

FROM TURMOIL TO TRANSITION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' AND 'A SUITABLE BOY'

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ABSTRACT

The partition of India in 1947, resulting in the creation of India and Pakistan, was an epochal event marked by widespread violence, displacement, and communal strife. This violent period is often considered one of the darkest chapters in South Asian history, and its impact was particularly harsh on women. This research paper titled "From Turmoil to Transition: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Representation in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and 'A Suitable Boy'" aims to delve into the nuanced portrayals of women in the post-partition Indian context, as it is depicted in two seminal novels. It is Focusing on Khushwant Singh's 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy.' The study seeks to unravel the evolution of women's roles, aspirations, marginalisation of women and societal expectations towards women during the tumultuous period of partition and its aftermath. 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' provides a lens into the chaos and brutality of partition, where women grapple with the immediate challenges of survival, loss, and the redefinition of their roles in a fractured society. In contrast, 'A Suitable Boy' explores the post-partition era, offering a panorama of women navigating societal changes, modern aspirations, and familial expectations in the newly independent India, but the complexities of post-partition India, where societal norms and familial expectations continue to cast a shadow on women's lives. The shift from turmoil to transition does not herald an era of liberation for women; instead, it reveals a more nuanced form of suppression. Women in 'A Suitable Boy' find themselves entangled in the intricacies of tradition, marriage, and societal expectations, showcasing a continuity of suppression in the aftermath of partition. The research aims to unravel the intricacies of how women are depicted in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and 'A Suitable Boy,' shedding light on the continuities of suppression across historical junctures. The comparative lens employed will highlight the enduring struggles of women, offering insights into the complexities of their representation within the broader socio-cultural and historical context of India.

Keywords: Comparative Study, Train to Pakistan, A Suitable Boy, Partition, 1947, India - Pakistan.

Introduction

A Closer Look at Women's Lives During and After the 1947 Partition of India

The term "partition" refers to the division or separation of a territory or region into distinct, often independent entities. In the context of India's history, the Partition commonly refers to the division of British India in 1947 into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. This separation was based largely on religious lines, creating the predominantly Hindu India and the Muslim majority Pakistan. The event resulted in significant demographic shifts, mass migrations, and communal violence, leaving a lasting impact on the socio-political landscape of the Indian subcontinent.

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During the partition of India in 1947, women experienced profound and often tragic consequences as a result of the political decisions and communal tensions surrounding this historical event. The suffering of women during the partition was multi-faceted, encompassing displacement, violence, and societal upheaval. The communal violence that erupted during the partition resulted in widespread atrocities, including mass killings, abductions, and sexual violence against women. Women from all religious communities fell victim to these brutalities, enduring physical and emotional trauma that left lasting scars on the collective memory.

Women who experienced sexual violence or abduction during the partition often faced social stigma and marginalization within their communities. The trauma of such experiences had long-lasting effects on their lives, with societal attitudes further compounding their suffering.

- Scholarly work such as **“Community, State and Gender: On Women’s Agency during Partition”** by **Urvashi Butalia** is considered seminal in the field of gender studies and partition history. The work of Urvashi Butalia explores the various roles women played during the partition, challenging traditional narratives that portray them solely as victims. Butalia sheds light on women’s resilience, activism, and contributions to community building amidst the turbulent times.
- **"Partition's Forgotten Women: Narratives of Comfort in Indian War Camps"** by **Crispin Bates**, delve into the experiences of women during the partition, shedding light on the complex and varied ways in which women coped with and were affected by this tumultuous period in history.
- The article **"Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition"** by **Ritu Menon** and **Kamla Bhasin** offers a nuanced exploration of the aftermath of the Partition, focusing on the abduction of women and the subsequent efforts at recovery and rehabilitation. The authors skillfully contextualise the Partition experience, emphasising the marginalised perspectives often overlooked in mainstream narratives. The first voice examined is that of the government, bureaucrats, and members of parliament.
- In **"Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition,"** by **Nisid Hajari** skillfully transcends conventional narratives, offering a fresh perspective on the Partition. Through meticulous research. The narrative, rich in emotions and details, uniquely examines the suffering of women amid the carnage, going beyond the surface to explore the profound reasons and intricate problems underlying their harrowing experiences.

The work of Khushvant Singh, 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' is also representing a visual image of partition time and women's condition, suffering, trauma and Violence as it is mentioned in the works of Urvashi Butalia, Crispin Bates, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin and Nisid Hajari. But the condition of women after partition was also worse as it is mentioned in 'A Suitable Boy', a novel by Vikram Seth.

In the post-Partition era, women had to rebuild their lives in unfamiliar territories. The challenges of starting anew included economic struggles, social integration, and adapting to different cultural norms. Women played crucial roles in the rehabilitation efforts. Social workers and organisations worked towards the resettlement of displaced individuals, with a particular focus on the specific needs and challenges faced by women. The Partition altered the socioeconomic status of many women. Widows, in particular, faced economic hardships, and the traditional support systems were often disrupted. The experiences of Partition spurred some women to become actively involved in political and social activism. They sought to address the issues of gender-based violence, displacement, and communal tensions.

Portrayal of Women in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' by Khushwant Singh

"TRAIN TO PAKISTAN," a significant work by Khushwant Singh, unfolds the narrative in the village of Mano Majra, situated near the Punjab border. Initially characterised by religious diversity, with Sikhs as the majority, along with Muslims, Hindus, and Pseudo-Christians living harmoniously, the novel captures the upheaval caused by the partition. In examining the representation of women within the novel through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that patriarchy serves as the foundational structure in both familial and societal contexts in Mano Majra.

The relationships between men and women are marked by inequality, where women assume passive roles, engage in unpaid labour, and exist as dependent and submissive entities. The transactional nature of relationships is underscored by women exchanging their bodies for material items like bangles, earrings, and bracelets.

Virginity emerges as a symbol of nobility, manipulated to propagate communal violence post-partition. Despite this, Khushwant Singh attempts a tentative reconciliation between the Muslim and Sikh communities through the love story of Nooran and the sacrifice made by Juggat Singh. In his portrayal of Iqbal Singh, the author seeks to challenge male dominance and mitigate the discrimination faced by women to some extent. The novel, with its exploration of gender dynamics, subtly hints at the potential for unity amid the communal discord unleashed by partition.

Khushwant Singh, following the footsteps of his predecessors, depicts women in two distinct categories: the traditional, faithful archetype or the luscious, promiscuous counterpart. In "Train to Pakistan," Singh introduces three significant female characters: Nooran, Juggat's lady love; Juggat's mother; and Haseena, a prostitute. Nooran, expressing her love for Juggat before marriage, unveils a pre-marital relationship indicative of a love affair. The dacoit gang describes her as a "**bogus woman**," emphasising her physical attributes and their expectations for her relationship with Jugga. This dialogue from the novel shows how women were seen at that time.

"Did you see that tight shirt showing off her breasts...she must give Jugga a good time... large gazelle eyes and the little mango breasts." (Khushwant Singh)

Men perceive women as inauthentic, anticipating a romanticised physical appearance. Juggat Singh, in his portrayal of his lover, employs the term "black buffalo," indicating a preference for white women over black ones. This preference is articulated by Juggat:

"Wah, Babuji, great. You must have had lots of fun. The memsahibs are like houris from paradise- white and soft like silk. All we have here are black buffaloes". (Khushwant Singh)

Khushwant Singh, through Juggat, provides a pragmatic insight into men's perspectives, emphasising their primal need for sex. Nooran reflects on this, stating, **"Always you wanting to sow your seed. Even if the world were going to hell you would want to do that"** (Khushwant Singh) Post-intercourse, Juggat's abrupt shift in mood, evidenced by his command to Noorajn, **"will you shut up or I have to smack your face"**, (Khushwant Singh) exposes the underlying desire for sexual gratification.

In the novel, the predominant focus is on male characters, with only two female characters, Nooran and Haseena, managing to secure some narrative space. However, their roles are relatively insignificant within the broader context of the novel. Nooran becomes the object of Juggat's passion, while Haseena is depicted as an object of lust for the bureaucrat Hukum Chand. The entire narrative revolves around male perspectives, offering scant room for women's thoughts or viewpoints.

The novel 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' reinforces traditional gender norms by explicitly referring to women as the "**weaker sex**" at a certain point, reflecting the prevailing societal conditions. Hukum Chand's statement -

"I know it all. Our Hindu women are like that. So pure that they would rather commit suicide than let a stranger touch them. We Hindus never raise our hands to strike women but these Muslims have no respect for weaker sex...." (Khushwant Singh)

Further underscores gender biases, as he stereotypes Hindu women as pure and self-sacrificing while expressing derogatory views about Muslim women's supposed lack of respect for the "**weaker sex**." This special focus on women's limited roles and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes contribute to an exploration of women's suffering within the novel.

Portrayal of Women in Vikram Seth's 'A Suitable Boy'

In Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy," the portrayal of women is intricate and multifaceted, reflecting the socio-cultural milieu of post-independence India. The novel, set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing society, offers a nuanced examination of the roles, challenges, and aspirations of women. The narrative introduces a diverse range of female characters, each navigating through the complexities of familial expectations, societal norms, and personal aspirations. Lata Mehra, the central protagonist, embodies the struggle between tradition and individual agency as she seeks a suitable match in a society where arranged marriages are prevalent.

Seth delves into the traditional roles assigned to women, exploring the tension between familial duties and personal desires. The characters grapple with societal expectations, and their stories unfold against a backdrop of evolving gender dynamics in a post-colonial India. The novel also explores the intersectionality of women's experiences, acknowledging that factors such as class, caste, and religion

intersect with gender, shaping the characters' identities and opportunities. The novel addresses issues such as gender inequality, patriarchal structures, and the evolving role of women in a changing society.

The narrative is deeply embedded in the cultural and historical context of 1950s India. This contextualization adds layers to the portrayal of women, depicting how societal shifts, political changes, and economic developments impact their lives. "A Suitable Boy" goes beyond a mere portrayal of women; it offers a rich tapestry of their experiences, aspirations, and challenges.

Set against the backdrop of post-colonial 1950s India, Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy" illuminates the societal norms dictating marriage. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's adherence to conventional values is evident in her disapproval of love marriages, particularly demonstrated in her stance toward her daughter-in-law, Meenakshi. Faced with her son Arun's marriage against her wishes, Mrs. Mehra embarks on a mission to find a suitable match for her daughter Lata. The urgency in her words is palpable: **"I want you to find her a boy at once. A suitable boy, she is getting involved with unsuitable boys and I cannot have that..." (Seth Vikram, p548)**. This emphasises the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, offering insight into the challenges women confront in navigating marriage within a traditional societal framework.

Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy" commences and concludes with a wedding, unravelling the narrative of a Hindu family's quest to find an appropriate match for Lata. The novel's thematic essence surfaces in the opening line when Rupa Mehra asserts to the protagonist Lata, **"you too will marry a boy I choose" (Seth Vikram, P6)**. This declaration echoes not only Rupa Mehra's voice but resonates with societal expectations skillfully depicted by the author. The selected boy is envisioned to be a Hindu, handpicked by Lata's parents, reflecting the prevalent mindset within Indian families regarding marriage. Driven by societal pressures and her mother's emotional entreaty, the otherwise rebellious Lata ultimately acquiesces to marrying the boy chosen by her mother, highlighting the tensions between personal desires and societal norms, particularly when love crosses caste boundaries.

Meenakshi stands as an anomaly in the narrative, portraying a discontented and unfaithful wife who resents the confines of domesticity. Her outspoken demeanour clashes with conventional expectations, causing friction with her mother-in-law. Engaging in an extramarital affair with her husband's friend Billy, Meenakshi dismisses societal norms, stating:

"What does marriage have to do with it? I am married, aren't I? You enjoy it, I enjoy it, that's all there is to it" (Seth Vikram, p1131).

Within the Mehra, Kapoor, Khan, and Chatterji families, each with two daughters and two sons, a notable absence emerges none of the daughters pursue employment. Seth underscores the confinement of women to domestic spheres after marriage, exemplified by the Khan family where Nawab Sahib's educated daughter, Zainab, adopts purdah post-marriage, spending her life in seclusion from the age of fifteen, either in her father's or husband's home.

Mrs. Rupa Mehra exemplifies a complex duality, experiencing oppression and acting as an oppressor simultaneously. While feeling oppressed by family members after her husband's death, she asserts dominance as a mother to Lata, insisting on adherence to tradition:

"What was good enough for her mother and mother's mother and her mother's mother should be good enough for Lata" (Seth Vikram, p22).

Despite Lata's typically outspoken nature, she becomes submissive to fulfil her mother's wishes, highlighting the intricate dynamics of familial expectations. Mrs. Rupa Mehra's intense focus on family welfare after her husband's death, though sentimental at times, defines her as a well-intentioned but occasionally intrusive mother.

The novel "A Suitable Boy," portraying women as marginalised, suppressed within the cultural landscape of post-colonial India. Through the varied experiences of characters like Lata and Meenakshi, the novel exposes the intricate web of societal expectations that stifle individual agency. The confinement of Zainab to purdah and Lata's eventual acquiescence to her mother's choices symbolise the prevailing constraints on women's autonomy. Mrs. Rupa Mehra, while embodying the complexities of motherhood, inadvertently becomes an agent of suppression. Seth's exploration of familial and societal pressures prompts reflection on the enduring challenges faced by women in navigating tradition and asserting their individual identities within a deeply entrenched patriarchal framework.

A Comparative Analysis of Women's Representation in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and 'A Suitable Boy'

Comparing the representation of women in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and 'A Suitable Boy' reveals distinct approaches by Khushwant Singh and Vikram Seth.

In 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' Khushwant Singh portrays women within a patriarchal framework, emphasising their subordinate roles, transactional relationships, and objectification. The limited narrative space for female characters like Nooran and Haseena underscores the dominance of male perspectives. The novel reinforces traditional gender norms and perpetuates stereotypes, exploring women's suffering within the context of partition. Contrastingly, 'A Suitable Boy' by Vikram Seth offers a nuanced portrayal of women in post-independence India. The narrative introduces diverse female characters navigating familial expectations, societal norms, and personal aspirations. Seth delves into the tension between tradition and individual agency, addressing issues of gender inequality and portraying the complexities of women's experiences. The novel explores the intersectionality of factors like class, caste, and religion, shaping the characters' identities and opportunities.

While 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' predominantly focuses on male characters, 'A Suitable Boy' presents a rich tapestry of women's experiences, aspirations, and challenges. The novels differ in their treatment of women, with Singh highlighting societal constraints and Seth providing a more intricate exploration of women's roles within a changing society.

Despite the differing approaches to women's representation in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' and 'A Suitable Boy,' there are some similarities in the portrayal of female characters in both novels. In both novels, there is a tension between traditional expectations and individual desires for the female characters. Women grapple with societal norms and familial duties that often conflict with their personal aspirations. In 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' Nooran's pre-marital relationship with Juggut challenges traditional expectations, highlighting the tension between personal desires and societal norms. Similarly, in 'A Suitable Boy,' Lata's reluctance to conform to her mother's choice for a suitable boy reflects the struggle against traditional expectations.

Marriage is a central theme in both novels, reflecting societal norms and pressures. Female characters, such as Lata in 'A Suitable Boy' and Nooran in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' navigate the complexities of finding a suitable match amid societal expectations. Both novels touch upon the intersectionality of women's experiences, acknowledging that factors like class, caste, and religion intersect with gender, influencing the characters' identities and opportunities. In 'A Suitable Boy,' the urgency expressed by Mrs. Rupa Mehra to find a suitable match for Lata reflects societal pressures on marriage. In 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' the communal violence post-partition disrupts Nooran's marriage plans, emphasising the impact of societal chaos on individual lives.

The female characters in both novels face challenges within patriarchal structures. While the intensity and nature of these challenges may vary, the novels explore how women navigate and sometimes resist societal expectations imposed by male-dominated systems. Despite societal constraints, certain female characters exhibit a degree of individual agency. Whether it's Lata's struggle for autonomy in 'A Suitable Boy' or Nooran's expression of love in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' these characters resist complete submission to traditional norms. In 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN,' the derogatory perceptions of women by male characters, such as the objectification of Nooran by the dacoit gang, highlight the challenges women face within patriarchal structures. Similarly, in 'A Suitable Boy,' Lata's resistance to her mother's pressure for an arranged marriage reflects her struggle against patriarchal norms.

Both novels delve into the experiences of women, highlighting moments of suffering and challenges they face within the cultural and historical contexts presented in the narratives. Nooran's tragic fate in 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' due to communal violence and Lata's internal conflict and compromises in 'A Suitable Boy' exemplify the exploration of women's suffering. Even if the form of their suffering is different, the suffering is there with no doubts.

In Conclusion, 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN' portrays the vulnerability and limited agency of women of the partition time, 'A Suitable Boy' offers a more nuanced exploration of women's roles in post-independence India, capturing the complexities of societal transitions and the evolving dynamics of female agency. In both novels, the continuity of suppression is manifested in various forms – from transactional relationships and objectification to societal expectations and limitations on autonomy. The nuanced exploration of these themes highlights the intricate dynamics of gender roles and the enduring challenges faced by women within the cultural and historical contexts depicted in the narratives.

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