CHAPTER – 2

KHUSHWANT SINGH’S TRAIN TO PAKISTAN

AND IT’S FILM VERSION

*Train to Pakistan*, an early novel on Partition is full of grey shade of smoke and ashes following red of blood and orange of fire. Khushwant Singh, the author has attempted to recreate the Partition storm that trembled every tiny village on the Indo-Pak border. The aspiring film-maker Pamela Rooks brought it on the screen amidst many problems.

2.1 Khushwant Singh

Born in 1915, in a small village of West Punjab, now in Pakistan, Khushwant Singh had his primary and higher education at extremely different places - Lahore, Delhi and London. He practiced law at Lahore High Court for a few years before joining the Indian Ministry of External affairs in 1947. He thereafter began a distinguished career as a journalist with All India Radio in 1951 starting his journey with ‘Pen and Paper’. He then attached himself to *Yojana, The Illustrated Weekly, The National Herald* and *The Hindustan Times*. He can be placed in the category of India’s top-level columnists and journalists to-date.

This multi-faceted personality was also a Member of Parliament in 1980 for one term. He was awarded ‘Padma Bhushan’ by the Government of India in 1973, but he returned the award in 1984 in protest of Golden Temple’s operation – ‘The Blue Star’
Although acclaimed as a successful writer, Singh initially had no intention to be a literary figure.


Singh’s debut publication *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* is said to have stories based on self experiences or those related to his friends. Whereas his first novel, *Train to Pakistan*, a tragic depiction of individuals and communities caught in the clutches of Partition of Indian Sub-continent, has realism as its ruling characteristic. This first major novel by Singh is the portrayal of the ghastly and sordid incidents arising out of the communal feelings disturbed by the partition of India.

His second novel *I shall Not Hear the Nightangle* is a remarkable presentation of life, tradition, culture and society of Sikhs in the pre-independence days of India. It portrays Indian family affairs, and common folk of India, contemporary youth’s temperament, Indian officers serving the British and one’s moral inclination towards nationalism.
The contents of his historical works, namely, *Ranjeet Singh* and *History of the Sikhs* concentrate on a central concept relating to the origin and the growth of Sikh religion in India and also the rise and fall of the Sikh power in Punjab.

Khushwant Singh’s third novel *Delhi* is a remarkable bring together of history of India, romance and sex. It contains the picture of history starting from Mughal period and ending to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Singh has given a blood-boiling description of Delhi’s 1984 riots which killed and wounded Sikhs in a large number.

His next endeavour *The Company of Women* gives an account of innumerable sexual encounter of its protagonist. It conveys a message to its readers to keep one’s self away from unsafe and unrestricted sexual encounters with unknown partners as it may open the doors to AIDS, a deadly disease. It has been criticised as neither erotic nor funny, but rather a sad novel.

Drawing a hair line difference between obscurity, pornography and erotica, Singh’s *Women, Love and Lust* is a non-fictional work. It gives a fine expression related to celibacy, chastity and arranged marriages. His *Sights and Sounds of the World* is on the hand, a collection of articles on places, people and nature. It is an artistic compilation of the informations and events gathered while tours and travels.

As a writer Singh has been influenced by three different kinds of atmospheres, rural locale of Punjab where he spent his childhood; Delhi and Lahore where he pursued his school education and started earning his bread; and Britain where he had his higher education. He writes about this as,
“My roots are in the dunghill of a tiny Indian village… I grew up in the Indo-Anglian atmosphere of New Delhi… I am the product of both East and the West…I am, if I may coin the word, an Orient-Occidental”. (Singh P.K. 2005: 25)

All the three atmospheres, altogether, dominate Singh’s personality and his writings. Undoubtedly one can point out that most of his works are rooted in and branched around Indian social life, religions and cultures. His characters are the best example of his creative talent. They are mostly from the common group of the society.

2.2 Train to Pakistan

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* – originally published as *Mano Majra*, a masterpiece containing perfect narrative sequences, artistically planned plot and characters full of life can be coined as the first major Indian English novel on Partition. As V.A. Shahne states,

“It is a grim story of individuals and communities caught into the vortex of the partition of undivided India into two states in 1947” (1994: 332)

The novel can be divided into four parts viz. (i) Dacoity, (ii) Kaliyug, (iii) Mano Majra, and (iv) Karma. These sub-titles are characteristically Indian.

