common Indian population. Any episode of communal violence on a train brings back the haunting memories of the communal carnage and bloodshed that occurred during the partition of India in 1947. The communal violence in Gujarat was triggered by a Muslim mobs' torching of two train cars carrying Hindu activists on February 27, 2002. Any episode of violence on the Indian trains becomes the harbinger of the outbreak of gory violence and brutal bloodshed evoking the memories of partition of India. The partition of India had long been forgotten as an inevitable part of the freedom struggle until the 1984 Hindu-Sikh riots following the assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. This episode forced the writers, cinematographers to reassess the nuances of communal violence. With the rise of the

Hindu fundamentalism in the 1980s India witnessed recurrent episodes of communal violence. Premeditated attacks on the trains carrying innocent masses have been witnessed persistently and the realistic portrayal of such mindless violence on trains as by Pamela Rooks in her film came at a relevant time when India & Pakistan need to comprehend the true socio-political dynamics of communal violence. Aesthetic texts like literature and film enable us to interrogate the narratives of cultural memory; they are the representations of everyday life that often mark the limits of historicist and social scientific accounts of such experiences. They enable us to understand the dark aspects of our communal history that have been state instigated. They also offer hope for the future generations by enabling them to understand the repercussions of such communal violence.

Keywords: Communal Violence, Aesthetic texts, partition of India, microcosm, Hindu fundamentalism.

1. INTRODUCTION: INDIAN TRAINS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE COMMUNAL HOLOCAUST

Indian trains are the mode of transportation for the common masses in India. Trains also harbor the culture of mobility. They represent in fact a microcosm that is representative of the common Indian population. Any episode of communal violence on a train brings back the haunting memories of the communal carnage and bloodshed that occurred during the partition of India in 1947.

...legacy of violence on Partition trains has been so powerful that the image of silent trains that arrived filled with the bodies arguably haunts any contemporary South Asian image of the train. This is especially true of depictions of communal violence on or around the train (Aguilar, 2011: 165). The persistence of the communal violence in India is a legacy of hatred and bloodshed that came in the wake of the partition of India. The ghost of communal violence has been haunting the generations since 1947 and the unconscious imbibing of the religious hatred by the future generations.

The 2002 Gujarat communal carnage was triggered by the burning of the Hindu activists retuning from *Ayodhya* by Muslims. The specter of partition violence arguably helped catalyze the horrific incidents that followed the 2002 fire on the *Sabarmati* Express near *Godhra*, a town in Gujarat with a nearly equal number of Hindus and Muslims that includes many Partition refugees from what is now Pakistan (Aguilar, 2011: 165)

The latest episode of the communal violence was the bombing of the *Samjhauta* Express on February 19, 2007. It can be seen as a serious attempt by fundamentalist and sectarian forces trying to hinder the possibilities of any cordial relationship between India and Pakistan. Another bombing evoked these ghosts of the past. On February 19, 2007, bombers attacked the *Samjhauta*, of Friendship, Express, the only train link between India and Pakistan, killing sixty-eight. Many observers saw the violence as symbolic, aimed at severing the tenuous link between the nations in the midst of scheduled peace talks. The prominent newspaper *Hindu* connected the *Samjhauta* bombing to the massacres during Partition, and for many, the deaths on a train to Pakistan must also have brought back memories bound in a collective consciousness (Aguilar, 2011: 165).

2. CINEMATIC PORTRAYAL OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE & THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Aesthetic texts like literature and film enable us to interrogate the narratives of dominant cultural memory; they are the representations of everyday life that often mark the limits of historicist and social scientific accounts of historical experience. Dipesh Chakraborty has noted about "the new histories of the Partition" that their "exploration of history and memory shows that only a capacity for a humanist critique can create the ethical moment in our narratives and offer, not a guarantee against the prejudice that kills, but an antidote with which to fight it." Questions of history and memory are now strongly in play in contemporary India and the diaspora (particularly in North America), such that literary and cultural histories are themselves part of a political struggle over the meaning of nationality, cultural identity, and freedom (Dhaiya, 2008 :30).

Indian trains since long have been associated with the mammoth devastation ensued during the communal riots in 1947. Saadat Hasan Manto's striking vignettes written in the immediate aftermath of partition, Khushwant Singh's classic *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Mukul Kesavan's magical realist *Looking Through The Glass* (1995), Deepa Mehta's contemporary film *Earth* (1998) offer haunting images of the "death train" during Partition, in which the trains reached their destinations filled with victims of the violent communal divide that placed Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other. (Aguilar, 2011: xx) Trainloads carrying massacred bodies of the innocent masses that had been travelling in the search of illusory homes across the border were a common sight.

