Witnessing Partition: Trauma, Memory, and History in Khushwant Singh's Fiction

"The past is never dead. It's not even past."
— William Faulkner

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Abstract
Khushwant Singh's major novels, particularly Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, and Delhi, are acclaimed for their subtle portrayal of the traumatic legacy of the 1947 Partition and its aftermath, and this article, through its qualitative literary analysis, reinterprets his fiction through the lens of trauma studies by way of drawing on theories by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Kali Tal to foreground how these works portray psychological, collective, and generational trauma. The paper also foregrounds the way(s) the writer writes with detached, quasi-historical objectivity and uses recurring animalistic metaphors to lay bare the dehumanising impact of communal violence. As exemplified by the ghost train of massacred bodies in Train to Pakistan, the dying words of Sabhrai in Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and the enigmatic figure of Bhagmati in Delhi convey unspeakable horrors obliquely, signifying the layered dimensions of trauma. This paper attempts to analyse how Singh's dual role as a novelist and historian enables a uniquely candid yet compassionate chronicle of partition trauma and thus offers fresh insight into partition literature and the processes of cultural memory and healing.
Keywords: Trauma Studies, Partition Fiction, Communal Violence, Collective Memory, Healing.

Introduction

The 1947 Partition of India, alongside its frenzied communal bloodshed and mass displacements, constitutes a collective trauma that has reverberated over generations. Many writers have struggled to represent the unspeakable violence and psychological wounds of this event. Butalia opines, "Much of what we know about Partition comes not from official accounts but from fragments of memory and silence" (20). In this context, Khushwant Singh stands out as a storyteller as well as a historian of trauma, given that he is himself a survivor of partition's horrors. He admits that those "savage massacres" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* xii) shattered his lifelong belief in human goodness and left him "an angry middle-aged man" determined to "shout [his] disenchantment" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* xii) by turning to writing. Accordingly, some of his novels, viz., *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), and *Delhi* (1990), deal with the legacies of colonialism, Partition, and sectarian violence, and subtly depict how these historical upheavals scar the minds and souls of individuals and nations.

When it comes to analysing Singh's fiction through the framework of trauma studies, it helps to measure the depth of psychological and cultural wounds beneath their economical, restrained prose. A noted trauma theorist, Caruth, describes trauma as an event that is "not fully assimilated in the moment but which returns in haunting, belated forms, often through nightmares and involuntary repetition" (4).

In context, much of Singh's narrative technique involving fragmented flashbacks, rumour and dream sequences, and elliptical hints of violence evokes the elements of belatedness and 'unspeakability' of traumatic memory. LaCapra's concepts of acting out (the compulsive reliving of trauma) versus working through (the effort to integrate and move beyond trauma) are also crucial in assessing how Singh's works oscillate between these modes, as they often act out historical traumas by restaging riots, massacres, and betrayals in vivid detail; however, they also attempt to work through trauma by situating these events from a broader historical and ethical perspective. Notably, Tal reminds us that survivors/witnesses feel compelled to "tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community" (7). In line with this impulse, his fiction can be seen as a sustained act of testimony and witness that acts as a literary catharsis to validate communal suffering and cautions against forgetting.

It is equally interesting to highlight that Singh achieved this with a detached tone and scrupulous objectivity, which might be equated with the eye of an objective historian. This is why he prefers to eschew overt didacticism and writes about the literary economy, allowing events to speak for themselves. However, this detachment may not be decoded as indifference in the sense that it serves to heighten the impact of horror by presenting it plainly, even clinically, signifying a narrative strategy that mirrors the numbness and disbelief that often accompanies real traumatic shock. For this reason, when violence erupts in his stories, the writer frequently resorts to animalistic metaphors and imagery of bestiality, suggesting that under extreme duress "animalism becomes [the] uppermost part of [the] human psyche" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* xx). For example, Hukum Chand sees vultures circling over the river: "Their wings make no sound. They glided like spirits of the dead…" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 114). Such recurrent metaphors of beasts, cannibalism, and predation throughout his novels underscore how communal hatred can strip humans of empathy and reason, and reduce them to a primal fight for survival. In this way, his fiction vividly conveys the dehumanisation and moral

disintegration that trauma inflicts on both individuals and societies. Accordingly, this paper attempts a sustained reading using the theoretical framework of Caruth, LaCapra, and Tal, with the aim of nurturing fresh insight into how Singh's narratives register psychic and collective wounding beyond historical documentation.