The story is set in a small village, Mano Majro, of Punjab province on the Indo-Pak border in 1947, where the action and interaction of the characters and events of the novel take place. When the Indian sub-continent was passing through the most turbulent period of its history, the Partition accompanied with migration, civil war
communal riots, mass killings, women raped and abducted, children mutilated and property destroyed, the tiny village Mano Majra seems to be away from the communal problems and fratricidal conflict. Sikhs and Muslims, equal in number, live like brothers at Mano Majra. The simple and innocent people dwelling here are still unaware of the things happening outside their village.

The train, later the symbol of death and disaster; in the beginning is the symbol of life and action. The life of Mano Majra is regulated by the incoming and outgoing trains.

“Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore… blows two long blasts of the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake… By the time the 10:30 morning passenger train from Delhi comes in, life in Mano Majra has settled down to its dull daily routine… As the midday express goes by, Mano Majra stops to rest… When the evening passenger from Lahore comes in, everyone gets to work again… When the goods train steams in, they say to each other,” There is the goods train”. It is like saying goodnight.” (Singh 1994:12-14)

However, the peaceful life of Mano Majra people is rippled by Mali and his friends, the dacoits, and their routine choirs are churned into bits by an untimely arrival of a train from Pakistan.

Mali, a dacoit, with his gang murders a money lender – Lala Ramlal, who refuses to part with his treasury. After committing the crime and before leaving the village, these dacoits throw a few bangles in the house of Jugga, Jaggat Singh. He is a
local dacoit, who had served several sentences in the past and was ordered by the local police not to leave his house after sunset. But at the time of Lala Ramlal’s murder he was with Nooran, the Muslim weaver’s daughter, in the outskirts of Mano Majra. When Nooran and Jugga return to the village, they find people disturbed due to the dacoit and murder.

Hukumchand, the recently transferred divisional commissioner, is staying in the officer’s rest house. He is engaged that night in a sensual and sexual affair with a teen aged prostitute Haseena. Soon, disturbed by the gunshots and chaos, he leaves the girl and goes to enquire about the happenings. The police come to Mano Majra the next day to collect the details of the happening.

The same day, an educated man Iqbal, who calls himself a socialist, comes to Mano Majra by a train and settles at the Gurudwara. He has been sent there for the political enlightenment of the people. Iqbal, not for once also, reveals his religion.

Both Jugga and Iqbal are held by police on the charge of murdering Lala Ramlal. Hukumchand orders serve action to get the truth out from both of them.

On the other hand, a little disturbed Mano Majra gets the major attack very soon. The peaceful atmosphere of the village soon sees its end.

“…1947 was not like other times. Suspicion and violence filled the air and an ill wind carried them even to little oasis of communal harmony like Mano Majra.” (Iyenger, 1973: 498)
Being on the border, Mano Majra was a highly sensitive spot, however, it had maintained a peaceful silence. This silence is suddenly disturbed by the arrival and unscheduled halt of a train from Pakistan – a ghost train.

“One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station. At first glance, it had the look of the trains in the days of peace. No one sat on the roof. No one clung between the bogies. No one was balanced on the foot boards. But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It has a ghostly quality… The arrival of the ghost train in broad day light created a commotion in Mano Majra. People stood on their roof to see what was happening at the station” (78)

The ghost train is full of dead bodies with not a single person alive in it. This one event pushed in the silently awaiting partition chaos and pollutes the peaceful life of the innocent people. The magistrate, alarmed at the sight of train load of corpses, is frightened by its violence and its magnitude. He loses courage. As K.K. Sharma and B.K. Johri aptly remarks:

“The entire picture is, indeed, very terrible. It unfolds the horrible drama of communal violence – the sinking of human values in the mire of communal frenzy.” (1984: 72)

The events start moving fast. Dark clouds of fear and distrust start hovering over the Muslims and Sikhs of the village. Brotherhood and unity start giving space to apprehensions and hatred. Muslims evacuate their houses and leave for Chandannagar camp for shelter and to be transported to Pakistan soon later.
The arrival of Sikhs from outside and the news of beastly atrocities on them and their brothers in Pakistan bring the attitude of the people to crisis. The Sikh and Hindu fanatics decide to take revenge upon Muslim for what they had done to Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. They plan to blow up the train that was to carry Muslim refugees to Pakistan. Both Nooran with Jugga’s child in her womb and Haseena are to go to Pakistan by the same train.

