

Reading the Sights and Sounds of Trains in the Narratives of Migration

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Abstract

With most migration across existing or freshly created borders happening via trains, the train becomes an embodiment as well as the environment for the emotional experience of migration. While the atmosphere in a train presents a heterotopia, quite like the world outside, it brings the Self of migrants in close proximity to others. Thus it results in a redefinition of the Self, during the transitional stage, and becomes definitive in the context of migration. This paper will look at trains as not just symbols, but also as recurrent motifs and environments of cultural contact and incubation. By doing so, this paper will attempt to address the perception of time and space, as seen from the windows of a train in the context of migration. The transitory nature of the experience within a train is mirrored by the fleeting glimpses of changing landscape. Trains, especially in the context of migration, almost invariably become the site of violence, or in some case the instrument of violence as well. This paper will look into texts such as Train to Pakistan by Khushwant Singh to look into the perpetration of violence with the Train as both the instrument as well as the environment, with the partition of India and Pakistan as its context. This narrative portrays both migration and violence as a two-way street, with the train plying to and fro, multiple times throughout the text. Enrique's Journey by Sonia Nazario on the other hand portrays a train from Mexico to America, nicknamed El Tren de la Muerte, or The Train of Death. While the narrative focuses on seventeen year old Enrique and his illegal immigration to America, the train becomes the only option for him to traverse hostile territories and find his mother. Here too, the train becomes the site of violence against

migrants as they not only have to circumvent lack of food and water but also mortal peril if discovered by authorities. Thus the train becomes the factor that provides agency to migrants to cross boundaries and venture into the unknown.

Keywords: Redefinition of the Self, Cultural Hybridity, Migration and Persecution, Migration, Literature.

Introduction

Migration across man-made borders, though sometimes by foot, is facilitated by various means of transportation. Of the many kinds, trains take on a bulk of this responsibility in carrying migrants in large numbers across borders. For the same reason, trains tend to become an unavoidable part of literature that concerns itself with the movement of individuals or groups across borders and have become a strong presence in many narratives. This paper will consider three texts for analysis, namely: *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *Enrique's Journey*, by Sonia Nazario and *Night* by Elie Wiesel. The focus would be to look into the recurring images of trains in these texts and how they are perceived by the characters, primarily through their descriptions of the sights and sounds of these gigantic metal boxes on wheels which reach the reader through language.

Aguiar in “Railway Space in Partition Literature”, points out that trains are generally considered as emblems of progress but in the context of partition, it takes on a distinctive haunted quality (Aguiar 2007:76). They probably symbolize the movement of communities of people separated from their places of origin and are undergoing a change that inflicts suffering, loss and pain. However, it is not only partition that causes such movement of people, the different roles that trains play also change with the context in which this movement of people is studied, be it that of an emblem of progress or that which brings horror and dread. Hence, Aguiar's argument

could be extended to understand these varied contexts of travel, on these metal beasts that become facilitators of migration as well as sites and instruments of violence against the people aboard. The selected texts in this paper would primarily deal with migration across borders where trains act as the only means available to facilitate the crossing of borders, and so they become the pivot around which the plot is organized.

The Motif of ‘Train’ in *Train to Pakistan*

The invention of railways is considered a symbol of progress and a bridge in connecting people and nations. According to Walter Russell Mead’s “Trains, Planes, and Automobiles”, the rail networks that sprang up in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and the Indian subcontinent, and that were projected for Africa and Asia, were the wonders of their age (Mead 1995:16). They were seen by many as the very face of mankind’s progress and a blessing bestowed on the colonized by the colonizer. They were magnificent objects that were marvelled at as is made evident in *Train to Pakistan* where the story is set in a little hamlet named Mano Majra which is known only due to its proximity to a railway bridge and the railway station, a symbol of western architecture connecting India to Pakistan. The text describes Mano Majra thus:

“Mano Majra has always been known for its railway station. Since the bridge has only one track, the station has several sidings where less important trains can wait, to make way for the more important. A small colony of shopkeepers and hawkers has grown up around the station to supply travellers with food, betel leaves, cigarettes, tea, biscuits, and sweetmeats” (Singh 1988:9).