This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis methodology for analysing Singh's fiction through the lens of trauma studies. In doing so, it employs theoretical insights from Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Kali Tal to examine narrative strategies, thematic motifs, and ethical positioning. Notably, this stance is a potent lens to decode trauma in terms of recursive, collective, and transgenerational phenomena. Accordingly, this study offers a trauma-focused analysis of Singh's novels. In *Train to Pakistan*, set at the peak of Partition carnage, we see how sudden atrocity shatters a community's innocence and leaves lasting psychic scars; in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, set in the early 1940s, the focus is on a family's internal strife and disillusionment, foreshadowing the greater trauma to come; and in *Delhi*, a sweeping historical saga, the text grapples with centuries of repeated upheavals, implying a cycle of collective trauma transmitted through generations. By way of situating the said works in trauma theory, the attempt is to nurture fresh insight into how his "detached and controlled" (Khatri 209) narrative voice and his blending of history with fiction constitute a form of witnessing. In this way, Singh's literary chronicles of partition and its aftermath invite readers to confront and process a traumatic past that continues to shape South Asia's postcolonial identity.

Collective Trauma and Ethical Witnessing in *Train to Pakistan*

Singh's debut novel, *Train to Pakistan*, is one of the most potent fictional accounts of partition's horrors. Set in the summer of 1947, it focuses on Mano Majra, a tiny village on the Indo-Pakistani border that was initially untouched by communal discord. The uniqueness of the novel lies in how it gradually unwinds trauma within the microcosm of rural harmony. Notably, at first, partition violence is only a distant rumour, and Mano Majra's Sikh

and Muslim villagers live in age-old amity; they are unaware of the storm-gathering momentum elsewhere. However, the calm is shattered by the arrival of a ghostly train laden with corpses of massacred refugees, which is the narrative's central trauma metaphor, and it may be decoded as a literal vehicle of death that unfolds the unimaginable reality of partition.

On a critical note, the writer does not depict the massacre on the train in real time; instead, he processes and filters it through the villagers' stunned reactions and through the torn psyche of Hukum Chand, the local magistrate who witnessed the aftermath of the train. This indirect portrayal exemplifies what Prasad and Kumar term a "sanitized silence" (17) in Partition narratives, which works as an aesthetic restraint that, at the same time, intensifies horror by not describing it in graphic detail. The reader first notes the massacre as an ominous rumour, then sees its residue in Hukum Chand's nightmare, and only later confronts its physical reality, especially when villagers are ordered to collect wood for mass cremation. Such narrative distancing may be better understood in the light of Caruth's insight that extreme trauma often resists direct representation and emerges in fragments and nightmares because it is "never fully known but nonetheless insists [s] on being told" (Caruth 4). In the narrative, the atrocity insists on being told through a horrific dream sequence as Hukum Chand imagines ghastly tableaux of mutilated bodies: "women and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror… mouths open as if their shrieks had just then become voiceless' (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 113). This dream signifies a symptom of trauma's intrusion into the mind, a belated psychic registration of violence that is too overwhelming to process in a waking consciousness.