Hukumchand experiences helplessness about the nearby ghastly future. He takes a chance by releasing Jugga and Iqbal. He feels that either of the two would be able to save the train. But Iqbal, like Hukumchand feels helpless and withdraws.

Jugga comes to know about Nooran and the plan to blow the train. Nooran was also travelling by the same train. He determines to save her. He goes to the bridge and slashes the rope connecting the explosive material with his ‘Kirpan’ and lets the train cross the border safely. The intention was just one: to save Norran’s life. In the process, he is shot by the Sikh fanatics. Jugga falls on the railway track and the train to Pakistan runs past his body carrying other people along with Nooran safely to their destined station.

According to Khushwant Singh Train to Pakistan is “… a documentary novel of the partition, on extremely tragic event which hurt me”. (Shahne, 1977: 352)

The novel presents the Indian perception of the greatest tragedy of the century, of course without any religious bias. Though not a sufferer of the riots, Khushwant Singh was aware of the miseries experienced by others. He did not have any animosity against the Muslims or Pakistan. This novel is an attempt to express that point of view.
As a writer, Khushwant Singh is a master craftsman. He has used lively portrayal of characters and realistic presentation of communal agitation in *Train to Pakistan*. According to Iyenger, this has made the novel one of the most satisfying ‘Imaginative records’ of Partition.

V. A. Shahne writes very specifically about Singh’s art and technique:

“Khushwant Singh’s art and technique of fiction show several notable features: his use of rhythm, especially of the train, his sensitive depiction of atmosphere…his excellent portrayal of characters, ‘round’ rather than ‘flat’, the exploration of their human context; his natural and almost effortless presentation of point of view through situation and character designed to convey the final significance of the novel” (1977: 350)

The three main characters namely Hukumchand, Iqbal and Jugga reflect three different thinking’s, three different societies. Hukumchand, a magistrate and Deputy Commissioner of the District is a person with two extremely opposite characteristics. He is an experienced and balanced bureaucrat, who maintains his administrative and bureaucratic perspective even amidst the most horrible news of bloodshed and mass murders. At the same time with Haseena, a teenaged prostitute, he is a sensual man found of liquor, music and girls to entertain his own self. But the corpses in the ghost train shook him. He was upset, both physically and mentally. In the end, he drowns himself in liquor when he gets the news of the plot of Sikhs against the train taking Muslim refugees to Pakistan. With Hukumchand’s helplessness, Singh has tried to show the helplessness of the whole class – the bureaucratic class. Hukumchand, a
Jugga and Iqbal, who may according to him, bring out some way.

Iqbal is an outsider. He is a city dweller, enjoys being called babu and seems to be influenced by the Western Culture. He has come to Mano Majra as it was exactly on the Indo-Pak border, ‘a vital point for refugee movements’. He seems to have put on the garb of socialism. According to him he has come to this place with a purpose to stop disaster and thus to make sacrifice. He has dismounted the train at Mano Majra railway station with a mission to save the village from communalism. But he proves his character otherwise. It is his sarcasm and nihilistic approach that makes the reader realize that he is more a politician than a socialist. Towards the conclusion when he was informed that the train heading for Pakistan with Muslim refugees would be attacked by fanatic Sikhs, for a moment, he thought of a brave self sacrifice. But at the second thought this sacrifice seemed meaningless if there was no one to witness and appreciate his brave act. Very soon he slips out of this world drowned in the dreams of bravery and applauds.

Jugga, a well-built strong young man is emotional and sentimental. It is through this character that Singh takes his readers to the focal point of the novel: the triumph of love, humanism and goodness of men at the time of real crisis and challenge. A Sikh by birth, Jugga is madly in love with Nooran – a Muslim girl. He is sent behind the bars in relation to the murder of Lala Ramlal, the money lender. Iyenger calls him a ‘self confessed budmash’. After his release, as like Iqbal, he too is informed of the plan to attack the train heading for Pakistan. One more information he gets from his mother is that Nooran, with his child in her womb, too was supposed to board the same train. Jugga decides to prevent the attack, even at the risk of his life. He reaches the bridge where the Sikh fanatics have tied a rope across the first span of
the bridge to finish off the Muslim passengers sitting on the roof of the train. Up the poll, Jugga starts to slash the rope. Though shot twice, he finally cuts the rope and falls on the track. “The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan” (207.) V. Pala Prasad Rao says that the passion of one man, saved hundreds of innocent people. He calls Jugga, a man of action who is neither lost amongst ideologies nor in the complicated thinking process. Rao further says:

“At a time when the bureaucracy, the intelligentsia, the men of religion and the political leadership failed to act, Jugga proved his mettle.” (2004: 40)

Apart to these three anti-heroes, characters like Sikh sub-inspector, Meet Singh, Mali, Nooran, Haseena and others enliven the text to a great level.