Trains have been haunting the Muslims and the Hindus alike since the Partition of India in 1947. Indian trains have a dark History of being associated with acts of communal violence. The explosion in the *Samjhauta* Express significantly hindered the peace processes between the two nations. The killing of the Hindu activists at Godhara by setting ablaze the *Sabarmati* Express in 2002 led to the Gujarat communal riots in 2002.

The ongoing violence in Gujarat was triggered by a Muslim mobs' torching of two train cars carrying Hindu activists on February 27, 2002. The attack followed an altercation between Hindu activists and Muslim vendors at the train station in Godhra that morning, around 8:00 a.m., but the sequence of events is still disputed (Dugger, 2002). Fifty-eight passengers were killed, including fifteen children and twenty-five women, according to Gujarat state officials (Reuters, 2002).

Among the victims of the Godhra massacre was Gayatri Panchal, a sixteen-year-old girl who saw her father and sisters burnt alive. She told the press, "After pelting stones, they poured kerosene on our compartment and set it afire. I was pulled out of the broken window. I saw my father and sister inside. I saw them burning" (Sharma, 2002).

In an attack on a long-distance train, 66 innocent civilians were killed following explosions in two coaches of the Samjotha Express (Peace Express) going from Old Delhi to Attari on the Indo-Pakistan border around midnight on February 18, 2007. The incident took place near the railway station at Deewana, about 100kms from Delhi. This train was started in 1975 to facilitate travel by poor Muslims in the two countries to visit their relatives (Raman, 2008: 106).

3. REPRESENTATION OF TRAINS AS VEHICLES OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE DURING PARTITION IN TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

The film *Train to Pakistan* by Pamela Rooks is a cinematic adaptation of the novel *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh. The film has projected the communal violence during the partition of India in 1947. Compared to the literary works on Partition, the cinematographic production appears less rich at first. One reason may be that since the medium of cinema seeks to reach a vast and diversified audience, caution is called for in broaching such delicate issues. Moreover film makers have to work within restrictions imposed by a rigid censorial control (Cossio, 2007:221). A film is a work of art composed of converging system of signs both verbal and non-verbal. As the fiftieth anniversary of partition approached, the national state television network of the Doordarshan commissioned a remarkably faithful version of *Train to Pakistan* (directed by Pamela Rooks, 1996, in Hindi). The national celebrations in 1997 were muted by the awareness that the Indians were also observing the anniversary of a holocaust, and Singh's novel continued to embody that holocaust in the minds of many (Brians, 2003: 49).

4. BASIC STORY LINE

The film is set in one of the remote villages of Punjab province of the Indian subcontinent before partition. *Mano Majra* is an oasis of peace and communal harmony which pervaded the entire social fabric of the Indian subcontinent. The life of the villagers is attuned to the rumbling and whistling of the trains that pass at regular intervals across the bridge. Mano Majra is a sleepy and obsolete community where, its citizens, lacking in civilized amenities, mark their time according to the arrival of trains at the railway station (Balaswamy, 2004:72). The population of the village is mostly Sikh land owners living with Muslims as land laborers in the village. The village is situated at the banks of the Sutlej that is spanned by a magnificent rail road bridge that connects Mano Majra with the rest India.

The protagonist of the film is a Sikh Jat dacoit Jugga (Juggut Singh) who is deeply in love with Nooran, the Muslim weaver's daughter. There is also a gang rivalry that exists between Jugga and Malli, another dacoit from the neighboring village. The district magistrate Hukum Chand is a typical bureaucrat who represents the shallowness of the government machinery. The life in Mano Majra is gradually having intruders from the outer world. A group of Muslims with sac full human skills arrive at Mano Majra. They claim that the skulls were of the Muslims massacred by the Hindus in Bihar. Inspector and the bureaucrat deport those Mullahs. Another conspicuous arrival is that of Iqbal who is a social activist and claims to have alliance with the 'People's Revolutionary Communist Party of United India'.

