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FROM COLONIAL LEGACY TO COMMUNAL FRENZY: A CULTURAL MATERIALIST READING OF RELIGION, CLASS, AND RESISTANCE IN *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN*

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Abstract:
Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan (1956) presents a small-scale depiction of the 1947 Partition violence through the imaginary border village of Mano Majra. This paper applies Raymond Williams' cultural materialism to investigate how colonial inheritances—such as economic exploitation, divide-and-rule strategies, and unequal class systems—serve as the material foundation that drives the ideological superstructure of religious belief, converting longstanding communal harmony into explosive violence. Relying on Williams' notions of base and superstructure, structure of feeling, and dominant/residual/emergent cultural formations, the study demonstrates that religion functions not as an independent cause but as an ideological veil concealing class conflicts rooted in British colonial rule. Figures such as the moneylender Ram Lal, the corrupt magistrate Hukum Chand, the dacoit Juggut Singh, and the activist Iqbal Singh reveal how economic hardship and political manipulation ignite communal hysteria. Nevertheless, instances of personal defiance—most notably Juggut's ultimate sacrifice—indicate the rise of oppositional forces that contest prevailing ideologies. By anchoring Partition suffering in concrete socio-economic realities instead of inherent religious animosity, Singh's novel criticizes the persistence of colonial power structures in the postcolonial era while upholding the possibility of human agency. This cultural-materialist perspective highlights the novel's ongoing significance for understanding contemporary communal tensions, illustrating how economic disparities are repeatedly channeled through religious identities.

Keywords: *Cultural Materialism, Train to Pakistan, Khushwant Singh, Partition Literature, Colonial Legacy, Religion and Class, Communal Frenzy, Resistance and Agency, etc.*

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, which appeared in 1956, stands as one of the most direct literary accounts of the Partition of India and Pakistan. Located in the modest Sikh-Muslim settlement of Mano Majra along the Sutlej River frontier, the story traces how outside influences—trains filled with dead bodies, circulating political gossip, and official indifference—destroy generations of peaceful rural coexistence. Although many Partition stories focus on religious conflict or individual suffering, Singh's realistic approach brings the underlying social and economic forces to the forefront. A reading grounded in Raymond Williams' cultural materialism clarifies how the novel exposes the unbroken link between colonial material realities and postcolonial communal upheaval. In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh describes the division of a unified India in to a "Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan" (Singh, 9).

Cultural materialism, maintains that culture forms an everyday element inseparable from material production. In *Train to Pakistan*, this perspective shows that British colonial measures—land-revenue arrangements, separate electorates, and economic rivalries—established the material

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conditions for Partition violence, while religion acted as the ideological layer that disguised underlying class exploitation.

The research paper contends that Singh's portrayal of Mano Majra illustrates the conversion of colonial inheritances into communal hysteria, even as it points toward resistance through personal initiative. Subsequent sections analyze colonial material conditions, the ideological function of religion, intersections of class, and acts of subversion. This approach not only deepens Partition studies but also underscores the novel's examination of postcolonial India's inability to eliminate inherited inequalities.In Indian Partition literature, it redirects attention away from religious essentialism toward concrete causes: British "divide and rule," zamindari arrangements, and uneven growth that intensified economic competition between Hindus and Muslims.

Singh's novel embodies this dynamic. Mano Majra's "residual" culture of blended village existence—Sikhs and Muslims participating in joint celebrations and shared work—confronts the "dominant" communalism introduced by outside political pressures. The characters' "structure of feeling" captures the unease of material insecurity that is reframed as religious hostility. In contrast to idealistic interpretations that trace violence to ancient religious instincts, a Williams-based method situates hysteria within class relations and colonial remnants while locating spaces of emergent opposition. This perspective prevents oversimplification: literature participates directly in ideological conflict, supplying both criticism and glimpses of alternative possibilities.

> Singh's novel is a remark on the event of Partition at the same time as an exploration of its repercussions on multi-religious groups living together for centuries. His characters show an innate desire to live peacefully with people belonging to different faiths (Haque, 280).

British colonial administration in Punjab deliberately created economic imbalances that prepared the ground for Partition violence. The colonial revenue framework benefited Hindu moneylenders and Sikh landlords while leaving Muslim peasants as insecure tenants. In Mano Majra, this inheritance endures: the murdered moneylender Ram Lal represents exploitative wealth built under British safeguards. His killing—attributed to Muslims—sparks rumours exactly because it endangers the village's delicate economic balance.

The narrative begins with the arrival of a "ghost train" packed with Sikh corpses from Pakistan, representing how hastily drawn 1947 borders turned existing material grievances into weapons. Magistrate Hukum Chand, a postcolonial administrator carrying forward colonial bureaucratic cynicism, steers events to divert scrutiny from administrative shortcomings. His comment that "we were better off under the British" (Singh, 45) ironically emphasizes the persistence of corrupt systems. Police and government functionaries, formerly tools of colonial oversight, now serve new national leaders yet continue their passivity.

> The novel portrays with bold and unrelenting realism the brutal story of political hatred and violence during the turbulent and fateful days that preceded and followed the partition of British India when spirit of communal frenzy and passionate zeal for self – expression was fanning and fumbling with the masses. Every citizen was caught up in the holocaust. No one could remain aloof; no one could be trusted to be impartial (Dar, 22).