Khushwant Singh’s art of transforming of actual into symbols and images is par excellence. Of many other symbols like rainless summer, scorching sun, swelling river, geckos and moths, the train is the most powerful symbol. The life at Mano Majra was guided by the trains all twenty four hours. It regulated the twenty four hours activity of Mano Majra people. Singh gives a melodious harmony of the passing, halting and whistling of train with the daily choirs of people at Mano Majra. This same harmony is shown shattered with the arrival of the ghost train. The trains that wake people in the morning and lull them to sleep become a carrier of death, disaster and parting. It sows the seeds of suspect and distrust. It is the train that brings Iqbal to Mano Majra but takes Haseena and Nooran away from their darlings. One train from Pakistan brings thousands of dead bodies. One Train to Pakistan runs ahead safely over the body of a true lover.
The train rules the novels. When it whistled, it dictated, when it did not, it brought fear, when it moved, it regulated life, and when it halted with silence at odd times, it turned a heap of corpses. The train, in the novel, becomes a symbol of disaster, displacement, rootlessness and also death.

Unlike other novels, *Train to Pakistan* shows quite an iconic religious harmony, even amongst the religious leaders of the village. Meet Sinh the religious head of Sikhs and Imam Baksh of Muslim called each other ‘Bhai’ and ‘Chacha’ with honour and respected each other’s religion ‘to make the first call’. No grievances related to religion were visible. Bhai Meet Sinh explains this harmony to Iqbal in very simple and straightforward manner:

“…Here next door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah”. (49)

Mano Majra represents thousands of such villages and hamlets passing a harmonious life untouched, unaware of the greatest tragedy their subcontinent was passing through.

Khushwant Singh very soon shifts this trust and harmony to doubt and fear. With the murder of Lala Ramlal and intervene of Police, fear and communal overtones start getting space widening the crater in the harmony. Next, the ghost train changes the scenario.

“One morning, a train from Pakistan halted at Mano Majra railway station...But somehow it was different. There was something uneasy about it. It had a ghostly quality.” (93)
The innocent people thereafter start becoming the victims of the monstrous tragedy, Partition. It compels the villagers to distinguish between the friend and the foe.

“Quiet suddenly every Sikh in Mano Majra becomes a stranger with an evil intent…” (141)

“Never trust a Mussalman…” the last Guru had warned them that the Muslims had no loyalties’” (141)

Along with the ghost train from Pakistan, also the Sikh Hindu refugees from Pakistan and the outsiders who were possessed with anger and revenge added to the communal rage and agony. Khushwant Singh, instead of brutal cruelties of Mano Majra, unfolds the dark shades of genocide, bloodshed, rape, abduction and violence with these two: the train and the outsiders. The train shows the result and the outsiders narrate the happenings.

*Train to Pakistan*, though a Partition novel, talks mostly of Partition effects. The readers receive the pioneer stroke of Partition effects in the very first page of the novel:

“The summer before, communal riots precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, had broken out in Calcutta, and within a few Months the death roll had mounted to several thousand. Muslims said the Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to blame. The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and
stabled and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped” (1)

Khushwant Singh himself was not a sufferer of the communal riots, but was aware of the miseries experienced by others. As a writer he seems to be well aware of the difference between any tragedy happening and a tragedy later narrated. May be for this he does not let his reader read of any slaughter happening. He instead of it tells of people slaughtered, shot, killed. Not one, two, ten, hundred…but thousands of them and that too together. He tells of corpses in the train:

“There were woman and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror, their months still open as if their shrieks had inst then become voice less… looking in terror at the empty windows through which must have come shots, spears and spikes”. (102)

In the flooded river:

“The river had risen further. Its turbid water carried carts with the bloated carcases of bulls still yoked to them…. There were also men and women with their clothes clinging to their bodies; little children sleeping on their bellies with their arms clutching the water and their tiny buttocks dipping in and out”. (164)

Singh has used the flooded river to show the overflowing cruel violence during Partition – swollen, flooded, as if never to end.