Hukum Chand tries his level best to do away with the alien intruders casting dark shadows over the peace of this village. The Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs also express their commitment to brotherhood but they all become helpless when trainloads of dead bodies of the Hindus and Sikhs arrive at the railway station. Mass cremation of the dead bodies fills the entire atmosphere with the acrid smell of burning flesh. Another ghostly train arrives at night without a whistle and light but another load of massacred Hindus and Sikhs. A group of Sikh extremists, (Sikh fundamentalists) arrive in the village and instigate the Hindus and Sikhs in the *gurudwara* to take up arms against the Muslims. The government machinery has made arrangements to deport the Muslims of Mano Majra to the refugee camp at Chundden Nagar to be taken to Pakistan by train.

Nooran pleads to Bebe to accept her as her daughter-in-law for she was bearing the unborn child of Jugga. She does not want to leave Mano Majra but is helpless at the impinging sectarian and fundamentalist forces.

Juggut and Iqbal are released from jail. The plan of the Sikh extremists to kill the Muslims sitting on the roof of the train by tying and massacring the remaining by tying a rope across the bridge disturbs Jugga who knows that the train is carrying his love Noora

and his unborn child to Pakistan. The power of dissent takes over Jugga when the people are bereft by fundamentalism, hatred and violence. In the dark hour of night, he scrupulously tugs at the rope and tries to cut the rope with all his strength. He is discovered by the extremists who had foiled the plan and he is shot three times but he tugs at the rope. The rope breaks, averting the accident the hatred the massacre of the innocent. Jugga falls dead at the railway track but his love reaches unharmed to Pakistan.

The film '*Train to Pakistan*' by Pamela Rooks is an earnest attempt to synthesize literature with life. This film also reflects the social concern of an artist and using art for life sake. The effective use of camera distance, camera angle, camera movement and the framing of the shot makes most of scenes emphatic. The clothes worn by the characters Jugga, Noora, Imam Baksh, the villagers and their vibrant colours lend an authenticity to film in terms of the time setting and the location of the film *Mano Majra* a remote village in the remote recesses of the Indian sub continent. The lighting has been an amalgamation of natural light and darkness and the artificial lights. Most scenes display the use of natural light and darkness. The sound track, the music suits the emotive mood of the film.

Trains as powerful motif: The train which is initially the symbol British Imperialism gradually transform to the leitmotif of the communal carnage that overshadowed *Mano Majra* at the arrival of a ghostly train carrying massacred bodies of the Hindus and Sikhs. The activities of the villagers during the day and the night are attuned to the passing of different trains passing the rail road bridge spanning the *Sutlej*. Even the prayers of Imam Baksh and Bhai Harmeet Singh are attuned to the different trains. It appears as if the rhythm of life was set by the trains. The abrupt timings of these trains upset the *Mano Majrans*. The song '*Sanu Aa Milya Yaar Piyaariya*' is a composition of Sai Bulleshah that projects the beautiful village of *Mano Majra* and its life. It is an intelligent blending of the different elements that play a critical role in setting the harmonious life of *Mano Majra* and also provides key to the theme of love and the motifs i.e. the railroad bridge and the trains, in the film. The imagery captured in the song is beautiful. The train sets across whistling into the village across the bridge spanning the *Sutlej*, with the rising sun. The camera clearly captures the rising sun against the sky. The song beautifully captures the awakening of life in *Mano Majra* beginning with the rumbling and the whistling of trains.

Realistic Portrayal of Death trains

Two train loads of hideously butchered corpses of Sikhs and Hindus arrive from the communal massacres in Punjab. Hukum Chand, the District Commissioner, tries to avoid being caught up in the "winds of destruction which are blowing across the land" and organizes in vain a relief train for the minority Muslim community to leave for Pakistan because he knows that at places terrorist bands are stopping train on the Indian Border and slaughtering the Muslim passengers (Singh & Agarwal, 2003:131).