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Williams would interpret this as the base—uneven land relations and governmental authority—shaping cultural reactions. Colonial underdevelopment generated "intense competition" for employment and assets, which the British directed into communal voting systems. "Singh delves deep into the social reality through his poignant portrayal of human emotions and by accommodating multiple perspectives" (Sethulakshmi, 2).The village's economic foundation—farming interrupted by monsoon rains and the arrival of refugees—generates tension that erupts into religious hysteria. Singh therefore presents Partition not as abrupt religious insanity but as the inevitable result of lingering colonial capitalist tensions.

Religion in *Train to Pakistan* operates as Williams' superstructure: an ideological structure that normalizes and conceals material exploitation. Before Partition, Mano Majra displays residual syncretism—Muslim calls to prayer merge with Sikh devotions, and residents jointly gather crops. External provocateurs, however, manipulate religious symbols to redirect class resentments. The Sikh crowd's scheme to assault the Muslim train is presented as a holy defence, yet the real drivers are economic: anxiety that Muslim departure will expose land and possessions to seizure.

Hukum Chand circulates the claim that Muslims killed Ram Lal, converting a class offense (bandit retaliation against exploitation) into communal fury. Singh's narrator notes: "every Sikh in Mano Majra became a stranger with an evil intent… the name Pakistan came to mean something to them—a refuge where there were no Sikhs" (Singh, 129-130). This "structure of feeling" discloses how ideology reshapes everyday experience from interfaith cooperation to a life-or-death confrontation.

Iqbal Singh, the socialist campaigner, openly identifies the problem.He tries to recast the conflict as class warfare but is overpowered by the prevailing religious storyline. Religion therefore functions as false consciousness, in Williams' terms, enabling ruling groups (landowners, politicians) to retain control by setting the disadvantaged against one another. The novel's multiple voices—clashing perspectives—uncover the instability of this ideology, consistent with Williams' conception of literature as a location of ideological contest.

Class relations in Mano Majra intertwine with religion in patterns that cultural materialism views as mutually reinforcing. Juggut Singh, the Sikh bandit known as "Jugga," typifies the lumpen proletariat: criminalized through poverty and colonial-era laws targeting certain tribes. His father's hanging and his own social exclusion arise from economic desperation—"criminals are not born. They are made by hunger, want and injustice" (Singh, 45). Nevertheless, his affection for Nooran, the Muslim weaver's daughter, crosses religious lines, revealing an emergent solidarity based on common subaltern circumstances.

Muslim tenants and weavers occupy the bottom economic level, their insecurity worsened by the migration triggered by Partition. The novel depicts how class grievances—peasants against absentee landlords—are redirected along religious lines. Young Sikh residents, confronted with insufficient land, join the mob less from pure belief than from tangible threats: "his economic well-being has been challenged by the presence of the Muslims."

Iqbal, the city intellectual, represents the unsuccessful middle-class effort at class-based opposition. His Marxist language collapses against village realities, illustrating Williams' warning against theoretical abstractions disconnected from lived conditions. Police corruption reinforces class divisions, safeguarding the elite while penalizing the powerless. Singh therefore demonstrates Williams' observation that culture, including religious observance, is generated inside and in turn reproduces class structures.

Although dominant ideologies prevail, the novel hints at emerging cultures of opposition. Juggut's final self-sacrifice—scaling the bridge to rescue the Muslim train despite certain death—embodies Williams' idea of agency operating within structural limits. Driven by personal devotion

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rather than theoretical politics, his deed undermines both communal hysteria and governmental complicity. It constitutes an emergent structure of feeling: human fellowship triumphing over religious separation.

Meet Singh and the village elders uphold residual bonds of brotherhood, initially protecting Muslim neighbours. Even Iqbal's detached witnessing preserves the potential for different stories. Women, although sidelined, express muted resistance through household ties. These subversive features keep the narrative from lapsing into despair, in keeping with cultural materialism's stress on literature's capacity to envision change.

Singh's realistic method therefore carries out ideological critique while retaining optimism: personal initiative, grounded in material reality, can confront prevailing structures.

> As a piece of fiction *Train to Pakistan* is cleverly contrived and articulate of the pity and horror involved in the partition tragedy. The third person omniscient narrative technique helps the novelist dive into the mind of characters and presents his candid view with precision and objectivity on the different shades of this tragedy (Rana & Rana, 459).

Train to Pakistan convincingly illustrates, via a cultural-materialist viewpoint, that the communal hysteria of Partition was never a sudden religious outburst but the final outcome of colonial material inheritances—economic competition, class exploitation, and ideological manipulation. Religion functioned as superstructure, legitimizing base contradictions, yet residual harmony and emergent acts of resistance (Juggut's heroism) expose fissures in hegemonic power. Williams' framework discloses the novel's lasting political relevance: postcolonial India received intact material frameworks, sustaining communalism whenever economic grievances are redirected as religious conflict. Singh's work compels readers to face these continuities, affirming literature's ability to record injustice while suggesting ethical pathways forward. In a time of revived majoritarianism, *Train to Pakistan* teaches that overcoming hysteria demands confronting its material origins.

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