As the daylight comes, the villagers of Mano Majra are constrained to confront the trauma's reality with hundreds of corpses burned alongside the poisonous pull of communal revenge. As a consequence, the once-peaceful village quickly descends into distrust and rage, demonstrating how trauma can fray the social fabric in no time. Consider the following textual extract: "The fact that both sides were killed. Both shot and stabbed, speared, and clubbed. Both

tortured. Both raped." (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 1), whereby the novelist emphasizes that atrocity was perpetrated by all communities, a point often echoed by historians. Indeed, in his non-fiction History of the Sikhs, Singh documented how on Independence Day 1947, "nearly ten million Punjabis were at each other's throats" and that "never in the history of the world was there a bigger exchange of population attended with so much bloodshed" (Singh, *History* 75). By importing this historical sensibility into his novel, the novelist performs the role of what LaCapra calls *history's witness* (78), which attempts to neither exaggerate nor understate trauma, but to record it with factual sobriety and ethical clarity.

Notably, *rain in Pakistan* is far more than a dry chronicle. It is a profoundly affective narrative with restraint refracting moments of humaneness amid barbarity. In this sense, the climax centres on Jugga, a local dacoit with a good heart, who ultimately sacrifices himself to save the trainload of Muslim villagers from a revenge massacre. This selfless act suggests the possibility of working through trauma through individual moral choices, even in the face of the tide of violence. In trauma terms, Jugga's heroism can be read as counternarrative to the cycle of acting out aggression. It offers a brief catharsis in the sense that the reader witnesses that even in a world "filled with reactionary and vindictive temperament" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 188), an ordinary man can rise above communal hatred. It is also important to note that the novelist leaves the ending ambiguous and somber, as there is no triumphant reconciliation, only a faint glimmer of hope amid tragedy. The novel's tone remains one of "disillusionment at the personal and social levels" (Singh, *Train to Pakistan* 190). This signifies a recognition that the trauma of partition has shattered the innocence of Mano Majra and, by extension, of India. In sum, *Train to Pakistan* presents Partition violence as a collective trauma that dehumanises its participants, while also illustrating, in fleeting moments, the potential for empathy and moral courage to persist. Singh's detached account is in sync with trauma theory, showing how the event's meaning continually exceeds and disrupts any straightforward narrative, leaving behind nightmares, silence, and unresolved grief.

Anticipatory Trauma and Disillusionment in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*

While *Train to Pakistan* depicts trauma at the moment of Partition, Singh's earlier novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (originally published in 1959) is particularly important as it explores the pre-Partition context and the seeds of trauma in the final years of the Raj. The novel was set in Amritsar in 1942–43 during the Quit India movement and World War II. The narrative portrays the Sikh family's internal conflicts, foregrounding the contrasting ideologies of the father and son. Notably, at the surface level, the narrative deals with loyalty and rebellion. The patriarch, Buta Singh, is a magistrate and loyalist of the British colonial government; however, his son Sher Singh plots violent uprisings against the Empire. Thus, the portrayal of these characters is ironic and critical. Rather than glorifying anti-colonial zeal, the narrative exposes Sher and his comrades as naive and self-serving: "full of nauseous bravado, bogus martyrdom, and Fascist conceit" (Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* 106). Das observes, "The event is not located in the spectacular but in the ordinary" (9). Accordingly, Sher's revolutionary stance culminates in a sordid act of murder, as he kills an innocent informer to cover his own tracks, which signifies the moral bankruptcy beneath his patriotic rhetoric. Meanwhile, Buta Singh's loyalty to the Raj is also motivated by personal interest, and he advises his son to "keep in with both sides" (Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* 84) to safeguard their family position. Thus, the narrative consolidates the fact that neither colonial collaborators nor supposed freedom fighters emerge as idealists. Through a trauma lens, the pervasive cynicism in the narrative manifests Singh's post-partition disillusionment. Through his writing after witnessing the 1947 carnage, he seemingly projects backward in time, and this is how he exhibits a kind of scepticism about violent struggle and an anxiety that India's impending freedom would be tainted by fratricide and chaos.