His minor characters try to convince their own selves fruitlessly:
“Some villages must have been flooded at night”, said the lambardar gravely. “Who yokes bulls to carts at night?” asked one of his companions.

“Lambardara, they were not drowned. They were murdered” (164-165)

Contrary to this, Singh also does not miss the fire ignited in the innocent villagers by the ‘city-bred militant youths’.

“For each Hindu or Sikh they kill, kill two Mussalmans.
For each woman they abduct or rope, abduct two” (171)

Thus Singh avoids the action of killing, shooting or stabbing after the murder of Lala Ramlal till Jugga gets shot. Instead he tells of preparation and results, before and after, and lets the reader imagine the horror.

According to I. A. Richards, as quoted by P. K. Singh, *Train to Pakistan* is a realistic novel and is almost a unit of ‘vast store house of creatively expressed values’ (2005: 34). When asked in what way the novel is different from the other Indian writing, Singh replied:

“Perhaps it was the first novel on the partition theme and totally unbiased”. (Rao, 2004: 41)

D. R. More considers the last action of the novel where Jugga stripes the thick cord, falls down letting the train move to Pakistan a romantic reliever in the plot amidst powerful emotional outburst of communal hatred and anger. On this scene’s background, M.K. Naik, as quoted by More, says in his essay ‘The Political Novel in Indian writing in English’:
“Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* is a copy book example. The story befits any popular film.” (2004:93)

### 2.3 Pamela Rooks

The novelist uses words as the medium of expression and a film-maker uses visuals as the medium of expression. Film is thus seen and heard by its audience. Apart to this there are visible differences of form and style between a novel and a film. But in the words of Somdatta Mandal, in spite of all the differences,

“…it is a well accepted fact that right from the birth of this new art form in the twentieth country, film-makers had to turn to literature, and especially novels, to go on supplying them with the essential ingredient upon which their narration if based, namely the story. (2005: 45)

For a film-maker, adaptation is not conversion but an artistic reconstruction of the original. This is what one experiences in Pamela Rooks filmic adaptation of Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*.

Pamela Rooks, born at Calcutta in 1958, was previously recognized as Pamela Juneja. In a short life period of fifty years, she could snatch away the National award for the best first film of the Director for ‘*Miss Beatty’s Children*’. It is an adaptation of her self written novel. A British national thereafter, she took in hands documentaries related to rural Punjab on Indo-Pak Borders. Apart from *Miss Beatty’s Children* (1992) and *Train to Pakistan* (1998) she gave one more film in 2004, *Dance*
like Man. This can be considered her last work before she met a fatal car accident and slipped into coma for many months. Rooks left the world in 2007.

Interestingly, as per Wikipedia, Rooks was offered the role of Nooran, in the prospective Ismail Merchant film *Train to Pakistan* when she was 17 years old. But the project never took off. The novel stayed with her. Rooks had not experienced the trauma of Partition. But she had heard the stories of it from her parents. She decided to make a film on it herself. Initially, the publisher of the book, Dayal, was not ready to give the rights of film making to Rooks, a new film maker. However later with the intervention of Ravi Gupta, the Managing Director of NFDC, he changed his mind.

### 2.4 The film *Train to Pakistan*

The film *Train to Pakistan* came on screen passing through many pangs and aches, nearly after five decades of the trauma, and four decades after the novel was written. Not that anyone had not thought of bringing it on screen. Known film personalities like Shashi Kapoor, Shabana Azami were approached for it. But owing to one or the other reason or the sensitivity of the subject, the pages did not come on the screen till 1998. Finally it made its way by the silver screen with the following crew:

- Film: *Train to Pakistan* (1998)
- Director: Pamela Rooks
- Screen Play: Pamela Rooks, assisted by Khushwant Singh
- Music: Piyush Kanojia, Taufiq Qureshi, Kuldeep Singh
- Lyrics: Baba Buleshah, Kabir, Amrita Pritam
The shooting of the film started about fifty years after the actual tragedy. It became difficult for the production team to find a village of Punjab having Muslim tradition pockets. Finally, a couple of villages of rural Punjab were selected to show both Sikh and Muslim cultured pockets and thus give a look of Mano Majra, a 1947 village on the Indo-Pak border. The film’s premiere on 15th August, 1997 was halted by Indian Censor Board. In an interview to Archna Jagirdar, Rooks said:

“They wanted 38 cuts. We were agreeable to six audio changes but not the visual changes. Our stand has been vindicated by the tribunal.” (n.pag.)

