

Spatiality and the Borderland: Mano Majra as a Heterotopia in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*

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Abstract— *Khushwant Singh's seminal 1947 Partition novel, Train to Pakistan (1956), is frequently critically positioned within the domain of trauma literature, socio-historical realism, or humanistic grief narrative. While these readings accurately capture the text's visceral emotional landscape, they often underexamine the spatial mechanics governing the novel's central setting: the isolated borderland village of Mano Majra. This paper employs Michel Foucault's spatial formulation of the heterotopia alongside Edward Soja's trialectic of Thirdspace to analyze Mano Majra as an alternative, relational site that initially resists the rigid religious and political binaries of the nascent postcolonial nation-state. By interrogating the physical geography of the village specifically the architectural triad of the gurdwara, mosque, and magistrate's bungalow the fluid temporalities dictated by railway rhythms, and the liminal nature of the River Sutlej, this study demonstrates how Mano Majra functions as a sanctuary of local co-existence. Furthermore, the article traces how the arrival of the "ghost train" acts as an epistemological and spatial invasion, forcibly superimposing nationalized, sectarian geometry onto a fluid borderland and converting a functioning heterotopia into a space of crisis. Ultimately, the paper argues that Singh's narrative exposes the violent spatial politics of nation-building, locating moral agency not in state apparatuses, but in marginalized subaltern interventions within contested spaces.*



Keywords— *Spatiality, Heterotopia, Thirdspace, Partition Literature, Liminality, Subaltern Ethics.*

Introduction: Re-Spatializing Partition Literature

The historiography and literary corpus surrounding the 1947 Partition of British India are predominantly marked by narratives of temporal rupture, political betrayal, and catastrophic communal violence. Standard critical approaches to Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) regularly emphasize its status as an archetype of Partition realism, focusing on its stark portrayal of moral degeneration, psychological trauma, and the breakdown of humanistic values amidst state collapse (Morey 64; Daiya 88). However, such thematic inquiries often treat the physical setting of the novel the remote, Punjab border village of Mano Majra, as merely a passive backdrop or a pastoral stage upon which historical tragedy unfolds.

To fully understand the ideological mechanics of Singh's narrative, Mano Majra must be re-evaluated through the lens of critical spatial theory. Geography in *Train to Pakistan* is neither neutral nor static; it is actively constructed, contested, and reordered by competing socio-political forces. In the months surrounding August 1947, as the Radcliffe Line carved arbitrary borders across Punjab and Bengal, spatial identities transformed overnight. Abstract political cartography drafted in distant rooms by colonial administrators directly collided with the lived, organic geography of borderland communities (Gyanendra Pandey 21).

This paper posits that before the encroachment of Partition violence, Mano Majra functions as a distinct spatial anomaly, a heterotopia in Michel Foucault's terms, and a 'Thirdspace' as conceptualized by Edward Soja. It operates outside the rigid, institutionalized religious and

nationalistic binaries of Muslim versus Hindu/Sikh that were being aggressively institutionalized across the subcontinent. The village maintains an internal social order rooted in local reciprocity, fluid spatial practices, and shared temporal rhythms anchored to the railway tracks rather than state-mandated clocks.

However, this localized, heterotopic equilibrium is inherently vulnerable. The arrival of the “ghost train”, a mechanized vessel overflowing with murdered refugees, represents the violent invasion of nationalized, sectarian space into the borderland geography. By examining the physical layout of Mano Majra, the liminal symbolism of the River Sutlej, the collapse of rural temporalities, and the ultimate subaltern intervention of Juggut Singh, this paper demonstrates how *Train to Pakistan* critiques the spatial violence of the postcolonial nation-state and maps the destruction of localized spaces of alterity.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault's Heterotopia and Soja's Thirdspace

To examine Mano Majra as a contested spatial construct, it is necessary to synthesize Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia with Edward Soja's spatial trialectic. In his foundational essay “Of Other Spaces” (1984), Foucault defines heterotopias as “real sites” that exist within every culture, yet function as “counter-sites, a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24). Unlike utopias, which are fundamentally unreal places, heterotopias are physical, localized spaces that accommodate alterity; they juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible or contradictory (Foucault 25).

Crucially, heterotopias are connected to temporal breaks or ‘heterochronies’, operating when individuals or communities find themselves in an absolute break with traditional, standardized time (Foucault 26). Mano Majra, tucked away near the River Sutlej with its small population of Sikhs, Muslims, and a single Hindu family, mirrors this formulation. It exists within the geopolitical boundaries of Punjab, yet remains socially and ideologically juxtaposed against the sectarian violence consuming urban centers like Lahore, Amritsar, and Delhi.

