

# Nation Building Media Narratives and its Anti-Ecological Roots: An Eco-Aesthetic Analysis of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

Andrew Veda<sup>1</sup>, Luke Gerard Christie<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai - 600127, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Sr.), School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai - 600127, Tamil Nadu, India

Correspondence: Luke Gerard Christie, Assistant Professor (Sr.), School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vandalur - Kelambakkam Road, Chennai-600127, Tamil Nadu, India.

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## Abstract

Khushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan* documents the horrors of the partition of India and Pakistan in the year 1947 by presenting a story set in a fictional village, Mano Majra which is an ecological synecdoche as the village stands for the two nations, India and Pakistan. The nation building narrative of Singh, as well as Gandhi - "the future of India lies in villages", though highly ecological as its focus is only on maintaining the "self-sufficiency" of every village, is paradoxical as it is concerned only with the microcosm of the villages and not with the macrocosm of the nation. The spiritual connection that Mano Majras have with their land and river, which is the basis of their identity, cannot be limited by narratives of nation building revolving around political boundaries. The post-partition anxiety of the two countries, at the level of the microcosm, is the trauma of the loss of their ecological home. Khushwant Singh's novel provides a powerful insight into the deep roots of this eco-aesthetic identity and the anxiety of its loss resulting in the cultural divide that continues to exist between India and Pakistan. This essay makes the argument that Khushwant Singh highlights the anti-ecological nature of nation building narratives in his novel, *Train to Pakistan*.

**Keywords:** ecology, aesthetics, media, nature, narratives, religion, culture, identities

## 1. Introduction

The roots of the post-partition anxiety of the two countries, India and Pakistan, can be found in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, which is set in Mano Majra, an ecological synecdoche as the village stands for the two nations. The novel makes it clear that the identity of the people of Mano Majra, the village at the centre of the novel, is rooted in their ecological dependence on the land and the river and not rooted in grand narratives of religion, culture, or nation. The spiritual bonding between Nature and the people of Mano Majra or their eco-aesthetic identities cannot be limited by political boundaries. The definition of nations as "communities of shared memory and shared forgetting" is particularly apt when describing nations that have witnessed a partition as their national identity was shaped by "both the remembered and the forgotten - and thereby weaving the nation's post-traumatic identity" (Andrews, 2003). In this essay, with an analysis of *Train to Pakistan*, it will be shown how nation building narratives resulted in a shared forgetting of ecological identities.

## 2. Methodology

In accordance with Hirschheim's framework for conceptual papers, with "the necessary components" of "claims, grounds, and warrants", this article makes the "claim" or "the explicit statement or thesis" that an eco-aesthetic analysis of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* reveals that the partition of India and Pakistan was fuelled by nation building media narratives which, in its essence, is anti-ecological and that the resultant post-partition trauma was because of the destruction of the eco-aesthetic identities of the people (Jaakkola, 2020). Research in Aesthetics, Ecocriticism, and Media Studies provides the necessary grounds along with appropriate quotations from the primary text. The role of media in nation building, especially in the Indian Independence Movement such as the fact that "Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Annie Besant were among a few prominent names that were controlling important newspapers as a mouthpiece

of India's freedom movement" (Vadhera, 2016, p. 4) fulfils the third component of "warrants" which are "the underlying assumptions or presuppositions that link grounds to claims" (Jaakola, 2020).

### 3. Ecological Identity

In Mano Majra, as in most Indo-Pakistani villages, it was the local, ecological identity that held power over the people as is seen in the words of the sub-inspector "I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan" (Singh, p.21). This exaggeration of ignorance is rooted in reality as their only reaction to their awareness of the partition of the country "had been an additional interest" in watching the trains. Iqbal's "anglicized way of looking at things" such as the perception of India and Pakistan as countries instead of hundreds of thousands of villages grapples with "the projection of rural society where everyone in the village was a relation and loyalty to the village was the supreme test" and where the grand narratives of "truth, honour, financial integrity" were not as important as the local, hence ecological relationship with "one's friends and fellow villagers" (Singh, p. 38). It is evident that Religion and Culture are grand narratives that do not have a place in Mano Majra as for the sake of an ecological relationship, one would readily sacrifice the grand narratives and be celebrated as a "*nar admī*" for having "defied authority (magistrates and police) and religion (oath on the scripture)" (Singh, p.38). Since the village is the habitat, loyalty to the village is loyalty to the habitat, which is why it is called an ecological relationship. Identities rooted in grand narratives are abstract whereas identities based on ecological narratives are concrete and result in palpable reactions. That is to say, actions to sustain one's ecological identity are aesthetic in nature. The aesthetics of existence in Mano Majra involves a relationship with the humans in the habitat as opposed to the aesthetics of nationality where such a relationship can only be forged through the media.

#### 3.1 The Irrelevance of National Identity in Indo-Pakistani Villages

*Train to Pakistan* yields itself to an ecological study starting with the original title of the novel, *Mano Majra*. Mano Majra is a village on the border of India, which witnessed the horrors of the partition of 1947. Though this novel is about the partition of India and Pakistan, the characters in the novel hold their relationship with Mano Majra, the land where they were born, more important than any nationalist spirit. In the Introduction, Khushwant Singh notes that he had a "hunch that if the title was changed to "Train to Pakistan", it would sell better" and so in later editions, the title of the novel was changed from *Mano Majra* to *Train to Pakistan* (Singh, 2010, p.viii). It can be safely construed that the original title is the title the author held to be faithful to the novel and the latter title, though approved by the author, does not carry the same weight as the former as it was an economic decision. "The title of a literary work may serve a number of purposes. It may help to explain the setting, provide insight into the theme, or describe the action that will take place in the work" (Chin & Wolfe, 2002). Both the titles serve the purposes as defined in the previous sentence but the changed title does not convey the importance Mano Majra placed on the land they live in. The original title symbolises the spiritual relationship between Mano Majra and Mano Majra and is evident that the novel is all about Mano Majra. An analysis of the partition of India and Pakistan, which consists of large-scale violence and the displacement of around 14-18 million people, would ignore the microcosmic reality of both countries i.e., the nature of the identity of the peoples of India and Pakistan. Since the majority of the citizens of both countries lived in their villages, national identity was not considered as important as their ecological identity. In this context, ecological identity would mean the relationships which people had in their *oikos* such as their spiritual connection with the local deity, their awareness of Nature, and their perception of their life in their *oikos*. The ecological identity of every village in India and Pakistan would be completely unique even as it is understandable and relatable to all the citizens of these two countries. The symbolism that Khushwant Singh creates with the setting of a village viz. Mano Majra helps to highlight this sense of unity, which transcends both geography and politics. It also provides an opportunity for readers from both countries to come together on a shared platform - to understand the ecological roots of the two nations better, regardless of where they stand politically or geographically, with the knowledge that ecological identity is more important than national or cultural identity. The several elements at play in Indo-Pakistan relations are bound up in Grand Narratives and the continual denial of the eco-aesthetic identities of its people such as geopolitical rivalries and religious differences which contribute towards creating numerous obstacles in finding common ground between people living on either side of the line drawn by Britain.

#### 3.2 Ecological Intelligence

In a novel, the term 'setting' denotes not only the location, historical period, and social surroundings in which the action of a text develops but also the ecological context of its characters (Klarer, 2009). While at first glance, it may seem as if the original title of the novel 'Mano Majra' is a concrete representation of the setting whereas the changed title is but a vague explanation of the setting, on closer scrutiny, it reveals the nature of the novel i.e., the microcosmic nature of Mano Majra. The historical period and social surroundings are explained alike by both the titles but *Train to Pakistan* captures the essence of the narrative that does not focus on the bird's view of India or Pakistan but only on the location, the train to Pakistan in Mano Majra. The Greek term *opsis* occasionally used to denote the visible or picturable elements in any work

of literature, is considered an important factor in the setting and it is highly relevant for *Train to Pakistan* as the village is not only the *Mise-en-scène* of the plot but it is the firm depiction of the ecological context of the plot (Abrams, 2011). It would be an error to consider the descriptions of monsoon and the river as mere 'picturable elements' of the plot because of their ecological importance to the Mano Majrans, a fact that is also highlighted by the author. Singh points out that Mano Majrans have recognised and embraced nature's cycles which indicates that they have always had a deep understanding of what it takes to sustain their way of life such as monitoring the water level of the river Sutlej.

Mano Majra is more than just a village to the Mano Majrans. To them, it is the land of their ancestors, thereby held sacred to them. The religion they practise does not alter this connection with the land. When the Muslims in Mano Majra are forced to leave their village, they are not prepared to leave their village forever. Their plan is to return after staying in the refugee camp for some time. Even the decision to go to the refugee camp was made not because of any religious divide in the village but because of the Sikh refugees pouring in from Pakistan i.e. the larger narrative of Religion and Nation forces the muslim refugees from Mano Majra to Pakistan. As the lambardar says, "We are so few and the strangers coming from Pakistan are coming in thousands. Who will be responsible for what they do?" (Singh, p.111). He also makes it clear that if they choose not to take shelter in refugee camps, they are most welcome to do so. He also says, "We will defend you with our lives" (Singh, p.112). He says this because both the Sikhs and the Muslims of Mano Majra have a spiritual relationship with the land. "To be on the safe side, the Muslims decide to go" but they still have a plan of coming back after religious tension has subsided (Singh, p.112). In Indian and Pakistani villages, as in Mano Majra, each character inhabits their own space within its restricted boundaries - therefore giving them an understanding not only on how people live in such rural places but also why living there can be so important for some individuals' sense of identity and purpose, which religious or cultural identity cannot hope to provide.

"But there is one object that all Mano Majrans – even Lala Ram Lal – venerate. This is a three-foot slab of sandstone that stands upright under a keekar tree beside the pond. It is the local deity, the *deo* to which all the villagers – Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or pseudo-Christian – repair secretly whenever they are in a special need of a blessing (Singh, p. 4).

Adoration of the physical forms of the Lord is considered to be the first step to devotion (Sumathy, 2010). The three-foot slab of sandstone is not an idol or a sculpture of a god, so the veneration which the Mano Majrans give the slab of sandstone cannot be considered to conform to any religious practice of the Hindus, the Sikhs, the Muslims or the pseudo-Christians. The veneration or rather, the adoration of the slab of sandstone can be construed as a foundational part of their ecological identity. It is clearly evident that the religions which the Mano Majrans practise do not affect their identity. Aymatov notes that "from the point of view of eco-aesthetics, then, first of all, ecological consciousness is an integral part of the spiritual culture of the nation"- the worship of the three-foot slab of sandstone is one of the many "ecological traditions formed in everyday life" that "are to some extent the first stage in the development of structured eco-aesthetics" (2021). In short, the ecological identity of Mano Majrans and everyone in every village in India and Pakistan, before the invasion of nation building narratives, was their national identity.

#### **4. Grand Narrative Dependent Identities vs. Eco-Aesthetic Identity**

National, cultural and religious identities are dependent on the grand narratives of nation, culture, and religion respectively, and not on close, personal relationships with other humans which is the foundation of an eco-aesthetic identity. Iqbal & Hussain, researchers analysing Indo-Pakistan tensions note that "available literature on war-media nexus" indicates that "media becomes active agents of wars when national interests are involved" and since, media is focussed only on geographical and political boundaries of the two countries, the ecological identity of its citizens is subsumed into the larger national identity, shaped by religion or political boundaries (2018). In other words, religion and political boundaries do not play a strong role in the microcosm but it plays a major role in the media narrative of nation building. Selvamony's statement that "home-abandonment seems to be, perhaps, the most important condition for the founding of a religion" and that "kinship and tradition wither away when religion grows upon a seeker who *exhomes* and quests after a new relationship with a home-substitute" is highly relevant as it points out the anti-ecological stance of religion and nation building narratives, by extension (2021).

##### *4.1 Grand Narratives as a Poor Substitute for Eco-Aesthetic Identity*

Custom and tradition provide the overarching framework within which human-nature interactions are carried out. While religion continues to permeate social life, in the realm of resource use, it is supplemented to a significant degree by custom (Gadgil and Guha, 1996). Dubey notes that from the 19th century, the press in India "assumed an important place in the life of the nation and nationalists" who utilised it as "a powerful and effective weapon against the outdated and unhealthy social customs" (2016). While it may be true that "unhealthy" customs needed to be eradicated, it should be remembered that they were achieved at the cost of the local identity (as opposed to a grand, national identity) of the villagers. The destruction of ecological identities did not result in the eradication of caste, for instance. The only triumph of the grand

narrative of nationalism was in ensuring that local, eco-aesthetic identities were traumatised. Mano Majrans share a special bond with Mano Majra as it is the land they were born in. This is not influenced by the fact that they depend on Mano Majra for sustenance. The Muslims in Mano Majra have the same love as the Sikhs have for Mano Majra. Imam Baksh says “What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. So were our ancestors” (Singh, p.111) Mano Majrans connect with their ancestors through the land and their relationship with it was considered to be more sacred to them than their religious relationship with their deity. They have adapted themselves to live in the land their ancestors lived. Since “aesthetic preferences strongly influence ecological work and the public’s acceptance of land management practices” and the custom of Mano Majrans and their ancestors have been almost uniform, it is evident that the collective aesthetic and ecological identity of the villagers is dependent on their interaction with the village (Kovacs, LeRoy, Fischer, Lubarsky & Burke, 2006). This eco-aesthetic identity may also be termed “a spiritual relationship” with the land i.e. an ecological relationship that evokes an aesthetic reaction in the individual.

Landscape perception is "the key process for connecting humans with ecological phenomena" as "aesthetic experiences evoked through perception of the landscape powerfully and regularly engage people with ecosystems" (Gobster, Nassauer, Daniel & Fry, 2007). Singh devotes considerable space to highlight the importance of the landscape perception of Mano Majrans by mentioning that the rising of the Sutlej became their main topic of conversation overshadowing the wrongs suffered by their Muslim 'brothers' who were evacuated from their village.

“By evening, Mano Majra had forgotten about its Muslims and Malli’s misdeeds. The river had become the main topic of conversation. Once more women stood on the rooftops looking to the west.” (Singh, p. 122)

Landscape perception has a key role in the maintenance of the habitat and so the rising river suggests that for Mano Majrans, "nature really exists" and is "actually present as an entity which affects" them and "isn't reducible to a concept" which is conceived as part of cultural practice (Barry, 2002). Before the possibility of an impending flood, the news of the rising river had not affected Mano Majrans, who "only wished that it would rise more and drown the whole of Mano Majra along with them, their women, children, and cattle - provided it also drowned Malli, his gang, the refugees, and the soldiers" indicating their ecological anguish at the loss of the relationship with their Muslim Mano Majrans who had been forcibly displaced (Singh, p. 121). The hatred against Malli and his gang is understandable as they are seen as the cause of their anguish but their negative feelings towards the refugees and the soldiers hint at the root cause of their turmoil. That is to say, the refugees, even as they were victims of the grand national narratives, were also the cause of the implementation of the violence of the grand national narrative in Mano Majra (retaliation for their loss in Pakistan) along with the soldiers.

Daniel Goleman, in his book ‘Ecological Intelligence’ states that “ecological intelligence” is the ability to adapt to our ecological niche (2010). This is precisely what Mano Majrans were endowed with. Goleman notes that native peoples everywhere have survived only by understanding and exquisitely attuning themselves to the natural systems that surround them and designing ways of living that best interact with those systems (2010). Mano Majrans have lived a fairly established life for many generations attuning themselves to the natural systems and designing ways of living that best interact with those systems as can be seen in the way the lambardar, who is just like any other Mano Majran in terms of wealth, functions as the headman. “He was ‘O Lambardara’, as his father, his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father had been before him” (Singh, p. 69).