The railway infrastructure becomes an instrument that facilitates the bringing in of people and goods to Mano Majra which still lacks well-paved roads. This makes trains the centre

of the action in this reading of the narrative and the lives of the characters are aligned with the arrival and departure of trains. It is crucial to note that it is the same railway infrastructure that later becomes a site of violence, which will be discussed later in this paper. This will help in observing the changing perception of the villagers towards the railway infrastructure that was introduced for the development of the village. The other aspects like; the train timings play a major impact on the life of the residents of the village. The onomatopoeic words used to describe the arrival of the train itself have a way of implying the time of day:

“After dark, when the countryside is steeped in silence, the whistling and puffing of engines, the banging of buffers, and the clanking of iron couplings can be heard all through the night. All this has made Mano Majra very conscious of trains. Before daybreak, the mail train rushes through on its way to Lahore, and as it approaches the bridge, the driver invariably blows two long blasts on the whistle. In an instant, all Mano Majra comes awake” (Singh 1988:9).

As often seen in real life, it is the sound of a train that hails its arrival much before its sight, and so in *Train to Pakistan*, initially, the ‘rumble’ of the train brings with it a sense of comfort to the villagers, as it lulls them to sleep. However, this comfort that they seek in the sounds of the train does not last long. As the narrative progresses, the trains start getting late by more than a few hours, throwing the routine of the villagers off track. Sometimes trains ceased running at all: “Goods trains had stopped running altogether, so there was no lullaby to lull them to sleep. Instead, ghost trains went past at odd hours between midnight and dawn, disturbing the dreams of Mano Majra” (Singh 1988:51). The uncertainty that the partition brings to this hamlet close to the newly created border is

mirrored in the uncertainty accompanying the sound of the train. The train's rumbling becomes a recurring motif throughout the text as it changes from a lullaby to a harbinger of bad news. As seen in the lines above, the trains that were central to the lives of characters at Mano Majra, are now referred to with ominous term such as, 'ghost trains'. The names used to refer to these trains themselves bring with them the outlook of the characters and their views of the trains.

Train as a Site of Violence and Hope in *Enrique's Journey*

In *Train to Pakistan*, while the citizens of Mano Majra refer to the train as the 'ghost train', the characters in Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* have several names for the train in the narrative. The story of a Honduran boy who undertakes a risky and arduous journey illegally into the United States to find his mother is represented on the book's cover by a picture of a boy riding on the roof of a train. This train is the only means that he and countless other migrants have to cross through a region that the migrants have nicknamed as 'the beast'. The land hailed as the beast is haunted by bandits and corrupt officials who rob, abuse and kill travellers, if caught, which forces them to board a freight train that they hope would carry them safely, guarding them against 'the beast'. This, however, is not without perils, as they must board the train secretly and dangerously as it slows down passing through a cemetery. Several travellers get injured and even lose their limbs trying to board the train. This valuable information which they gather from each other acts as a potential source for saving lives. With this information comes varied descriptions of the train itself that they await, like a saviour while lying in wait behind tombstones at the cemetery. They know the train by many names, like those who know of its potential to sever limbs, call it *El Tran Devorador*, meaning "The Train That Devours". Others call it *El Tren de la Muerte*, the "Train of Death". The

names the characters use to address the train give an insight into the train as viewed by the characters and their past experiences with this perilous journey across the border. Ironically, they try to escape the violence of the territory by climbing the train, only to be violated by the train itself or attacked on board by corrupt officials on being found. The train thus becomes both, the site of violence and an entity with the ability to cause harm to the migrants.

The violence, however, is not all that the characters see when they discuss the train amongst themselves. Being the only resort available to escape ‘the beast’, the train becomes a symbol of hope and faith to many. To young Enrique, the protagonist in *Enrique's Journey*, the train is the only way to reach his mother and so, he refers to the train as *El Caballo de Hierro* (the Iron Horse). Some other migrants ascribe a certain religious faith to the train by considering the journey to be a test of their will placed on their path by the divine. It is seen as what one has to brave to reach their goal, and hence the faithful refer to the train as *El Tren Peregrino* (The Pilgrim’s Train). The trains become a site of violence in both the texts discussed above and this environment soon turns hostile to the migrants. The train remains the only option available to the people. They are left with no other choice, trapped within its metal boxes from which they have no escape. In *Train to Pakistan*, the peace of Mano Majra is disturbed not by the political and religious disturbances in cities like Lahore or Delhi but by the arrival of a train filled with the bodies of migrants from Pakistan. Half burnt bodies were found floating in water bodies, and the train became the subject of everyone’s conversation in the village. People from Pakistan, who were displaced from their homeland and forced to migrate to a different country, leaving behind almost everything except their lives, were found in the compartments of the train. In this context, Gopika Raja in her article, "A Kaleidoscopic

Unraveling of the Socio-Cultural Dilemma in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*", addresses this as a socio-cultural dilemma by stating it as:

"The train in *Train to Pakistan* implies the movement of vast communities torn from their roots and areas of traditional growth to a new 'Jerusalem'. It indicates the harrowing processes of this change, the awful and ghastly experience of human beings involved in a historical, impersonal and dehumanized process" (Raja 2017:159).

Trains as 'Crisis Heterotopia'

The trains in the texts taken for study can be read as crisis heterotopia for the migrants. Foucault in *Of Other Spaces* describes a heterotopia as a place that is somehow outside of all places though we can indicate a location for them in reality. Further, several kinds of heterotopias are discussed as 'other spaces' of which, the crisis heterotopia, is described as reserved for individuals who live in a state of crisis in relation to society and to the surrounding human environment (Foucault 1986:3). The trains are a crisis heterotopia for the migrants because they are in a state of crisis with respect to the human environment in which they used to live. Though present in the physical world, the train becomes quite a distinct space from its immediate vicinity due to the distinction that we perceive between those within its compartments and those outside. Those within the train hoping to flee from danger or crisis, but the train itself become a greater threat in many cases. The travellers from Mano Majra are given barely ten minutes to pack their belongings and are forced to leave behind almost everything which was part of their lives. The leaving behind of possessions can be seen as travellers being forced to part with whatever they call their own: their belongings, their homes, and their homeland. Similarly, the

migrants in *Enrique's Journey*, get stripped of their belongings and are hurled from the freight train if they are found carrying anything of value. They are warned to prepare themselves to run fast and hide easily, at the slightest inkling of trouble. Therefore, they too are forced to carry bare essentials. The sight of such travellers is described as:

“Some migrants climb on board with a toothbrush tucked into a pocket. A few allow themselves a small reminder of family. One father wraps his eight-year-old daughter’s favourite hair band around his wrist. Others bring a small Bible with telephone numbers, pencilled in the margins, of their mothers or fathers or other relatives in the United States” (Nazario 2007:70).

While the migrants in *Enrique's Journey* willingly undertake the journey by boarding freight trains and hiding at various parts of the train to avoid detection by officials and dacoits, the ones in *Train to Pakistan* are crammed onto trains and forced to move to another country based on religion. Owing to the severe lack of space on the train, many of them travel on the roof. This condition brings the migrants in close proximity, with no consideration given to their social status. Thus, the Mullah of the mosque, the weaver’s pregnant daughter Noora and the young girl Haseena who has been forced into prostitution, all share the same space on the train. What may be read as the train forcing people apart by shipping them away to a distant land, can also be read as the same train forcing people closer, too close in fact, to the point that they no longer possess what one may call ‘personal space’. When the train arrives from Pakistan carrying hundreds of corpses, they too remain in close proximity irrespective of their social status, within the train compartments, even in death:

“There were women and children huddled in a corner, their eyes dilated with horror, their mouths still open as

if their shrieks had just then become voiceless. Some of them did not have a scratch on their bodies. There were bodies crammed against the far end wall of the compartment, looking in terror at the empty windows through which must have come, shots, spears, and spikes. There were lavatories, jammed with corpses of young men who had muscled their way to comparative safety” (Singh 1988:55).

Trains and the Journey of the Holocaust in Wiesel’s *Night*

The third text for analysing the role played by trains in the lives of migrants is Elie Wiesel’s, *Night*. In this narrative, the train becomes a weapon used by Nazis to transport hundreds of Jews to concentration camps. About eighty people are crammed into a single cart with its windows barred and top open as they traverse through freezing and stormy weather. The environment within the train compartment and the human experience of being confined in close proximity that this text focuses on is similar to Kushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*.

In Weisel’s *Night*, the characters spend several days and nights in these carts starving, having no idea where they are being shipped off until they arrive at the gateway to Auschwitz. The text describes the beginning of this train journey thus: “The doors clanked shut. We had fallen into the trap, up to our necks. The doors were nailed, the way back irrevocably cut off. The world had become a hermetically sealed cattle car” (Wiesel 2006:24).

Unlike the train’s rumble announcing its arrival in the other two texts, the sound described in the third text is the long piercing whistle and grinding of the wheels on the rails as the characters’ journey into the unknown begins. The description of the sound of the train from the very beginning echoes a feeling of uncertainty and a fear of the unknown, unlike the previous texts. After making an appearance at the beginning of

the narrative and transporting the protagonist and his Jewish companions to the camps, the train is not visible to readers until a later part in the text. Thus, in this narrative, the train marks the beginning of a very harrowing description of the holocaust experience of a young boy and his father. After spending several months at the camp, once the Nazis discover that the Russians are advancing towards them, the inhabitants of the camp are once again herded into the cattle cars of the train, which makes its reappearance at this juncture. This time, due to several months of starvation, the soldiers could fit a hundred of them into a single cart, once again emphasizing the non-consensual violation of personal space and bringing people closer against their will. Of these one hundred, which the protagonist is also a part of, only twelve exits the train cart alive at the end of the journey. This calls attention to the fact that about ninety people in each cart of the train had successfully overcome life at a Nazi labour camp only to fall prey to the perilous journey aboard a train. Though the agents who caused their trauma and loss of lives remain the same, the role of this train in inflicting such horrors raises several questions about the sites where violence occurs and its varied forms, especially in comparison to the several works that have described the holocaust experiences over the years.

Trains as Symbols in Migration

In *Enrique's Journey*, the train becomes a symbol of the journey itself that Enrique undertakes as it provides not just hopes and dreams of starting a new life and reuniting with family but also brings with it several dangers. It further brings the possibility of meeting several other migrants as young Enrique does, including other child migrants searching for family members like himself. These people exchange stories of their previous failed attempts at crossing the border on overcoming the hurdles of this journey. They recall harrowing

events they have witnessed in the hope that this would warn the others to be careful: “A seventeen-year-old girl waiting for a train was dragged out among the headstones three years ago, then raped and murdered. The year before that, a young man’s forehead was beaten in with a metal tube” (Nazario 2007:223). They help each other whenever possible by giving out warnings or words of caution. The migrants perceive their fellow travellers and the facilitators of the journey such as smugglers and drivers as their own but they consider the immigration officials and dacoits as ‘others’ who hinder their crossing of the border. Most often these individuals brutally abuse them, thus forming their notion of oneness amongst those onboard the train, and a notion of otherness for those who hinder their journey.

The train, while in motion, becomes a place of incubation where they find others to whom they can relate. The stopping of the train in *Enrique’s Journey* and *Train to Pakistan* is associated with negative feelings, often those of anxiety and threat. Not only does the stopping of the train symbolize a break in the journey, it means the arrival of a possible threat. To Enrique, it signals the possibility of an inspection. The officials search the cars for illegal immigrants and bring along trained dogs to sniff out well-hidden ones who have learned to avoid being captured by applying garlic paste over their bodies. In Khushwant Singh’s text, Sundar Singh’s journey to Lahore presents a different case. A decorated army hero, he was migrating with his family to claim the bounty land that the government had given him. However, when the train was stopped along the way, his fate took a turn for the worse:

“Then the train was held up at a station for four days. No one was allowed to get off. Sunder Singh’s children cried for water and food. So did everyone else. Sunder Singh gave them his urine to drink. Then that dried up too. So

he pulled out his revolver and shot them all" (Singh 1988:109).

For those aboard the train to Pakistan, the train coming to a stop could also mean an attack by a violent mob. The bridge that connects Mano Majra to the border, which was initially a facilitator of economic and cultural exchange, becomes an instrument of destruction as it becomes the site where a mob decides to attack the train. The train is a source of solace for those who wish to flee a region where they are being attacked to a place of relative safety but the train also traps them and becomes the instrument of violence. The dominant image of the train in the narrative takes on a dual role - that of life and death, of locomotion and immobility, of tranquility and mayhem (Raja 2017:5). Mirroring this, it is the lawless and unruly character, Juggut Singh, who climbs the steel bridge to rescue a group of people going to Pakistan. He succeeds in saving not just the life of his lover, but all the passengers aboard the train. The closing lines of *Train to Pakistan*, "the train went over him, and went on to Pakistan", gives the reader further reminders of the unpredictability of relating events, people and in this case a mode of transport to one particular category. While the train means death to millions, to several others, it provides agency to cross boundaries and venture into the unknown.

Conclusion

Through these readings, one can note, not just the multiplicity of ways in which the train may be seen, but also the multiplicity in how language has been used to construct this difference. The sights and sounds of trains have been described in these texts only in relation to the experience of individuals who behold them, allowing the reader to state without a doubt that any feat of marvel and glory, like these powerful metal beasts, can be seen otherwise based on one's point of view and

context. The need or necessity of travel may be many, and hence the ways of seeing the traveller and the travel itself too will be many. This argument can be extended beyond just the train, which has been analysed and examined in the paper as an instrument of violence as well as a symbol of hope, to just about anything we may perceive through sights or sounds as we embark on our own journeys.

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