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Paradoxes of Partition and Railways: A Symposium of Cinema and Literature Identity in Twentieth Century India

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Abstract:

Railways had been the mainstream transportation medium in India since its inauguration in middle of the nineteenth century under the colonial Government. Railways form a very crucial link between the communities and several geographically differentiated places in India. Railways link all of them under the same thread. And thus railways had been a much talk about phenomenon in Indian society, and thus it would be never a surprising matter to find railways in the cinemas and literary practices. Thus there had been always a contradictory view point of railways in Indian society, in one view the railway proved to be source of joy and comfort and in another view the railway becomes a messenger of death, specifically in the partition scenario in India, which took place in the middle of the twentieth century. From then on, the contradictory or even paradoxical views about railway became very prominent and at sometimes became misleading to know about the impact and scenario of railway traveling at the time of Partition, in Cinemas and literature. This paper would point out the paradoxical dimensions as seen in the existing literature and cinema at the time of partition. This paper would try to reveal the process of amalgamation of literature and cinema with the historical aspect of railways at the time of partition. However, this paper would bring out the contribution and contradictions presented by the cinema and literature in understanding the impact of partition of the railways and would also bring out its paradoxical nature in bringing out the historical aspect of it. Thus, this paper would be very crucial in pointing out the paradoxical view point of Partition and its representation in the films and literary practices. And in doing so, this paper would point out certain questions and would also try to find out the answer. Questions such as: How literature reflected the paradoxes of the partition? How film and literature represented railways to project several things such as communal unrest, political unrest and several other things of the society? What was the role of cinema and literature in bringing out the

history of railway at the time of Partition? How the representation of the railways impacted historical account of the railway at the time of Partition?

Keywords: Partition, Railways, Contradictions, Violence, Paradoxes, Communal unrest, ambivalent presentations.

Introduction: Since cinema and literature gets consumed by the general people and these people were much interested in the partition and railway aspects, the Indian films and literature uses it very often in their own context. And it needed to be mentioned that, a particular genre of literary practices had grown from the partition scenario and came to known as partition literature, which specially deals with the theme of Partition. And in this type of literature the railway becomes a crucial phenomenon for the representation of the Indian society and its communal unrest, political unrest. Thus, the railways, specifically from the time of partition became a fundamental aspect and theme of literary and cinematic practices. And it became so popular that, the representations of railways in the context of partition tend to be taken as history of partition itself. These aspects became so crucial and impacted the minds and hearts of Indian people in such way that it became a unforgettable account of partition scenario and thus the mark left by the cinema and literature of partition from then on amalgamated with historical account of railways. And since historical account of the railways often gets subdued under the magnanimous representation style of cinema and literature, thus it created a paradoxical view point of the railways in the time of Partition. And it needed to be mentioned that, the cinematic and literature representation of railways from the time of Partition to the later times, created a history of its own.

It had been seen that railway in India was always seen under certain contradictions and these contradictions could be found in Indian cinematic and literary representation of the railways especially at the time of Partition. And mostly the partition literature and cinema representation presented the picture of violence surrounding the railway travel and its adventure in the time of Partition. Railways had been used as a symbol and metaphor in many literary works. There were ironic representation in the cinema and literature of the partition. Railway in literature and Cinema represented diverse range of things and images. But, to again reassert the crucial point that, railway at the time of Partition mostly presented the theme of violence but also acknowledged its importance in the everyday life of Indian people and the luxury the railway provides to these men. But the violence and negative imagery of the trains were often put up in the literature and cinema of the partition. Saadat Hasan Manto very efficiently pointed out the violence that was seen in the partition trains. He observes that,

“Rioters brought the running train to a halt. People belonging to the other community were pulled out and slaughtered with swords and bullets. The rest of the passengers were treated to Hales, fruits and milk. The chief assassin made a farewell speech before the train pulled out of the station: 'Ladies and gentlemen, my apologies. News of this train's arrival was delayed. That is why we have not been able to entertain you lavishly- the way we wanted to.’”