Finally the movie was telecast in 1998 on Star Plus, a television channel. The film was also released in United Kingdom, United State and Sri Lanka and it snatched away appreciations in International Film Festivals at places like Denmark, Beirut, Germany, Hong Kong and Zanzibar. The film could acclaim critics appreciation.

Singh’s novel was thematically quite strong and appealing and to adapt it on a silver screen was a challenging task. And Rooks was not an exception. Neither has Rooks excluded much from the novel, nor has she included anything from any other
sources. But she has introduced a few alternatives in the characters belonging to the original work.

Rooks, in the screen adaptation has presented/shown Hukumchand, the District Magistrate and Deputy Commissioner reminisce the past of Mano Majra.

Unlike its counterpart in print the film begins with neither the train, nor Jugga. Instead it begins with Hukumchand heading towards Mano Majra to take the charge as a Divisional Commissioner. In his huge office car, the ageing Hukumchand recollects his past experience at Mano Majra. It is here that he narrates the family background of Jugga. Jugga’s father was a dacoit. He was hanged to death when Jugga was still a child. Jugga as a child is shown witnessing his father’s death sentence. Must this have affected child Jugga’s psyche to follow his father’s footstep! The novel does give details about Jugga’s father but not of the child Jugga watching his father’s death.

Rooks has tried to build Jugga’s character played by Nirmal Pandey in the first ten minutes of the film itself. Hukumchand, reminiscing the past and the present of Jugga, also tells the audience about his combat with Mali, a rival dacoit. The two had on open battle before a few years. Jugga was injured and also imprisoned. The book says that Jugga was not permitted to leave the village after sunset. But he breaks the law and goes to meet Nooran, his Muslim beloved in the field. But Rooks’ Jugga goes to meet Nooran at her place. He is shown sneaking into her house from the terrace. They try to get intimate. Nirmal Pandey as Jugga, the brawny Sikh dacoit seems to be over shadowed by his role of dacoit in the ‘Bandit Queen’. Rooks’ Jugga’s sensual love for Nooran differs a little from Singh’s Jugga. Rooks’ Jugga hints towards an unexpected end while talking to Iqbal in the prison. When imprisoned as a suspect for
Lala Ramlal’s murder. Iqbal and Jugga are making fun and talking of woman and womanizing, Iqbal tells Jugga:

“When you get married and you find your wife a match for you, you’ll be holding your ears and saying ‘toba toba’.

(127)

To this Jugga of the movie replies emotionally:

“Hope it would rain this year!” (Translation-mine)

This statement gives Jugga a different stroke of colour. Rooks’ Jugga starts showing his true love, far before Singh’s Jugga does.

When Jugga goes to see Nooran played by Smriti Mishra, at her place, the two indulge in physical love making. Nooran’s father Imam Baksh hears the commotion. But he is blind and unaware of the happenings. He is shown so very simple and gullible by the director that his daughter could easily convince him of nothing around. Unlike the novel the two are also shown meeting in the fields during the daytime. Singh’s Nooran is a growing up teenaged daughter of Imam Baksh. She fears her father who is blind but a respected person in Mano Majra. She likes to surrender in Jugga’s demanding arms. Rook’s Nooran, too, is a young daughter of the blind but respected Imam Baksh. But she is a much more mature person. The way she enjoys Jugga’s company in her own house in the room next to her blind helpless father’s room, takes the character far away from Singh’s Nooran. In a small conservative village of 1947, such a shift in the attitude of a young rural village girl is not palatable. Smriti Mishra unlike her counterpart in the novel is not a submissive beloved but a demanding partner.
Rooks’ Hukumchand, the ageing pot belly magistrate played by Mohan Agashe fits Singh’s description of sensual Hukumchand quite well. Though the novel does not provide Hukumchand’s detailed physical description, the character shown on the screen mirrors the novelist’s imagination to a great extent. His relation with the girl prostitute Haseena (played by Divya Dutta) renders the character a complexity. In the very first scene of the film Hukumchand enters as a perfect experienced bureaucrat, but very soon becomes a person full of complexity and questions for both, his junior staff and also his audience. The director takes her Hukumchand to a height step by step. First he establishes himself as an administrator, then a sensual person and finally a helpless man. He shows his inner broken personality when he tries to drown himself first in Haseena’s innocence and then in liquor amidst the chaos of partition and riots.