Complementing Foucault, Edward Soja's spatial trialectic in “Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places” (1996) provides a framework for analyzing how physical space interacts with ideological power. Soja categorizes space into three interrelated realms:

1. Firstspace (Perceived Space): The concrete, material spatial forms that can be directly mapped and empirically measured.

2. Secondspace (Conceived Space): Conceptualized representations of space created by urban planners, cartographers, and political institutions the realm of maps, boundaries, and state ideology.

3. Thirdspace (Lived Space): The complex overlay of real and imagined practices, where subaltern groups navigate, resist, and redefine the dominant spatial order (Soja 6-10).

Applying Soja's model to Partition, the Radcliffe Line and the newly created nations of India and Pakistan represent ‘Secondspace’ an abstract, politically conceived geometry imposed upon the subcontinent from above. Conversely, Mano Majra represents a Thirdspace, a lived social geography where villagers historically prioritized localized agrarian co-existence over abstract national affiliations. The conflict in *Train to Pakistan* is thus fundamentally spatial: it is the violent collision between the state's Conceived Space (Secondspace) and the villagers' Lived Space (Thirdspace).

The Spatial Architecture of Mano Majra: Heterotopic Coexistence

The opening pages of *Train to Pakistan* meticulously map Mano Majra not as a generic village, but as a tightly woven spatial ecosystem. Singh introduces the village through its physical and architectural parameters, establishing its heterotopic nature through its spatial layout: “Mano Majra is a tiny village. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and the mosque. The rest of the village a cluster of fourscore mud huts is divided into two halves by a narrow lane which runs down its middle. One half is shown as the Sikh quarter, the other as the Muslim quarter.” (Singh 1)

At first glance, this description might suggest a divided, segregated community. However, a deeper spatial analysis reveals that these physical divisions are permeable and relational rather than absolute. The three brick structures, representing financial capital (Ram Lal), Sikh spiritual life (the Gurdwara managed by Meet Singh), and Islamic worship (the Mosque managed by Imam Baksh) do not exist in isolation; they anchor a shared communal sphere.

Unlike urban centers where religious neighborhoods functioned as insular enclaves, the central “narrow lane” in Mano Majra acts as a conduit for continuous daily interaction rather than a boundary of exclusion. The physical proximity of the Gurdwara and the Mosque creates an acoustic and spatial overlap. When Bhai Meet Singh recites the Gurbani and Imam Baksh calls the Azaan, their voices blend in the village sky, creating a shared auditory landscape. As Singh writes, the villagers “do not know that the British have decided to quit India...

To them, India is the whole world, and Mano Majra is its heart" (Singh 2).

Furthermore, this spatial harmony is reinforced by the presence of local syncretic structures. Outside the formal religious buildings stands the 'deo', a local sandstone rock worshipped collectively by both Sikhs and Muslims during times of drought or disease (Singh 2). The deo represents a spatial manifestation of Thirdspace, localized, non-doctrinal sacred site that bypasses orthodox religious boundaries. In this heterotopic space, identity is relational and localized; a person is a Mano Majri first, and a Sikh or Muslim second.

This localized spatial harmony stands in sharp contrast to the external state apparatus represented by the Officers' Rest House and Magistrate Hukum Chand's bungalow. Situated at the periphery of the village, the rest house represents the detached, panoptic gaze of Secondspace, the bureaucratic authority of the British Raj and the incoming postcolonial state (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200). Hukum Chand does not inhabit the lived space of the village; he observes it from a distance, using spatial isolation to maintain administrative detachment. The spatial distance between the rest house and the village proper mirrors the ideological divide between abstract state policy and lived rural reality.

Heterochronies: Railway Rhythms vs. National Clock Time

Foucault asserts that heterotopias are frequently linked to "heterochronies", breaks in traditional time that allow alternative spatial orders to function (Foucault 26). In Mano Majra, this temporal break is produced by the complex relationship between the village and the North-Western Railway line that runs adjacent to it.