The pointed noted and very clearly asserted by the South Asian writer Saadat Hasan Manto, defines the cruelty and savagery of the communal massacre at the time of Partition. The horror scene of the railways that gets both reflected in the pages of the literary works and also gets displayed at the screens of cinema. People, at the time of Partition found it dangerous and utterly fatal to travel by those partition trains. The horror gets intensified in the manner of welcoming the trains into a particular nation. This sort of welcoming scenes had always been marked with ironic overtones. People, did waited for a train to gets into a particular station but some waited with wrong intensions in their mind and thus such situations often gets flooded not with tears for seeing their long awaited family members or inmates but with blood for revenge. Thus the welcoming of trains had an irony in its depiction. Marian Aguiar has pointed out that

“Manto's short story is one of the many creative works describing communal strife that took place in the period up to and during India's partition into Pakistan and India in August 1947. Indeed, this period of South Asian history has captured the attention of writers from the subcontinent from 1940's to the present, including those of a later generation looking back from the spaces of the diasporas. For a number of works about this period the railway has an important presence, either as the main setting or as the critical scene of violence. During the period of Partition, trains carrying refugees (along with ill-fated travelers) were halted, detailed or blown up, their trapped passengers massacred. With engineers left to carry on, trains arrived at their destinations carrying dead bodies, thus earning the name ‘death trains’. I would suggest, however, that the appearance of the train in Partition stories has implications beyond faithfulness to history. The emblematic status of the railway as an icon of modernity made it a critical symbol of the forces- past, present and future- at play in the moment of national independence and partition.”

Railways always took a centre stage in the discussion about partition but sadly railway had been projected in the most violence manner. Railways, which had been the dream full filling object, became a dull picture of massacre and communal riots. Railway became the carrier of all sorts of bad omens because it was the railway in which the revenge of the communal unrest took place. But it needed to be mentioned that, the projection of the railways under the view of incarnating violence must not be seen under the implication that, the railway was the creator or murderer of many men. It was the communal unrest which made the journey of in the trains unsafe and fatal. Men from one community would attack on other community. Several men would be killed on the ground of their religion or being from a separate country or religion. Men were slaughtered mercilessly on the trains and these sorts of facts could be very well found in Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories. He was one the chief South Asian writer to project the theme of massacre and violence in the railway or in the journey of the train carrying refugees. Marian Aguiar again pointed out that, “The phrase ‘full load of corpses’ presents an ironic and macabre contrast to the contents of the goods trains that were their nighttime ‘lullaby’. The use of the word ‘descends’ creates a sense of the village enfolded in an aura of the train that covers the

whole. In the narrative, Singh juxtaposes this to a description of clouds rolling in on the village. The spectral quality of Singh's description continues as another train appears, this time in darkness as well as in silence.”

One of the most notable writers about the theme of partition and the impact of the railways was Kushwant Singh. His most famous novel about the theme of partition, “Train to Pakistan”, had pointed out effectively about the peculiarities of the partition and the unrest in the Indian community. He brought forward the notion of the violence that was prevalent at the time of partition. In fact he gave us a detailed description of the impact of the railways under the communal unrest along side with the political unrest between the newly established Pakistan with India. It was also a fact that, communal riots and unrest killed several people traveling through the train to their particular destination. People were shot and killed, butchered with knife and sword, women were raped and abducted and children were thrown away like stone. Kushwant Singh became very prominent and established writer the publication of the novel “Train to Pakistan”. In this novel he shared his observations about the partition and the horrible experiences of traveling in the partition trains. He, very efficiently pointed out the factual and almost photographic representation of the railway violence and injustices in his novel.

Thus, at points his literary works seems like history of the account of the railway inconveniences at the time of partition. His works often seemed to be an amalgamation of the literary representations and actual history. Though it could be very easily found that, the manner of his projection of the railway brutalities existed in the real situation but his accounts of massacre, violence, riots had also the touch of literary representation which would be based upon the actual events but would also exaggerate or misinterpret some particular situations. But the notable thing about Kushwant Singh's literary representation of the horrors of partition was his manner of presenting things in a photogenic manner and this ability of Kushwant Singh's works gave themselves a historical touch and historical value.

Kushwant Singh presented several aspects of railways in an ambivalent manner. He used several tropes and imagery to depict the actual circumstances through his literary works and as previously mentioned, this would give his work a historical significance along with the value of being providing a picturesque account of the railway travelling and its inconveniences which the railway accounts fails to provide. And here lies the importance of the literary fictions which could very well bring out the actual situation rather than only facts and figures. His description of the full load of corpses presents an ironic and macabre contrast to the contents of the goods train that were there nightmare lullaby. Marian Aguiar pointed out that, “The phrase ‘full load of corpses’ presents an ironic and macabre contrast to the contents of the goods trains that were their nighttime ‘lullaby’”. The use of the word ‘descends’ creates a sense of the village enfolded in an aura of the train that covers the whole. In the narrative, Singh juxtaposes this to a description of clouds rolling in on the village. The spectral quality of Singh's description continues as another train appears, this time in darkness as well as in silence.”

