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Abstract

Though more than six decades have passed since the death of Saadat Hasan Manto, the relevance of his voluminous body of work continues to increase as we speed into the twenty-first century. He was a literary genius who crafted stories in his characteristic style: bold, unapologetic, utterly honest. A major theme underlying most of his work is the problems faced by the weaker sections of society and he minces no words as he presents their stories to his readers. He draws them in and entangles them intimately with the issues his characters are facing and he almost always ends his tales with unforgettable sentences that haunt the readers for a long time.

India has been independent for over seventy-three years now but India is still not truly *free*. It is still struggling to solve the problem that had caused its freedom in 1947 to be bathed in blood-communalism. Over the decades, we have witnessed a multitude of heart breaking episodes of communal hatred and in the light of this distressing fact, we need the sharp voice of Manto to echo through our collective conscience and remind us of our own universal humanity. In this dissertation, we shall explore four of his stories set against the backdrop of the Partition and aim to understand how he was able to convey his message of peace and brotherhood through the use of seemingly harsh metaphors and macabre descriptors. We shall try to understand how, in not diluting the truth of violence in his stories, he was able to move the conscience of the readers and force them to face the brutality of the world they were living in.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Saadat Hassan Manto, the prolific storyteller who died a few years after the partition of India left behind some horrific accounts of terror for his admirers as well as critics. Manto, born in the year 1912, witnessed the ground reality of *Partition*, more popularly known as *The Independence of India* and portrayed the same in his stories. He lived through the times of the massacre that took place when our country was maimed forever and was instinctively drawn towards the plight of ordinary men and women. Although Manto has been endlessly critiqued for the depiction of obscenity and pornographic elements in his stories, his main motive of showcasing the bare truth is mostly chosen to be ignored by his critics. Manto's way of storytelling baffles the society as they come face to face with it. Manto aimed to showcase the lives of people without sugarcoating anything.

It is remarkable that a personality as staunch and fearless as Manto was able to exercise his right to creative freedom such a long time ago and notwithstanding the lawsuits filed against him back then, it is highly probable that had he been writing today, he would have faced greater harassment, censorship and social isolation. But it is also equally probable that a 21st century Manto would not have backed down, he would have found newer ways to raise his voice and tell us the truth-exactly as it is. And truth is often bitter, filled with sadness, loss, longing; truth is not pretty, describing it requires honesty more than artistic finesse and Manto had more than enough of both. In this dissertation, we wish to explore how Manto was able to create and destroy at the same time, leaving the readers astounded,

horrified, disgusted even but always curious about the slew of questions the stories birthed in their minds. You read Manto once but you keep hearing him for a long time. The questions haunt you, the imagery does not leave your consciousness, you are forced to surrender, to simply accept the truth and neither glorify nor vilify it, just as Manto wanted it to be. In this, Manto was helped greatly by his repertoire of symbolism and seemingly ordinary choice of words that pounded on your imagination and altered it every single time. Choosing this radical way of storytelling cost Manto a lot in terms of material success but has earned for him eternal fame, glory and sincere respect from millions of readers across the subcontinent.

Literature Review

Manto wrote in *Urdu* and therefore, in order to conduct our research, we relied on the English translation of his works by the renowned Pakistani journalist and writer Khalid Hasan. The two books that we referred to for the stories are *Bitter Fruit: The Very Best of Saadat Hasan Manto (The Return/Khol Do)* and *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition (Toba Tek Singh, The Dog of Tithwal/Tithwal ka Kutta and Cold Than Ice/Thanda Gosht)*. “The Dogs of Tithwal: Imagining Animals in Partition” by Susan Haris was instrumental in shedding light on the plight of abandoned animals during the chaos of Partition. We referred to Veena Das’s *An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* for her insights about the portrayal of women during Partition with special reference to *Khol Do*. *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* by Suvir Kaul provided useful information regarding the incredibly surprising consequences of an imbalance of power relations between the male perpetrator and female victim in *Thanda Gosht*. Basu’s article on *Academia* helped to understand the theme of sadomasochism displayed by the central characters in *Thanda Gosht*. Sudha Tiwari’s article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* shed light on the ways Manto’s stories have played an important role in documenting the memories of Partition. The 2018 Netflix movie *Manto* by Nandita Das also helped to gain an insight into the life and personality of Manto along with showcasing how the incidents in his stories influenced and were influenced by the events in the writer’s life. The movie was extremely helpful in understanding the finer points of the story *Toba Tek Singh* as Bishan Singh’s pain can be seen reflected in the pain Manto felt when he had to leave his beloved Bombay and go to Pakistan. Using the aforementioned sources, we explored how Manto employed hard-hitting descriptors of horror to convey the harsh reality of the violence that followed Partition.

