

ON THE RAILS OF FASCISM AND RESISTANCE: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON V SHINILAL'S *THE WANDERER*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines how V Shinilal's *The Wanderer* (2025) - originally published in Malayalam as Samparka Kranti in 2019 - mobilizes the imagery of trains and territoriality to critique the fragile idea of the nation-state. By dismantling the triumphalist narratives of national progress and subsequently foregrounding dislocation, exclusion and existential precarity as the defining experiences of modern citizenship, the image of Samparka Kranti, a train that connects Trivandrum and Chandigarh via New Delhi metaphorically connotes the rise of fascist tendencies in a novel 'liberal' democracy. Deconstructing the traditional perception of train as a symbol of progress, modernity and connectivity, Shinilal's narrative reconfigures it as a divisive site marked by violence, surveillance and estrangement. By the myriad symbolic stories associated with each of the passengers, the novel shows how the nation is in a threatening phase, rendering them as territorial animals who are compelled to assert and defend fragile claims of space, echoing the violent politics of partition, displacement and marginalization that structure the modern Indian nation. Through this metaphor, the paper argues that Shinilal interrogates the nation's contradictions: its idealized image as an inclusive home on the one hand and its lived reality of exclusionary practices on the other. The train's compartments allegorize fragmented social world's—class, caste and religion find their representation in the micro-territories of its seats and berths, spaces where negotiations of identity occur under constant threat. It also demonstrates the endless wandering of the protagonist Karam Chand, representing Gandhiji, in a new nation of the territorial species like Dvi and his supporters who symbolize divisiveness.

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Nationalism, Territoriality, Displacement, Allegory, Fascism*

Postcolonial studies have long interrogated the nation as both an imagined community and a contested terrain of identity. Thinkers such as Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha emphasize that national belonging is fraught with ambivalence, forged through narratives of unity yet fractured by colonial legacies, internal exclusions and territorial anxieties. In Anderson's perspective, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail ... the nation is, always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Bhabha supplements it in the Introduction of *Nation and Narration* by stating that "nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (1). The postcolonial nation thus emerges as a space where modernist symbols of progress coexist uneasily with memories of displacement, violence and marginalization, revealing its unstable and divisive foundations. However, thinkers like Partha Chatterjee remind us that nationalist modernity in India is never a simple adoption of European forms; it becomes what he calls a "derivative discourse" (5) that is appropriated and reconfigured within local cultural and political contexts.

In literary studies, political allegories function as a powerful mode of resistance literature. It is done by incorporating symbolism, metaphor and narrative indirection to challenge authoritarianism and critique dominant ideologies. By encoding political critique within fables,

dystopias, or fantastical settings, writers circumvent censorship and reach wider audiences while sharpening the emotional and intellectual force of their dissent. Allegories demonstrate how power operates in postcolonial societies, often through manipulation, surveillance and systemic exclusion. Foregrounding the agency of individuals and communities who resist these pressures, these counternarratives against fascism reimagine the structures that govern collective life. It is in such a background that Shinilal's *The Wanderer* is presented as a political allegory of the Indian nation in the wake of the fascist uprisings.

The concept of the train is considered as a fundamental icon of historical, cultural and political unification in India. This idea occupies a central place in both colonial and postcolonial imaginaries, symbolizing integration, mobility and the promise of national unity. Introduced by the British in the 19th century primarily to serve imperial economic and military interests, the railway soon acquired a dual significance: while it facilitated the extraction of resources, it also created unprecedented networks of connection across India's vast geography. People of diverse castes, classes, religions and regions found themselves traveling together in the same compartments, making the train a lived metaphor for the composite idea of the Indian nation. None other than Karl Marx noted about the sense of modernity and the possibility of unification in the Indian scenario, as given in the novel's Preface titled as "Story So far":

The day is not far distance when, by a combination of railways and steam vessels, the distance between England and India, measured by time, will be shortened to eight days and when that once fabulous country, will thus be actually annexed to the western world.

The railway system will therefore become, in India, truly the forerunner of modern industry. (2)

Nationalist leaders like Gandhiji (who was initially critical of the idea of trains and railway as a whole in his opposition to mechanization) recognized this potential, famously using train journeys to experience the realities of India firsthand and to mobilize people across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Richard Cronin in *Imagining India* argues the irony of the colonial vision about the trains: "Dalhousie planned the railways to tighten British rule of India, to make it more efficient. But the trains had one effect that Dalhousie surely did not foresee. They made possible the birth of the idea that was finally to put an end to the Raj, the idea that India was a nation" (77).

Both the train and the nation is European in terms of origins. However, both get transformed in the colonies in native ways. In countries like India, Partha Chatterjee writes: "nationalism sets out to assert its freedom from European domination. But in the very conception of its project, it remains a prisoner of the prevalent European intellectual fashions" (10). The derivations of the nation that appeared in the post-independence phase is like the crowded trains in India, which differ from their Western counterparts by functioning not merely as efficient transport systems but as dense, culturally layered social worlds—spaces where diverse languages, religions and classes converge in chaotic intimacy. In this sense, it is argued that the train represents the nation like no other literary metaphor especially in the postcolonial Indian scenario. Shinilal himself states in an interview that appeared in Thasrak.com, an online platform: "Movement is the essence of human existence. A self-acting mechanism is embedded within man. Therefore, man moves through time and space. So do nations, which grow and develop over time. The most appropriate metaphor to represent India is the train itself. The train is a biopsy piece of the larger body of India" (trans.).

In post-independence India, the railway came to embody Nehru's vision of modernity and development, a democratic infrastructure knitting together the fragments of a newly partitioned land. Politically, it functioned as both a material and symbolic tool: the Indian Railways became one of the largest state-run institutions, affirming the government's capacity to administer and unify a diverse population. In sum, the train remains a powerful political entity that consolidates national identity, connects remote geographies and sustains the imagination of India as a cohesive whole. It is at once infrastructure, ideology and allegory, embodying the ongoing project of nation-making.

Literature has always imagined in the Indian scenario how the trains were positioned literally and symbolically the idea of an "imagined community" for the postcolonial nation. In Kipling's *Kim* (1901), the railway is portrayed as a vibrant microcosm of colonial India, symbolizing both mobility and the hybrid experiences of empire. In contrast, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) presents the railway as a tragic emblem of Partition, carrying not only refugees but also the weight of communal violence and displacement. Later, in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), the railway functions as a connective thread, bringing together the protagonists while simultaneously reflecting the turbulence and oppressive realities of the Emergency. Together, these texts highlight how the railway becomes a crucial metaphor for imagining the nation across shifting political contexts. Similarly, in Paul Theroux's non-fictional work *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1975) the railway is not only a mode of travel but also a lens through which the diversity, contradictions and cultural richness of India are vividly recorded. According to Theroux, "to understand the real India, the Indians say, you must go to the villages. But that is not strictly true, because Indians have carried their villages to the railway stations... The village in rural India tells the visitor very little... The life of the village, its interior, is denied to him. But the station village is all interior" (114). These texts highlight how the railway becomes a crucial metaphor for imagining the nation across shifting political contexts.

The critique of fascism in Malayalam literature emerges as a powerful response to authoritarian tendencies, communal polarization and the erosion of democratic values within the nation's socio-political life. Writers across ages, especially in the post independent scenario, have employed allegory, satire, realism and dystopian visions to expose the dangers of political absolutism and cultural homogenization. From O.V. Vijayan's *Dharmapuranam* which satirizes authoritarian excess, to K.R. Meera's *Arachar (Hangwoman)*, 2012) which portrays the violence and oppression of the new millenium amidst the rising fascist tendencies, Malayalam literature repeatedly warns against the cult of strongman politics and the silencing of dissent. Such a critique addresses the creeping normalcy of fascist tendencies in everyday life—caste exclusion, religious bigotry and state sponsored violence.

V. Shinilal's *Samparka Kranti* (2019) translated as *The Wanderer* (2025) in English is a contemporary Malayalam novel that allegorises the Indian nation through the metaphor of the railway system or train. The title in Malayalam, borrowed from the Sampark Kranti Express trains introduced to connect state capitals with New Delhi, signals a political as well as cultural journey. The novel situates its narrative inside a train, which becomes a moving miniature of India's plurality—its passengers embody diverse castes, religions, languages, ideologies and regional identities. The journey which begins on 23 January 2019 and ends on 25 January 2019 is a discourse physically through the myriad landscape of the country and symbolically referring to the major

stages in the formation of the present station. The journey includes people of different walks such as Karamchand, Lekha Namboodiri, Sameera Fathima, Kuriakose M, Zachariah, John the wildlife photographer, Louis Fulton Carvalho along with the innumerable number of travellers of various walks. The rest of the narrative allegorically portrays how the nation is aimlessly moving forward and backward, once the authoritarian Dvi takes control of the train and converts into a country of deaths of all who dissent and resist. Through the constant motion of the train, Shinilal reflects on the tensions of belonging and exclusion, where the promise of connection often collides with experiences of alienation, hierarchy and violence. Louis Harrington observes in "The Train nation': the Railway as a Leitmotif in South Asian literature" about the complex duality associated with the train and nation as "the railway and the nation both encapsulate the movement of multitudes who appear fundamentally chaotic in their diversity, yet who move in similar patterns and on the same terrain" (294).

The train as the unifying idea of the nation has been critically negotiated in the new millennial Malayalam literature. At a time when the nation has shown signs of disintegration in the wake of majoritarian fascism, literature has begun to perceive the nation as a hub dominated by territorial animals who always kept away other animals of the same species. "We had a dog in our village. When other dogs entered his territory, he would attack and chase them away... We had a landlord in our village. If anyone entered his lands, he would shoot them with his shotgun (5). Shinilal visualizes the transition of the integrationist national politics under the rubrics of 'unity in diversity' is reformulated as 'uniformity against diversity' through this metaphor from the biological world. The text shows how the symbols of unification of the past have become tools in the revivalist new age a symbol of division and a way to autocracy.

The train in *The Wanderer* is more symbolic than real. Though the train is realistically described as one with "twenty-two coaches, (travelling) 3417 kilometres, (in) Forty-eight hours and thirty-five minutes, (with) speakers of eighteen languages..." (11), it is situated in temporality rather than spatiality. It is a journey that is carefully structured against the colonial invasion of the Portuguese and the British connoted through the historical and fictional characters. The postcoloniality of spatial geography is conveyed through the fictional British wildlife photographer John and the ticket examiner Louis Fulton Carvalho. The Indian resistance to colonial and neofascist agencies is allegorized in the figure of Karamchand son of Mohandas, who resembles Gandhiji and is presented as a consciousness eternally alive in the country. Partha Chatterjee observes how the image of Gandhi could unify a sect of scattered people: "for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the *whole people* within the political nation" (110).

The most striking symbolization of the colonial memory in the novel is the museum piece steam engine called "Wanderer". The postcolonial is imagined as the offspring of the colonial modernization paradigm of development is metaphor thus:

A steam engine attached to the rear of the train turned out to be the centre of attraction. The crowd looked at it in amazement. It was being taken to New Delhi for display in an exhibition of heritage engines on Republic Day. With its chimney that had once set the skies trembling, 'Wanderer', now aged, stood quietly behind the twenty-two coaches pulled by one of its modern descendants. (8)

This image is supplemented by the idea of a book entitled *India* which John holds and falls upon the shit of the rails and gets retrieved through a porter. At the climax, the symbolic transfer of the book to Gandhi's namesake is a pointer about the irony of the power transfer. The past, present and future of the country is blended by the scatological image connoting the still shitty nature of the millions even in the digital, neoliberal world. No doubt, in medical terms of bodily disintegration, the novel describes, "a railway compartment is a tiny biopsy section of the Indian body" (85). However, when the train resumes its journey from New Delhi, it travels without the chronicler and unifier Karamchand who carries all the characters in his head in his identity as the child with no history – meaning the eternal present.

The resistance to colonialism by the subaltern masses is allegorized through the mythological Kariman who resents the Savarna lords and the Portuguese navy headed by Francisco de Almeida. The slave rebellion in history by a Pulaya (A Scheduled Caste in Kerala) is emblematic of the innumerable subaltern uprisings situated in opposition to Dvi's emergence later. The severed penis, connoting the sense of castration the marginalized faced in India, recurs in the form of the transgender Amanushi, who often dresses up as a man in the north-bound train and return as a woman in the south bound train, later defies the binary construction initiated by the fascists.

Dvi encapsulates the autocratic fascist who appropriates the rights of all the travellers who travel. He is the functional signifier that enables the nation to metaphorically function as an aimlessly wandering train in place of the connection by revolution. The coup in the text, as Shinilal argues, is characterized by the establishment of a Panopticon-like structure of a jail. "As of this instant, this train is the Mahabharat Express. I am its manager. I'll decide where and when the train should go.' The mob cheered him. The stationmaster regained his senses. He gave the signals for the train to proceed. The passengers ran up to the train and boarded it. Mahabharat Express started its journey" (204). Shinilal brings the allegory of fascism in the comparison of Dvi with Hitler. "If the mob was a pyramid, Dvi was its needle tip. He was the sum total of smaller individuals with analogous thoughts. Hitler was not a single individual. He was the manifest form of millions of mini-Hitlers" (200). Such rulers rise by manipulating the consent of the herd animals who are the symbolic supporters of authoritarianism and autocracy. In similar lines to many parody fictions in Malayalam and World literature, the novel portrays how the nation is converted into an army of thoughtless people depending on mythological scholarship articulating "Os" (meaning Oh, yes) to the commands of the master.

The political allegory also connects how the nation is transformed from *ahimsa* to *himsa* as well. One can argue that the Beretta M semi-automatic gun of 1934 vintage allegorically points to the centrality of violence in the formation of a fascist nation. The trajectory of a gun that has historical connections in the hands of the Italian fascists to Nathuram Godse's hands to assassinate Gandhi emerges as the historical connective. The novel portrays Dvi as carrying the same gun in his hands refers to the continuing flow of the fascist order in twenty-first century India replacing the Gandhian ideal.

Dvi polished the gun. He caressed its black body. He kissed its cold, dead barrel, and shoved it in his trouser pocket. He rose from his seat, silently slid open the door and went out.

What else has intervened and interceded in history as much as weapons?

What is this thing between humans and weapons? (214)

One of the most striking expositions of the rising facism in the country within the novel is the discussion between Karamchand and Dabholkar who is travelling in the train to attend a seminar titled "Nationalism and Black Magic". The discourse between two ideologies – Gandhism and Political Liberalism – presents a stark, unsettling meditation on nationhood, nationalism and democracy, exposing them as artificial human constructs rooted in territorial instinct and myth-making. The historical character Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, who was a pioneering rationalist that dedicated his life to challenging superstition and promoting scientific temper in India until his assassination in 2013, defines the nation as "an open jail ... The nation is a shackle put on our ankles, our movement is circumscribed" (164). Expanding the debate on nationalism, Dabholkar extends the argument in the lines of Anderson. Nations, therefore, are not natural entities but human inventions born of a territorial impulse: "Everything that is against the natural order has been created by men... Men are territorial animals" (164). Using the metaphor of a dog and its garbage bin, the text configures the nationalist critique through Dabholkar who argues that humans elevate their equivalent the nation by surrounding it with stories, songs and rituals. People "write and sing paeans about the bin" (164), proclaiming it superior and sacrificing themselves for it. Thus, nationalism becomes a cultivated ideology "a survivalology that a dog doesn't have" (164) constructed to sanctify ownership and justify exclusion. The contemporary practice of democracy, far from offering liberation, is framed as another illusionary construct, a "new form of dictatorship with makeup on" (164) a system in which authoritarian power merely disguises itself behind a mask of collective participation. Analysed in terms of historical facticity, both Gandhi and Dabholkar who visualised the nation got murdered by right wing extremists. But figuratively, unlike the eternal Karamchand, the liberal ideas of Dabholkar is not resurrected in the narrative.

The Wanderer functions as an incisive political allegory like George Orwell's classical political critique *Animal Farm* (1945). Exposing the mechanisms of power, control and ideological manipulation within their respective historical contexts, both the texts mark two contrastive ideologies through a fictional lens. Orwell's novella employs the simplicity of a farmyard fable to dramatize the rise of totalitarianism, revealing how revolutionary ideals are corrupted by authoritarian leadership. Through the gradual transformation of the pigs into indistinguishable replicas of human oppressors, *Animal Farm* critiques the cyclical nature of power and the ease with which democratic promises devolve into tyranny. "The pigs did not actually work, but directed and supervised the others. With their superior knowledge it was natural that they should assume the leadership" (Orwell 23). In contrast, *The Wanderer* situates its allegory within the contemporary postcolonial nation-state, using the symbol of a long-distance train journey to map the anxieties, exclusions and territorial conflicts embedded in modern citizenship. The train, which is traditionally celebrated as a sign of progress, here becomes a heterotopic site where surveillance, violence and spatial control operate in unsettling ways. While Orwell externalizes political brutality through the metaphor of animals overthrowing their masters, Shinilal internalizes it within the lived experiences of passengers whose precarious identities are shaped by caste, class, religion and rising fascist impulses. Both works, however, share a structural affinity: they expose how ordinary individuals become complicit in sustaining oppressive systems, whether through fear, habitual obedience, or the illusion of national unity. Orwell's characters are deceived by propaganda

slogans, while Shinilal's passengers enact territorial defensiveness that mirrors the divisive ideologies of the state. Yet where *Animal Farm* ends in total ideological collapse, *The Wanderer* stages resistance through the figure of the perpetual wanderer reminiscent of the father of the Great Indian nation, whose movement unsettles the rigid boundaries imposed by fascist structures.

In conclusion, in the context of the crisis in humanities in the liberal/post-truth age, translated texts from regional literatures can offer a pluralist and broadened perspective regarding the nation. *The Wanderer*, in this sense, resists fascism not only through political commentary but also by celebrating plurality, memory and ethical responsibility. The nation is imagined as a moving train which rather than connecting serves as a metaphor that divides the people in times of a political crisis. The way Shinilal links human nature is linked to the images of territorial, herd and subversive animality systematically demonstrate how the nation is transformed against the general dehumanization of the individuals in fascism. Through such symbolic acts, in Indian literature translations from regional literatures, especially from the South, can position itself as a cultural safeguard, reaffirming the values of justice and diversity in the face of totalitarian impulses.

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