Kushwant Singh also introduced the villagers fears of the appearing 'ghost trains' and asserts that the fear comes from realization of the trains approaching. Marian Aguiar pointed out that, "...Singh continues to take a circuitous route around introducing the scene in the train, increasing the tension of the novel and representing through his narrative from the villagers' fear that comes from the knowing and not knowing." Kushwant Singh's interior and exterior description of the trains also horrifies and intensifies the scenes. Kushwant Singh's use of silence trope in his works also highlights the horrific nature of the partition railways and this sort of account very well defines the historical situation of the railways at the time of partition. His works often gets stagnated into the minds of people and these impressions create a permanent image of the railway brutalities into the minds and hearts of the people. And this make the people believe in the literary history of the partition railways. His work also very skillfully brings forward the religious tensions between Hindu and Muslims at the time of partition and unrest of the passengers also.

Marian Aguiar precisely pointed out that, "In the final scene of the novel, a group of villagers vow to stop a train going to Pakistan and kill its passengers in retaliation for the 'death trains' that have been arriving from across the border. Muslims from the village, the ones they vowed to protect with their own lives, will be among the passengers. The fact that this ultimately does not deter a group of them is a sign of how much communal allegiance have supplanted, obscured, or formulated local relations. Only one man, the Sikh named Jugga who is driven by romantic love for one of the refugees, tries to stop them; he ultimately succeeds by cutting the rope suspended over the tracks to knock off the passengers on the roof." Bhisham Sahni's literary works also projects the same horrific account of the railway travelling inconveniences and fatalities. Sahni uses a different method altogether and he metaphorically uses the partition trains and shows similarity of the trains breakdown with India's breakdown because of partition. The partition had not only brings catastrophic fatal bite to the partition trains travelers but also the general people of India. Marian Aguiar also pointed out that, "Bhisham Sahni's "We Have Arrived in Amritsar" presents a view of the shifting landscape of Partition from within the train itself. His short story resembles Singh's novels in several important ways. Like 'Train to Pakistan', this story marks the moment when individuals come to recognize the impact this national decision for Partition will have upon their lives. Sahni uses the events inside the train to set up a dual narrative in which the breakdown of relations within the compartments also tells the story of the 'cracking of India' during partition."

The railway projection had a very significant turn also in the literary representation of the partition railways. It did not only represent the gloomy side of the railways but also reminded everyone about the importance and significance of the railways in Indian context. Marian Aguiar pointed out that, "From the perspective of the town, however, the railway station and the trains that run through it are extremely important. The sounds of the trains passing through have made 'Mano Majra very conscious of trains'. In fact, in Singh's novel this 'consciousness of trains' structures the daily rhythms of the village. When the morning train comes, the mullah gives the call to prayer, and hearing that, the priest gets up to

perform his ablutions. Even the local thieves organize themselves around the timetable of the train, listening in the field for the night train before they sneak into the village. As this 'railway time' becomes entrenched in daily life, it gives rise to what may be called a 'railway consciousness.'

In another different aspect Amrit Rai's 'Kichar' display another different aspect of railway representation. Arup Kumar Chatterjee pointed out that, "In contrast to this aesthetic of argumentative pathos, Amrit Rai's 'Kichar' is rather direct in baring the image of a society that still suffers the trauma of partition. The stories train journey features a set of well to do Hindu passengers talking nonchalantly about the partitions death toll, taking even a sensationalist pleasure in the bourgeois critiques they offer to the growing communal hatred and the growing prices of food at Nirula's restaurant."

There were complexities in the literary representations of the railway narratives and thus there were several kinds of narrative structures and narrative points as well. Marian Aguiar pointed out that, "In the years leading up to independence, these two relationships so intrinsic to the specialization of the Indian railway inspired two opposing groups in the nationalist movement to invoke the railway as symbol. Roughly put, one position, represented by Mohandas Gandhi, saw the railway as embodying and inscribing an alien culture; the other, represented by Jawaharlal Nehru, saw a map of the future laid out by the tracks. Yet as literary representations from South Asian colonial, decolonizing and post-colonial periods demonstrate, the railway presented a much more complex space than these two narratives."

The trains were often associated with the national space and modernity as well. Modernity which was propelled by the introduction of the railways generated new meanings and communal interactions. Marian Aguiar precisely pointed out that, "This nexus between community, nation and modernity represented by the railway, already well established by the point of independence, gained another layer of meaning during partition. As refugees clamored for spaces on the train, they placed their trust in the sanctity of that space. The railway offered itself as a national space that through a secular modernity appeared to transcend religious enmity and violence. These were spaces sanctioned by modernity and secularism, yet within them communal bodies' awaited tragedy."

In films such as 'Gadar' railway gets a crucial position in the political phenomenon along with bloodsheds. Arup Kumar Chatterjee pointed out that, "Gadar, on the other hand leaves no room for imagination. It is a proper orgy rape and bloodsheds that the trains or the platforms facilitate. Whereas in other partition narratives, trains have no agency, and therefore serve as dumbwaiters of the carnage, in Gadar they always seem to side with the greater power, which finally is wielded in the heroism of Tara Singh." Attacks on train, using trains for the purpose of thrills and fights including bloodsheds, could be seen in most of the movies dealing with partition trains. Movies such as, Chhinnamul (1950) presents a gloomy picture of railway travelers stacking up in a small place. ArupKumar Chatterjee pointed out that "The film Chhinnamul (1950), directed by Nemai Ghosh, and collectively

produced by the Indian People's Theatre Association, captures the gloomy images of refugees piling into the railway station at Sealdah, from a fictitious Naldanga, the unmapped massacred site". In another movie Chhalia (1960) the trains serve as the symbol of calmness and equality. There were also movies of that kind made by Ritwik Ghatak, namely "Komal Gandhar" (1961). He pointed out that, "In other (regional) films that take a departure from the partitions reign of terror, such as Ritwik Ghatak's Komal Gandhar (1961), "Trains encapsulate more of the trauma of refugees- the engine's whistle haunting the memory of dislocation- rather than the macabre. Ghatak's uses of trains signify neither departure nor arrivals."

There were also movies which shifted from the general picture of violence in the later times, such as Satyajit Roy's 'Apu Trilogy'. He also pointed out that "The most iconic representation of trains- in the iconography of the railways depicting the transition from pre-independence to post-colonial- came in Satyajit Roy's 'Apu Trilogy', the adaptations of Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's novels, Pather Panchali and Aparajito (novels, 1928, 1932; films, 1955; 1956; and, Apur Sansar in 1959). The train sequence of Pather Panchali, in which Apu and Durga were seen running across the field of kaash flowers, to catch a glimpse of 'diminutive' train, crawling from edge, was actually the first scene to be shot in the film, although in the film's chronology it appears towards the end."

Epilogue: Thus in the final assertion about the literary and cinematic representation of the partition railways of twentieth century, it could be said that there were ample amount of paradoxes seen in the representations of the partition railways. From the beginning of the railways and specifically at the time of partition, the railways became an object of much debated phenomena be it in the locality or in the films or in the literature of partition. Some aspects or the other always gets revealed in a different manner in different presentation of the railways. But one thing remains the same about the partition and that was its association with violence and fear, which trembled many an Indians heart at the time of partition. And this issue being a prominent among all other aspects of the railways finds much space in the history of cinematic and literary representation. Thus it was never a matter of contradictions if we would want to focus on the primary point of concern for the railways in the time of partition. But the representations of the railway accounts of the partition helped tremendously in understanding the history and circumstances of railways. Though these representations could not be ascribed or given the position of history but it certainly helped in getting out the proper picture of the partition railways. But it also furthered the paradoxes associated with the representations when compared with the railway records because it was a fact that the film representations or the literature specifically talked about inconveniences and presented mostly violence and pathetic conditions of the railway travelling. And the history of railway representation would also point out that there had been a severe paradox in these representations itself because they often varied in their representations. It could also be pointed out that this sort of literary representation also affected the history of the partition railways into the minds of the Indian people. And it could also be stated that there would be always a difference between history and historical representation, in this case, the

railway records could be seen as history whereas the cinematic and literary representations could be merely seen as just a literary representation of the history of partition. But it would always be an undeniable fact that, railways paradoxical representations brought about many a conflict along with many a crucial input for the historical records.

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