The title of the novel, drawn from the last words of Sher's mother Sabhrai, impregnates a sense of despair about the future. In the poignant scene, Sabhrai lies dying, while her son faces imprisonment for his misdeeds. Earlier, Sabhrai had asked Sher what good he expected to achieve through independence, to which he replied in poetic optimism, "Spring will come to our land once more… once more the nightingales will sing" (Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* 211). At the novel's end, Sabhrai softly counters this vision, telling him, "I shall not hear the nightingale, my son" (Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* 212). Notably, this pronunciation operates at multiple axial levels. Literally, this signifies Sabhrai's acceptance that she will not live to see the postcolonial spring. However, symbolically, it performs a certain kind of scepticism about the coming dawn of independence, suggesting that its sweetness will be lost amid the noise of violence. Situating it within the framework of trauma studies, Sabhrai's line can be interpreted as a foreboding of national trauma in the sense that the nightingale's song, symbolising peace and renewal, is something the older generation fears that they will never hear, because the cycle of brutality is bound to continue. Thus, the novel's conclusion anticipates the impending turmoil of partition, which signifies that the real cost of independence will be mass suffering and loss. In this sense, Sabhrai's deathbed words are a subtle iteration of generational trauma and manifest intuitive knowledge of impending catastrophe.

The detached narration also foregrounds this tragic irony. The novelist maintains a cool and clinical perspective of characters, and by refraining from patriotic glorification, he conveys an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, and moral ambiguity (the psychological landscape that precedes overt communal trauma). Interestingly, the characters' interpersonal dynamics mirror a broader social rupture, and, in context, the filial betrayal and collapse of trust within Buta Singh's family symbolise the breakdown of community bonds during partition. For example, when violence and suspicion flare in the village, Singh describes the crowd's mentality in terms of a "ruthless swerve of the mind" where "animalism becomes the uppermost part of the human psyche" (Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* 174). From a trauma perspective, extreme fear and violence can induce a regressive, animalistic state in humans to manifest a reversion to fight-or-flight instincts of survival. However, in Sabhrai's storyline, the narrative offers a counterpoint in the

sense that her character embodies resilience through faith and compassion (she, for instance, cares for a wounded fugitive out of maternal instinct). Sabhrai's quiet strength amid chaos suggests the potential for what LaCapra would call working through trauma (LaCapra 144). Her daily acts of prayer and empathy serve as small rituals of healing, even as the world becomes hostile. Her death, coming at the novel's end, is tinged with a sense of mourning, not just for an individual mother but for an entire way of life that perishes in the convulsions of history.

Contextually, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, seen in a trauma context, is about anticipatory trauma and loss of innocence before the storm. The novelist's own bitterness about the outcome of the freedom struggle seeps through the narrative, given the fact that it offers modern readers insight into an entangled truth: that the jubilation of 1947 cannot be disentangled from the trauma that accompanied it. The novel's detached, somber tone invites us to question the cost of political violence and empathise with those like Sabhrai, who intuited that the fruits of independence would be sour. In doing so, the novelist again performs a dual role: the historian of his times and the diagnostician of collective trauma. This is how he illustrates that a nation's psychological wounds begin to form even before physical wounds are inflicted.

The City as Wound: Repetition, History, and Trauma in *Delhi*

Notably, *Delhi* (1990) moves beyond the temporal confines of a single event given that it presents Indian capital as a living palimpsest of trauma-laden history. Spanning eight centuries, i.e., from the medieval invasions of Delhi by iconoclasts like Nadir Shah, through the Mughal era and colonial rule, up to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, Delhi is both a historical chronicle and a metafictional meditation on the city's soul. In this way, the persistent presence of violence, betrayal, and resilience defines Delhi's past, and in this sense, Delhi's history is like a ghost that "enjoys human blood and never gets satiated' (Singh, *Delhi* 45). It is a striking metaphor that personifies history as a spectre who feeds on repeated carnage. It is important to highlight that the idea of a never-satiated ghost of history resonates with the

trauma theory's concept of the repetitive nature of traumatic events. In this context, cities have been assaulted and rebuilt multiple times. Each wave of trauma leaves scars that become a part of its cultural memory, even if overlaid by subsequent events.

At the centre of *Delhi* is the narrator's love-hate relationship with a hermaphrodite prostitute named Bhagmati. Bhagmati is far more than a colourful character in the narrative; she is a living symbol of the city itself. The novelist explicitly twines the two, writing that his narrator's life in Delhi became "a love-hate affair with the city and the woman" (Singh, *Delhi* 23). Bhagmati, who is described as dark, ugly, and vulgar, is also irresistibly seductive; accordingly, she represents Delhi's paradoxical nature, that is, a city of grandeur and filth, of splendour and suffering. In context, Bhagmati (a hijra, or eunuch) and Delhi share a history of exploitation: "Both have been exploited by rough people, and hence they hide their 'seductive charms' under a disgusting ugliness" (Singh, *Delhi* 24). This imagery refracts trauma at a metaphorical level: Bhagmati's body bears the trauma of her social marginalisation and abuse, while Delhi's landscape carries the accumulated trauma of conquests and massacres. Bhagmati's ambiguous gender is also symbolically resonant since, as an individual who is both male and female, she embodies union and division at once and equals India's syncretic culture that was violently split during Partition. Her presence in the narrative is a challenge to binary thinking, reflecting how trauma destabilises fixed identities and categories.

Throughout the narrative, the novelist toggles between historical vignettes (told in the third person, covering figures like Aurangzeb, Meer Taqi Meer, and the last Mughal Bahadur Shah Zafar) and the modern first-person narrative with Bhagmati. This structure itself mimics the oscillation of traumatic memory, where the past intrudes upon the present and the present constantly revisits the past. The novel's contemporary climax is set around the 1984 riots following Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination, which targeted the Sikhs in the capital. In this way, the narrative draws an explicit parallel between 1984 and 1947, noting how the riots "revived the memories of 1947" (Singh, *Delhi* 347) in their brutality. In other words, a later trauma

re-triggered the unhealed wounds of an earlier one, which is a phenomenon well-documented in trauma studies as re-traumatisation or the transgenerational transmission of trauma. For readers aware that Singh himself was a Sikh deeply anguished by both Partition and the 1984 violence, the novel's blending of these episodes carries an additional weight. It is as if the author, through fiction, is continually reliving and recording the "gruesome events" (Singh, *Delhi* 348) that marked his community and nation. It signifies LaCapra's acting out in textual form: *Delhi* compulsively returns to scenes of bloodshed (from the 1739 massacre by Nadir Shah to the 1857 Sepoy Revolt to Partition and beyond) almost ritualistically, as if unable to escape the cycle. However, Singh's treatment of these episodes is notably restrained and devoid of overt sentiment, and he writes as if sketching a series of historical portraits, allowing the stark facts to convey the shock. For instance, when describing the 1984 pogrom, he simply notes the "limitless cruelty in the name of religion and revenge" (Singh, *Delhi* 349) and the burning of innocents. Such simplicity belies deep anguish and achieves what Caruth might call a "double telling" (8), that is, a narrative that conveys trauma by oscillating between emotional numbness and painful flashback. The reader, like the survivor, must piece together the full scope of horror from these controlled accounts and the emotional subtexts beneath them.

In this context, Bhagmati's role is crucial, as she is present in the modern frame story as a comfort and foil to the narrator, reappearing between historical chapters almost as a reminder that the human element (love, desire, and survival) endures even as empires fall. Notably, Bhagmati often appears immediately after tragic historical chapters and provides a sort of grotesque solace. Her earthy humour, sexual openness, and resilience ground the narrator whenever history threatened to overwhelm him. In terms of trauma, she represents the potential for working through, and this is why she forces the narrator to engage with the messiness of life rather than succumbing entirely to the ghosts of the past. By loving Bhagmati, the narrator symbolically embraces the totality of Delhi's past, both the glory and the gore, and is an act of acknowledgement, as trauma healing requires acknowledging the wound.