### **5. Destruction of Eco-Aesthetic Identity**

Ecological intelligence is displayed in the way in which customs and relationships between the organisms (including humans) in the habitat are in a stable equilibrium, a state that demonstrates the continuation of the lives of the past generations in keeping with the knowledge they have gathered from them. As noted earlier, certain customs regarding the hierarchy among humans in the group may have needed change but it should have been done without affecting the local relationship of the humans with their environment i.e. the change in the dynamics of the relationships between fellow Mano Majrans should not result in the change in the dynamics of their ecological relationship with the landscape. By drawing a larger political boundary between India and Pakistan, the ecological boundary formed by the landscape of Mano Majra was made irrelevant. As Singh notes numerous times in the book, the larger nation, both India and Pakistan, had been irrelevant before the media narrative of unification became the main narrative. The reason for the success of the British policy of 'divide and conquer' was that even as there was a uniformity of 'culture' (to a certain extent), there was also a plethora of identities such as caste, language, and most importantly, region. Iqbal acknowledges the overarching influence of the media that spins the nationalistic grand narrative "They were all alike: the same news, the same statements, the same editorials" but he hopes to be a part of the smaller narrative of a communist identity even as he falls "asleep with visions of banner headlines announcing his arrest, his release, his triumphant emergence as a leader" (Singh, p. 64).

## 6. Post-Partition Trauma due to the Loss of Eco-Aesthetic Identities

The relationship between "aesthetic experience and political change rests on a reconstitution of individuals' states of the psyche at a social scale" (Miles, 2016). That is to say, the displacement of Mano Majrans and other forced migrants in the Indo-Pakistani villages unsettled their collective eco-aesthetic experience resulting in an identity being forged from their trauma of disruption. With many villages undergoing a disruption in their aesthetic experience, it was inevitable that political change had to follow along with a reconstitution of individuals' state of the psyche at a social scale as Miles has mentioned. Gandhi's statement that "the future of India lies in its villages" would have been much more relevant pre-partition as Indian identity was merely a summation of the multiple smaller, ecological identities of its villages. Partition resulted in the loss of smaller, ecological identities in favour of a larger religious identity as in the case of Pakistan, and a secular identity as in the case of India. Both Pakistan's religious identity and India's secular identity were reliant on its political borders and it superseded other collective identities, subsuming them where possible and erasing them if they posed a threat to the larger nation building narrative.

The people in Indo-Pakistani villages were forced to confront the loss of the relationships in their *oikos* and to forge a new relationship with the refugees and, by extension, with the grand narrative of religion, as they were the victims of it. Since the grand narrative of religion acted in reaction to the grand narrative of Nation with its geo-political borders, it led to the destruction of the eco-aesthetic identities of the people as it could only deal with foundational relationships with humans, organisms and the landscape within the *oikos* which were 'deeper' (with a longer time frame) as it was built on a personal level with co-existence on habitat with their awareness, knowledge, and understanding. The omnipresence of grand narratives of Nation and Religion meant that they interfered with the perception within the habitat i.e. they became deciding variables in human relationships. The trauma of the loss of eco-aesthetic identities is the trauma of separation and the inability to form foundational relationships within the *oikos*.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, this analysis of *Train to Pakistan* has not only revealed the relationship that the people of Mano Majra had with Mano Majra but more particularly, the importance given by them to Nature which far surpassed the importance they placed on their culture, religion, and nation. Furthermore, it displays how the grand narratives of nation building and religion battled the local narratives rooted in ecological wisdom in Indo-Pakistani villages with their understanding of how important it is for people to form supportive relationships with society as well as being self-reliant, with fatal consequences to both even as it is all of those qualities that would indicate the strength of a nation. It is clear that by presenting a microcosm of India's partition trauma, Khushwant Singh has arrived at the root of the post-partition trauma viz. the destruction of eco-aesthetic identities by the grand narratives of nation, religion, and culture.

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