- In a close up scene Imam Baksh is startled by an expected train at an odd hour of the night. The camera very precisely captures the facial expressions showing anguish, concern and fear on the face of Imam Baksh.
- The other scene that follows a train puffing and whistling mumbles past to come to a halt at the station. It is a long shot where the train engine gradually comes to a close up as it stops at the station. Only one man the engine driver gets down the train. The extreme close up of this driver reveals some foreshadowing about what could be there in the train. Voice of Hukum Chand is played telling the guards and engine drivers were left alive so that the dead could safely reach across the border. The trains without a head light, whistle at late hour of night represented ghostly appearance and filled every *Mano Majrans* with dread.
- A train coming from across the border had the Sikhs and Hindus slaughtered, brutally murdered and their women were raped and the mutilated bodies were put in gunny bags. A shot in which the D. Magistrate Hukum Chand and his inspector come to inspect a train, their expressions reflect their horror, fear, the foul smell of decaying bodies loaded into the train forces Hukum Chand to cover his nose with handkerchief. The train in this context implies the movement of vast communities torn from their roots and areas of traditional growth to a new 'Jerusalem' It indicates the harrowing process of this change, the awful and ghastly experience of human beings involved in a historical impersonal and almost dehumanizing process. The scene of train from Pakistan, which brings in countless corpses to *Mano Majra* is awful and heart-rending (Singh & Agarwal, 2003:132).
- Mass cremation of dead bodies was a common sight during the communal violence at the time of partition of India. Truckloads of wood and kerosene oil were used to burn the dead bodies. In a long shot the mass cremation is shown. It is being witnessed by the villagers where Imam Baksh is brought into focus. He is troubled by the smell burning flesh. Noora observes refugees from across the border approaching the village. The depth of focus lends significance to the scene where the refugees coming across the *Sutlej* seemed to be in a never ending, tiresome journey towards their illusory homelands. The depth of focus accentuates to long tiring journey of the Sikh refugees with bare minimum belongings.

- During the communal violence at the time of partition the rivers were flooded with dead bodies of animals and men, women, children alike. One of the scenes in the film has captured this fact vividly where furious Sutlej is shown afloat with the human carcasses.
- Looting and killing became rampant. In one of the scenes Chacha Imam Baksh, the blind weaver is shown being looted by Malli and group. Religion had become an excuse for the interplay of Barbarism and acts that defied Humanism. Pamela Rooks has taken tremendous pain to picturise the horrors of communal violence with utmost authenticity.

Foreshadowing and the Death trains

The film has powerful shots that create the tension, apprehension and grave anxiety amongst the viewers about what is going to happen.

- The close up in which Imam Baksh is shown perturbed by the sound of a passing train captures his concern about the abruptly approaching trains to Mano Majra. This also foreshadows the doom the destruction looming over the village.
- There is another in which another train from Pakistan arrives to Mano Majra. The sound track lends intensity to the shot. Amidst the halt and steam only one person gets down from the train engine probably the driver. His extreme close up reveals something horrible. In this scene the camera movements, angle and use natural light and brilliant back ground sound lend momentum and intensity to the shot. The recurring images of partition are of massive lines of humanity moving in a slow disbelieving chain towards the unknown. The stories of brutal massacres, of trains full of people arriving at stations with only the driver surviving, are spread throughout the partition. Train stations became impromptu graveyards, and the sounds of the whistles were the only mourners to signal the passing of life (Kalra & Purewal, 1999: 63).
- The following scene shows the bureaucrat, the inspector, moving with fast heavy steps to witness the train. Their expressions when they stand at the door step are full of gloom and nauseating looks. They cover their noses with handkerchiefs. The background music again captures the gloom and foreshadows the tragedy that they witness

5. CONCLUSION

Trains are powerful symbols evoking images of communal violence in India. The History of the development of the railways in the subcontinent stands as a metaphor for the expansion of capitalism into the region. For the apologists of colonialism, the train network and the establishment of the railways was a lasting to the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps it is poignant that these were the very vehicles which became carriages of death with the departure of the British in 1947 (Kalra & Purewal, 1999: 63). The recurrence of these episodes of communal violence centered on the Indian trains brings back to life the horrors of the communal carnage.

The partition of India had long been forgotten as an inevitable part of the freedom struggle until the 1984 Hindu-Sikh riots following the assassination of the then prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. This episode forced the writers, cinematographers to reassess the nuances of communal violence. With the rise of the Hindu fundamentalism in the 1980s India witnessed recurrent episodes of communal violence. Premeditated attacks on the trains carrying innocent masses have been witnessed persistently and the realistic portrayal of such mindless violence on trains as by Pamela Rooks in her film came at a relevant time when India & Pakistan need to comprehend the true socio-political dynamics dynamics of communal violence.

New national and regional identities were certainly involved, and one might well connect the hostility to such local and contemporary events as the rise of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in Gujarat and the uncertain status of the town comprised of nearly half Muslims. Yet arguably the image of a death train also must have conjured powerful communal sentiments, a spectral violence, which fed the riots (Aguar, 2011: 165).

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