The Horrors of Partition

Manto was a supremely gifted writer, one who could observe trauma at close quarters and yet when describing it, could stay detached and narrate the complete truth. He did not sugarcoat anything. One of the most moving themes in Manto's works is the portrayal of the horrors that engulfed the subcontinent after it was hastily divided into two. In this chapter, we shall discuss two of Manto's famous stories that poignantly describe the madness that was Partition. The first story is set in a mental healthcare facility in Lahore, Pakistan and the second in the scenic mountainous military post of Tithwal. Through stories which feature lunatics and a dog, Manto has expressed his deep disappointment at the decision to divide India which led to a bloody civil war that claimed half a million lives and forced the exodus of about fifteen million people.

The first story is titled "Toba Tek Singh" and takes place in Lahore two or three years after partition. The governments of India and Pakistan decide to exchange the lunatics lodged in various asylums based on their religion. This announcement leads to a flurry of activity inside the asylum in Lahore and initiates many confusing conversations between the inmates, who are at varying stages of madness. The most curious story is that of a Sikh man named Bishan Singh, also called Toba Tek Singh by the inmates, who has been in the facility for over fifteen years. He has a weird habit of not lying down or sleeping and this has caused his feet and ankles to swell. After hearing about the impending exchange, he is agitated because he does not know whether his beloved native place, Toba Tek Singh, is in India or Pakistan. He

keeps asking the other inmates and prison officials for help but nobody is able to help him out. He then waits for the monthly visit by his family so that he can ask them but they do not come. Instead a family friend turns up who informs him that his family has safely gone to India. Even this person is unable to confirm where Toba Tek Singh now lies. On the day of the exchange, Bishan Singh asks the officials to clear his doubt but they confuse him even further. Bishan Singh stands up the whole night in the cold and just before dawn, a scream is heard- he has given up. He falls down in despair. The man who had not lied down in fifteen years is now on the ground.

Chosen by the BBC as one of the 100 stories that shaped the world, Toba Tek Singh is an allegory, a heart-rending portrayal of the horrors taking place in the Indian subcontinent in the weeks and months following the vivisection of India ("100 stories"). Identity does not stem from religion alone, it is deeply tied to one's homeland, one's place of birth and the witness of one's growing up years and maturing into a complete individual ("Toba Tek Singh" [Surviving BA Literature]). This can be seen in the story of Bishan Singh who wanted to know where his homeland Toba Tek Singh was, in India or Pakistan but nobody, not even the asylum guards or the lunatic exchange authorities could give him an answer. This is a horrible position to be in for anyone, to have lost your mind but for one idea-the love of your homeland and then to have that idea crushed so mercilessly. At the end of the story, we see him crumbling, his resolve to never lie down breaking, all the energy draining out of him. We see him melting into the ground, a ground that is neither India nor Pakistan, an accurate symbolism for what he must be feeling inside, a nobody, belonging to nowhere. With this story, Manto perhaps also wanted to describe his own feelings about having to relocate from Bombay, his Toba Tek Singh, to Lahore (Manto, *Netflix*).

In “Tithwal Ka Kutta”/ “The Dog of Tithwal”, we are taken to a military post nestled amidst beautiful hills and valleys in Kashmir, right on the border of India and Pakistan. The Indian and Pakistani units are stationed behind secure fronts on two hills which are facing each other. One night, on the Indian side, Corporal Harnam Singh is singing a song in memory of his beloved when a bark is heard and Banta Singh, having gone off to search for the source, returns with a dog who he names “Chapad Jhunjhun” (Manto 2011). The soldiers are amused at the sudden appearance of the dog and want to interact with him but only after finding out his nationality. They eventually tie a sign around his neck which declares him to be an “Indian dog”. The next evening, the dog wanders off to the Pakistani side where he is questioned about his whereabouts the previous night. The dog had appeared a few days ago and had been with the Pakistani unit since then until his foray into the Indian side the previous evening. After seeing the sign around his neck, they are enraged and replace it with “Sapad Sunsun. This is a Pakistani dog” (Manto 2011).

Then Captain Himmat Khan sends him back to the Indian side to carry the new message to the enemies. Captain Harnam Singh, upon seeing the dog coming from the other side, is furious and shoots at the dog. The dog wants to retreat but is prevented by bullets from the Pakistani side. He keeps leaping from one side to the other until he is finally killed. No remorse is shown by either side after killing the dog so inhumanely. While Himmat Khan declares that the dog was a “poor fellow” who had been “martyred”, Harnam Singh said “He died that death that is a dog’s alone” (Manto 2011).

This shows the extent to which basic human values like compassion and kindness had been erased due to the two wars, first the civil war and now the military one. For these soldiers, there was no difference between men and animals, the only point of difference was the country one belonged to. What is even more saddening about the dog's murder is how he had been anthropomorphized just prior to it (Haris). Both sides had given him names, had fed him, talked to him and the Pakistanis had even asked him to go to the enemy side to deliver a message. Using the example of a dog, Manto perhaps also wanted to draw attention to the plight of millions of animals that must have been abandoned and left to starve during the exodus. The description of the helplessness of the dog while being fired at from both sides conjures up similar images of men, women and children being brutalized in the name of religion. The trains full of corpses, the wombs sliced open, the women raped, the men castrated and the maimed and orphaned children, the dog symbolises the plight of them all (McManus).

The previous story in this chapter had focussed on the absurdity of the authorities who wanted to make sure everything, including asylum inmates, were thoroughly and properly divided. Manto lived through the times of the massacre and this event which altered his life forever was a major theme in many of his stories. His partition stories will forever serve as lessons to those who willingly incite violence, cause rifts in communities and create situations for war to ensue.

Women in Partition

An overarching theme across Manto's enormous body of work is the plight of women belonging to the lower classes. This sensibility to the feminine gender was deeply affected and shaped by the communal clashes that followed Partition. Women were at the centre of the worst acts of violence and Manto tried to capture their agony in the stories he wrote. He wrote, without embellishment and also without filters, about the sexual violence that was inflicted on women. For this, he was tried in court many times because the upholders of morality in those days failed to see the real objective in his storytelling which was to lay bare the truth-naked and disturbing. Manto was not one to give strictures or lessons, he merely wanted to show what was already happening so that one may then decide for himself or herself what is right and what is wrong. Oftentimes, his stories contain powerful descriptors of horrible incidents that can shake one to the very core and in this chapter, we shall analyze two such stories "Khol Do" and "Thanda Gosht".

"Khol Do"/"Open It" is set near the border of India and Pakistan, perhaps a few weeks after Partition. Sirajuddin wakes up to find himself alone in a refugee camp. After the confusion in his mind clears up, he remembers how he had lost his wife to the communal violence and become separated from his only daughter-Sakina. He desperately searches for his daughter in the crowd of the camp but to no avail. A few days later, he meets a group of young men who promise to help him. He describes Sakina to them so that they can find her easily and it so happens that the men manage to find her after a few days. They take her to

their lorry and give her food and milk and even a coat to cover herself up as she had lost her dupatta. A few days pass. When Sirajuddin meets the men the next time and enquires about Sakina, they say they are still searching. That evening, he sees some men bringing an unconscious girl on a stretcher to the camp hospital. He follows them and reaches the room where she has been kept. And to his joy, he finds that the girl is his beloved daughter Sakina. In order to examine her properly, the doctor attending Sakina gestures towards the window and asks Sirajuddin to open it-“khol do” (Manto 2011). At the sound of these words, Sakina, with her weak hands, unties her salwar and pulls it down, exposing her thighs.

The climax of this story is chilling; in a mere gesture by Sakina, Manto has laid bare all that has happened to her. Das rightly argues that in not describing the sexual act, Manto adds to the quality of the story. She does not utter even a single word but we are brought face to face with the reality of her situation. The doctor asks Sirajuddin to open the window, but by now, Sakina has been ravaged enough number of times that she has no strength left to resist and interpreting the words as a command for her to undress herself, she does so. However, this gesture, instead of breaking Sirajuddin, makes him exclaim in joy that his daughter is alive. Sirajuddin has also undergone so much abuse, violence and trauma that another sign of violence is less important than the happy fact that he has finally met his daughter and that she is alive. The doctor is taken aback both by Sakina’s gesture and Sirajuddin’s response and we see the effect the incident had on him, he “was drenched from head to toe in sweat” (Manto 2009).

What adds to the distress is the fact that Sakina, after being rescued, is violated again by the people who had promised to bring her back safely. Manto, through the medium of this story, wanted to highlight the barbarity that was unleashed in the name of religion and how

patriarchy managed to co-opt nationalism to fight wars on the bodies of helpless women (Khan).

The second story “Thanda Gosht”/”Cold Flesh” starts in the dead of night when Eesher Singh comes to meet his partner, Kalwant Kaur. Kalwant has been eagerly waiting for him but she notices that Eesher is not his usual self. She asks him about his whereabouts for the last few days but Eesher, wanting to avoid any direct answer, engages her in love-making. However, Kalwant finds that Eesher is unable to satisfy her and this spawns in her mind doubts regarding Eesher’s loyalty. She picks up Eesher’s dagger and slashes at his neck demanding the name of the woman who has stolen him from her. Eesher, with blood dripping from his wounds into his beard, finally tells her the truth. He describes how, when the riots started in the city, he had also participated in violence against the muslims. He had killed six members of a household but instead of killing the seventh, a beautiful young girl, he had carried her off to abuse her. But just as he was about to enter her, he realised that the girl was dead- “thanda gosht” (Manto 2011)! Ironically, by the end of the story, Eesher has also turned into “thanda gosht” bleeding from the wounds inflicted too soon by Kalwant and by the same dagger he had used to kill the girl’s family.

The story describes the gruesome act of attempted rape on a dead body, a corpse. This act has so rattled the mind, body and soul of Eesher Singh that he has become impotent. Eesher was taking advantage of his powerful position as an armed man with respect to the helpless victim but ended up quite helpless himself. As described by Kaul, by dying, the girl does not allow Eesher to force himself on her and this sudden imbalance of power relations traumatises Eesher who is unable to perform any sexual act thereafter (253). Manto has also juxtaposed the sadomasochistic behaviour of Eesher Singh in sparing her life to first rape her

with the aggressive action of Kulwant who first stabs Eesher and then demands an explanation (Basu). This is an attempt to portray the futility of violence and aggression which renders the perpetrator himself helpless later on. It is interesting to note that while Manto is describing the terrible act committed by Eesher, he is also explaining the effect the incident had on every aspect of his being. Eesher has been affected not just physically but psychologically as well. He keeps pleading with Kulwant to not abuse the girl because he realises how wrong he was and in his guilt, wants to spare the girl any more harm, even if it is only verbal abuse. This aspect of the story was elucidated by Manto himself in one of his trials where he said that “even at the last limits of cruelty and violence, of barbarity and bestiality, he (Eesher) still does not lose his humanity!” (Tiwari). On the question of obscenity in the story, Manto had said “If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth’ (*Netflix*)’.

We see that Eesher, though a well-built man, and capable of stopping Kulwant from attacking him does not protest because the guilt that has been churning his insides for the last few days makes him think that it is a justified punishment to him for his deeds. Manto repeatedly uses irony in this story to drive home the point that violence only leads to more violence and at the end, nothing fruitful is to be gained by indulging in it.

Conclusion

The date of carving out of Pakistan from India is celebrated as Independence Day but it cannot be viewed so linearly, detached from the chaos and destruction that accompanied the first such day. In this paper, we did not delve into the political reasons behind the partition but focussed on understanding the barbarity that followed it, barbarity committed by friends against friends, neighbours against neighbours, humans against other humans. Our sources consisted of four of Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories that each zoom into one aspect of the utter confusion that was partition. These stories give no excuses, make no attempts at hiding the truth but lay bare each incident in all its horrifying details. Manto uses morbid words and phrases, conjures up painful images of violence and makes sure that the reader is forced to think beyond what is written. In making the reader uncomfortable and deeply disturbed, Manto only aimed to make him recognise the true nature of reality. Without any words of preaching, Manto successfully makes the reader reflect on life, its trials and tribulations, the nature of justice and the universal forces of love, kindness and compassion.

Toba Tek Singh emphasises the importance of homeland in shaping one's identity and with the sad demise of the protagonist, drives home the point that hasty political decisions can have incredibly devastating effects across time and space. In *Tithwal Ka Kutta*, the plight of millions of men, women and children are represented by the piteous situation the dog finds himself in, attacked without reason save his *nationality* and mercilessly killed by the very people who had earlier befriended him. *Khol Do* is a commentary on the hideous sexual violence that millions of women had to go through during Partition. It also showcases how

patriarchal attitudes had blinded people to such an extent that women were being violated by members of not just hostile religions but by people of their own communities. Manto had a gift for diving below the surface and extracting meaning embedded deep within. This can be seen in the final story *Thanda Gosht* in which a man is rendered impotent after he tries to rape the corpse of a woman. This incident affects the man not only physically but also psychologically, he accepts the violence shown to him by his enraged partner in slitting his throat for disloyalty because he feels guilty and ashamed of his actions. In the end, we find that just like the girl, he has also become “thanda gosht”, having been killed by his own weapon. Each of these stories, once read, become a part of our consciousness and come to us during periods of silence and of commotion, force us to look within, to introspect, to question, to love and also to forgive, to accept reality for what it is and to strive to change that reality if possible. And Manto is able to achieve this lasting impression on our psyche because he chose to be blunt, he chose to let the grotesque guide us to wherever we want to go and for this, he will be forever cherished.

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