Rooks’ imagination in casting minor characters seems perfect. ‘Garam Hawa’ fame M. S. Sathya, playing Nooran’s blind father, ‘Shantranj Ke Khiladi’ fame Suresh Jindal as Granthi at the Gurudwara and the costume designer Paritosh Sand as Mali match a lot to their originals in the novel. Both Imam Baksh and Granthi, in the novel, represent communal harmony, fraternity and innocence. In the film too they become the symbol of innocent fraternity. They are shown taking each other’s advice in any and all the types of crisis. Same can be said about Haseena’s character played by Divya Dutta, except her dubbed child like voice which does not add to her innocence.

Three scenes in the film are enough to prove the film Train to Pakistan equally good a tale of murder and arson like its source text. Of this the first is the ‘ghost train’. One late evening, the military officials approach Hukumchand informing him of railway station to be sealed. They also ask of wood and fuel.
Hukumchand’s facial expression reflects the terror. He understands the matter. At an ominous moment, a train arrives and halts at the station early in the morning. The disturbed look on blind Imam Baksh’s face is similar to previous evening Hukumchand’s facial expressions. When the train halts at the railway station, the engine driver is the only person who gets off. He silently gives a weary and a helpless look to the stationmaster. There is no sound. When Hukumchand the Magistrate arrives at the railway station, the police inspector receives him. There is no verbal exchange. The silence gets heavier every moment, when Hukumchand boards the train with the police inspector for an inspection; a sound of buzzing flies is heard. It conveys the stench of death before the camera moves in the compartment. The officials gaze over the compartment and so does the viewer see piles of dead bodies. Men, women and children, all butchered. Till this moment, the horror was reflected only in various eyes – Hukumchand, Imam Baksh, Engine driver etc.

The director has not allowed the villagers too to see the corpses. They only see the smoke, get the pungent odor and guess the happening. One more train comes to Mano Majra railway station, without any lights on, without whistling. The villagers call it a ghost train. There is the crisis of wood and oil to cremate the people. The horror of a burial scene dawns on the villagers and the audience through the shocked eyes of a villager. In both these scenes, Rooks and her music composer Kuldeep Singh have used the magic of silence. No music is heard in these two scenes. The silence helps the horror become more terrifying. Here Rooks directs the audiences responses thoroughly enough to make them one with the numbed villagers.

In the concluding scene of the novel villagers are shown watching the flooded swollen river and drifting dead bodies. Khushwant Singh has narrated the scene with blue and grey strokes. He has given details of the bodies drifting in the water and
villagers discussing it. In the film this comes as a monochrome (blue and black) long shot in grave moonlight. It shows bodies floating down the flooded river watched by shocked villagers of Mano Majra. Not a single body in this scene is shown from close range and neither the sound of flood is heard. The villagers exchange a few words only. It is the silence and the monochrome shot that adds to the horror. By not giving multicolored details of the bodies, as aspired to that in the text, Rooks has proved herself a practical director. She has tried to present the horror and the grief of partition without burdening the screen with graphic images and also without being preachy.

The last scene gives the film a powerful end without derailing from the main story. Two parallel shots are connected here. It has a train, without lights on, without whistling, heading for Pakistan in the dark night. The darkness becomes a metaphor in this scene—a metaphor of the silent sacrifice of a lover. A rope is tied across the first span of the rail bridge over the river to throw down the Muslim passengers from the roof top of the train to the Sikh militants waiting to create a tragic history. Jugga, holding the span, is temerariously trying to cut the rope. The parallel shot is of Nooran in the compartment of the same train with her blind father. She is shown in dull orange light. Every slash of Jugga’s Kirpan on the rope seems to carry Nooran and the whole train a little and still a little more towards hope, towards life, towards sunrise. The scene has Jugga all alone in the dark moonlight and Nooran with other passengers in orange light. It suggests their near future. Jugga, shot twice, finally falls dead on the tracks and the train with Nooran moves ahead safely with life.