Prior to the outbreak of Partition violence, time in Mano Majra, is not measured by mechanical clocks, standard civil time, or political calendars. Instead, it is regulated entirely by the arrival, departure, and passage of trains across the nearby railway bridge over the Sutlej:

"Mano Majra has always been known for its railway station... Before daybreak, the mail train rushes past on its way to Lahore. When the whistle blows, Bhai Meet Singh gets up... Imam Baksh knows it is time to call the faithful to prayer... When the 10:30 a.m. express goes by, the whole village comes alive... As the goods train goes by, the villagers drop off to sleep." (Singh 4-5)

This dependence on train schedules represents a localized heterochrony. The train, typically an icon of industrial modernity, colonial expansion, and precise mechanical time, is re-appropriated by the villagers of Mano Majra and converted into a pastoral clock. The

technology of the state (Secondspace) is domesticated into the rhythms of rural life (Thirdspace). The train does not divide the village; it structures its collective, cross-communal daily routines. The sound of the train engine acts as a communal pulse, unifying Sikhs and Muslims in a shared, predictable temporal sequence.

However, as Partition deepens, this temporal balance is violently disrupted. The state's political disruption manifests first as a temporal anomaly. The regular passenger and express trains cease to run on schedule, replaced by erratic schedules and heavy, unnatural silences: "The trains registered the change... The express trains did not stop. They sped past Mano Majra with their blinds down... Then the schedule was completely shattered" (Singh 78).

The collapse of train schedules marks the dissolution of Mano Majra's temporal heterotopia. When time is no longer regulated by the predictable passing of trains, the social cohesion of the village begins to fray. The domestic temporal rhythm is replaced by an eerie, anxious uncertainty, preparing the physical site for the intrusion of external political violence.

The Violent Invasion: The "Ghost Train" and the Ingress of State Binary

The critical turning point in *Train to Pakistan* occurs when the external violence of Partition physically invades Mano Majra via the railway tracks. This invasion is embodied by the arrival of the "ghost train" from Pakistan a train that arrives out of schedule, under the cover of dark, carrying no living passengers, but filled entirely with the corpses of slaughtered Hindus and Sikhs (Singh 82).

Spatially, the ghost train represents the violent injection of Secondspace, the lethal, sectarian reality of the newly birthed nation-states, into the heterotopic space of Mano Majra. The railway track, which previously integrated the village with its surrounding environment, is transformed into a vector of death.

The state's handling of the ghost train further highlights its spatial violence. Magistrate Hukum Chand and the military authorities do not allow the villagers to view or process the tragedy through local customs. Instead, they requisition the village's bulldozers, fuel, and space to conduct a secretive, mass burial and cremation near the tracks (Singh 88). The smell of burning flesh and rotting corpses physically saturates the air of Mano Majra, violating the village's sensory boundaries:

"The breeze was blowing from the river towards the village. It brought a smell which was not unfamiliar, but which no one had ever smelled in Mano Majra... a stench of burning human flesh. The wind carried it everywhere. It went into

the huts; it hovered over the narrow lanes; it settled in the Gurdwara and the Mosque.” (Singh 89)

This sensory invasion breaks the heterotopia. The stench of mass death strips the Gurdwara and Mosque of their localized sanctity, replacing shared communal trust with pervasive paranoia. The arrival of the ghost train forces the villagers to view themselves through the external, binary categories of the state. The Sikh villagers are exposed to the visual proof of Muslim-led atrocities across the border, while the local Muslims are suddenly transformed from neighbors (Mano Majris) into potential internal enemies or future victims.

The spatial rupture reaches its zenith with the forced evacuation of Mano Majra's Muslim population to the Chundunnugger refugee camp. The physical expulsion of Muslims from their ancestral “mud huts” destroys the relational geography of the village. As Imam Baksh prepares to leave, he asks Bhai Meet Singh, “What have we to do with Pakistan? We were born here. Our ancestors lived here” (Singh 131). Meet Singh's tragic reply “It is the government's orders” underlines the absolute victory of state ‘Conceived Space’ over local ‘Lived Space’. Once the Muslim quarter is emptied, it is immediately looted by neighboring agitators and displaced Sikh refugees, completing the conversion of a harmonious heterotopia into a fractured, crisis-ridden space of exclusion.

Fluid Boundaries vs. Fixed Borders: The River Sutlej

Alongside the railway line, the River Sutlej serves as a critical spatial motif in *Train to Pakistan*. In geographical theory, rivers are naturally dynamic, fluid features that resist absolute categorization; they overflow banks, change courses, and nourish surrounding ecosystems. Historically, the Sutlej functioned as a source of sustenance and a fluid borderland for the inhabitants of the Punjab plains.

In the novel, however, the Sutlej is subjected to the same violent redefinition as the village itself. As the monsoon rains hit, the river swells, threatening to flood the village. Simultaneously, the river becomes a floating graveyard, carrying the mutilated corpses of Partition victims down from the northern regions:

“The Sutlej was rising... The water was muddy brown, with thick foam floating on the surface. Floating on the foam were logs of wood, dead cattle, and human bodies... They were bloated, their skin turned white from long immersion. Some were headless; others had their limbs hacked off.” (Singh 142-143)

The fluid river is thus weaponized into a physical carrier of political terror. The boundary between land and water, life and death, becomes blurred. The river no longer

acts as a natural element connecting communities along its banks; it becomes an active border enforcement mechanism, physically displaying the price of national separation.

The physical bridge spanning the Sutlej becomes the climax's contested spatial node. The bridge is a human construct designed to span fluid boundaries—to link one side of the river to the other. Yet, in the novel's final chapters, an outside gang of militant Sikh agitators transforms the bridge into an execution site. They tie a rope across the top framework of the bridge, calculated to sweep off and decapitate Muslim refugees riding atop the upcoming train to Pakistan (Singh 168).

The bridge a space intended for passage and connection is repurposed into a trap of sectarian containment.

Subaltern Ethics and Spatial Reclamation: The Sacrifice of Juggut Singh

In the final section of the novel, Khushwant Singh poses a fundamental question: When the state (represented by the cowardly, paralyzed Hukum Chand and his corrupt police force) and organized religion (represented by the radical agitators) conspire to commit spatial massacre, where can moral agency reside?

The answer is provided through the character of Juggut Singh (“Jugga”), a local, illiterate Sikh dacoit (outlaw). Jugga's position within Mano Majra's spatial hierarchy is distinctly subaltern. He is an outcast, routinely arrested by the state police, placed under spatial curfews, and viewed with suspicion by the respectable villagers (Singh 10). Yet, it is precisely Jugga's location outside the state apparatus and orthodox religious institutions that allows him to exercise genuine ethical responsibility.

Jugga's motivation is intensely personal and localized, rather than abstractly political: he is in love with Nooran, the daughter of the village Muslim weaver, Imam Baksh, who is currently aboard the targeted train to Pakistan. Upon learning of the plot to slaughter the train's passengers at the railway bridge, Jugga climbs into the steel structure of the bridge in total darkness:

“He brought out a small tough knife from his waist... He began to slash at the rope. The strand parted... The engine was almost on him. He kept slashing away at the rope... The man dropped his knife and began to tear at the rope with his teeth. The train was only a few yards away... A volley of shots rang out. The man fell off the rope, but he had cut it through. The rope snapped. The train went over him into Pakistan.” (Singh 180-181)

From a spatial perspective, Jugga's heroic self-sacrifice represents a reclamation of Thirdspace. By placing his own body directly on the physical structure of the

bridge, interposing himself between the lethal rope and the moving train, Jugga neutralizes the trap set by the agitators. Jugga uses his knife and teeth to sever the rope of sectarian violence, dying under the wheels of the train so that the train, and the refugees within it, may cross safely into Pakistan. In doing so, he temporarily restores the original function of the bridge as a space of passage and sanctuary. His action is not an act of state heroism or religious martyrdom; it is a localized, subaltern intervention driven by love and ethical responsibility to the other. Jugga reclaims Mano Majra's lost heterotopic ethos at the cost of his own life.

CONCLUSION

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* offers a critique of the spatial violence that accompanied the 1947 Partition of India. Through the spatial evolution of Mano Majra, Singh demonstrates how abstract political boundaries drafted at national levels (Secondspace) violently dismantle localized, lived spaces of cross-communal co-existence (Thirdspace).

Initially operating as a heterotopia, Mano Majra maintains a delicate equilibrium characterized by permeable religious architecture, shared daily rhythms tied to the railway line, and a localized identity that resists external sectarian categories. However, the arrival of the "ghost train" and the flooding of the Sutlej with corpses signify the violent invasion of state space, converting the heterotopia into a site of crisis, displacement, and mass death.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that state machinery, institutional law, and formal politics are fundamentally incapable of preventing spatial violence during times of ideological madness. By placing the narrative's ultimate act of moral redemption in the hands of Juggut Singh, a marginalized, subaltern outlaw, Singh locates true humanistic ethics not within abstract nationalisms or state cartographies, but in localized, embodied acts of sacrifice that reclaim space for the vulnerable. Mano Majra stands as a literary testament to the fragile beauty of heterotopic borderlands and the catastrophic cost of their erasure.

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