The novel ends without a neat resolution, but one senses that Singh's exhaustive journey through its history has a therapeutic aim–that is, to confront the city's traumas head-on, to ensure they are remembered, and thus, in some measure, redeemed by memory. In *Delhi*, the novelist positions himself as a participant and observer of history's traumas; therefore, the narrative voice shifts from an intimate first person to an archival third person, signifying the dual identity of a writer who is also a historian. Notably, this duality is reflected in the novel's style: part historical documentation and part lyrical epics. The detached tone and economy of language that characterise Singh's earlier novels are also present here, even as the canvas broadens. By refusing to sensationalise even the most horrifying events, the novelist avoids the trap of voyeurism. Instead, he shows that not everyone was swept up in the frenzy, and "many wise and gentle persons felt suffocated and disillusioned" (Singh, *Delhi* 352) by the violence.

Delhi, as a novel of trauma, suggests that a city, like a person, can suffer, given that repeated invasions and riots are its flashbacks and persistent communal tensions are its anxiety. However, through memory and storytelling, these traumas are kept in a conscious view and are not repressed. As Tal argues, transforming traumatic memory into narrative serves both the survivor and community by validating the reality of the experience (Tal 7). *Delhi* performs exactly this function on a civilizational scale: it narrates the nation's traumatic history with unflinching candour, thereby integrating those "unknown chunks of shattered memory" (Singh, *Delhi* 366) into a form that can be collectively acknowledged. In doing so, it contributes to a cultural working-through, that is, an attempt to learn from the recurring horrors of the past so that the "ghost of human history" (Singh, *Delhi* 366) may someday relinquish its hold on the present.

Conclusion

Singh's fictional oeuvre on partition and its aftermath signifies a seminal contribution to the literature on trauma in South Asia: *Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale,* and *Delhi* encompass the shock of communal violence, the despair of a family in turmoil, and the tragedy of a city and

nation. Interestingly, by avoiding sensationalism, the novelist respects the unspeakable quality of trauma; by employing metaphor and indirection (the ghost train, the nightingale's silence, the hermaphrodite lover), he finds creative ways to express what conventional realist language cannot fully capture. His recurring use of animalistic imagery and motifs of bestiality drives home on how trauma can erode humanity. Importantly, these novels resonate with key insights from trauma studies in the sense that they illustrate Caruth's notion that traumatic events are often grasped belatedly and indirectly, through nightmares (Hukum Chand's dream), gaps in knowledge (the villagers of Mano Majra initially oblivious to Partition), or prophetic utterances (Sabhrai's dying words). These narratives also echo LaCapra's ideas on acting out versus working through characters such as Jugga or Sabhrai attempt acts of understanding that suggest the possibility of healing. In line with Tal's observations, Singh's fiction indeed seems born of a need to "tell and retell" (Tal 7) the story of Partition with a view to making it real to those who did not experience it and to ensuring that the enormity of that trauma is not sanitised by time or lost to official history. These works also remind us that the work of memory and mourning is ongoing beneath every statistic of the dead or the displaced. Singh's partition fiction offers a rich site for trauma-informed teaching. In this sense, these works can serve as core texts in modules in partition literature, (South Asian) trauma narratives, and historical memory. Apart from this, future research might further explore this trauma-theoretical lens to lesser-studied partition writers. Comparative studies could also examine how Singh's narrative restraint differs from the testimonial urgency of survivor memoirs, which may consequently open new dialogues between fiction, history, and cultural memory. In this way, Singh's fiction suggests that understanding trauma precisely requires what he offers: an honest confrontation with the past, a refusal to forget, and an abiding faith in the resilience of the human spirit, even when the nightingale's song cannot be heard. In this regard, Felman and Laub also affirm, "To testify is not merely to narrate but to commit oneself and to affirm the truth of what one says" (204).

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