Of the three, last two scenes have effectively used the lights, shades and darkness. Lights being one of the chief part of film technique, is called the essence of the aesthetic property of film by Somdatta Mandal. She further says,
“In film, generally, the director shifts and transposes the lighting tones in the various shots in accordance with variations in the mood of the film. This transposition is in itself the instrument for the powerful expression of emotion in the film.” (2005: 39)

The same technique is strongly used by Pamela Rooks by highlighting the scenes of trauma, horror and death in the monochrome long shot using blue light and black night.

A few noteworthy shifts, whether introduced knowingly or unknowingly, catch one’s attention. Rooks has given Hukumchand’s character the responsibility of narration. Unlike the source text, Hukumchand enters as the narrator of the film. He closely observes other characters and the events. At the same time he himself is one of the main characters. He tells a story of which he too is a part. He refers to the information he had seen himself or heard from other characters. But surprisingly, he removes himself from the story in the end. After Hukumchand releases Jugga and Iqbal, he withdraws himself. He drowns his own self in the bottle of liquor not knowing what was going to happen thereafter. Narrator Hukumchand is overshadowed by the confused helpless Magistrate. Worried about Haseena, he withdraws himself not in irrespective of consequences. Singh’s Hukumchand is justified by Rooks’ Hukumchand throughout the film with an added responsibility, of narrating.

Unlike Khushwant Singh, Rooks has tried to balance the ghost train and bodies in the river (Sikhs and Hindus massacred by Muslims) by showing Sikh Militants looting the Muslims of Mano Majra. When Nooran goes to meet Jugga’s
mother before leaving for Chandannagar Camp, blind Imam Baksh is busy packing the household things. At that time four to five Sikhs arrive, hurt Imam Baksh and take away many things. They are also shown creating commotion in the streets and alleys, setting fire to Muslim huts. No such description is given in the printed text. Somehow it looks disjointed and loses the ambiguity. Singh has tried to avoid violent actions in the text.

Singh’s train is an important character in the novel. It is a powerful symbol of both, life and death. But somehow in the film, its frequent entries fail to fulfill its importance. The relation between the train and Mano Majra people is shown in the second scene with Amrita Pritam’s lyrics in the backdrop. Rooks has used the arrivals, departures and passing of the train and its relation with daily life at Mano Majra to give the titles of the movie. But somehow the long shots fail to clarify the routine of the village to those who have not read the novel. The train brings Iqbal, the symbol of futile socialism. Still remains unnoticed. The train is noticed only when it comes from Pakistan as the ghost train. The train gets adequate recognition in the last scene of the film where Jugga helps the train carrying Nooran pass to Pakistan safely over his dead body. With a long shot of the train moving ahead beyond the borders, the film ends. The long shots fail to project the train as a symbol of life and also of death except at the end of the film. The train, by no means stress itself as a regularator of daily life of Mano Majra too. The director has missed an opportunity to make the character of the train as an appealing and later appalling symbol. The role of the train proves disappointing and the immense efforts of Set designer Chhel Paresh look getting wasted.

A novel passes through the process of creative violence to be a film. It enters another body. The novel is of the author, but the film is of the film maker and his
troupe. It is their artistic creation. The film maker does borrow the storyline, but treats it differently.

Sudhir Bose aptly remarks about the film in his review. He says,

“It goes to the credit of Rooks that in transforming the novel into film she retains the attributes. In particular, she doesn’t take sides and the film is marked by an economy of style an ‘un-emphatic voice’ even as its images are shot through with underlying tension” (1998 : 38)

As for Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan, its quality of realism, accurate presentation of incidents and characters deserve acclamation. K. R. S. Iyenger calls it a nightmare that numbs the sensibilities.

Pamela Rooks has tried her best to render it on the screen. It does depict horror and trauma of the Partition period being faithful to the source text. It is too accurate and thus upto certain extent helps the less perspective reader to understand the novel and to appreciate it better. It faithfully retains the attributes. Though the movie Train to Pakistan dose not take the sides, is marked by the economy of style and much more, its appeal is not the same as that of the text. Too much of faithfulness to the words printed instead of its essence makes the film miss the height gained by the text. The non readers may like the concept, but those who are aware of the novel may feel something missing.
References:


