

Objectivity and Omniscience in Selected Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto

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Abstract : Partition was one of the most significant events that drastically changed the geo-political and social framework of the Indian subcontinent by its tumultuous impact leading to huge displacement of human population, genocidal violence and social destitution. In this paper I will basically discuss the harrowing experiences of Partition faced by the ordinary people in reference to their literary representation in the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto, a phenomenal Partition writer whose stories are well known for their black humour and sardonic quality and give us a glimpse of the magnitude of anguish and suffering of the poor and marginalised sections of society. This paper will also shed light on the authorial intent of Manto in close relation to the sudden and abrupt endings of some of his stories and his quality of objective narration abstaining from any kind of personal stance or judgement on the misery and injustice that his protagonists face.

Keywords : Partition violence, nation-state, territorial bifurcation, citizenship, trauma, identity crisis, religious fanaticism, censorship, objective narration.

The Partition of British ruled India into two separate nation states of India and Pakistan based on the religious concentration of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs resulted in unprecedented changes in the lives of the people who were disillusioned by the sudden identity crisis that they were compelled to face on account of the territorial bifurcation. Millions of people migrated across the newly formed borders, millions were uprooted and there was widespread communal violence which led to huge loss of life and property. This was a situation of complete chaos and anarchy, as fuelled by strong religious sentiments and communitarian hatred the Hindus and Muslims were bent on killing each other. Manto's short stories serve as a chronicle of the trauma and pain in the aftermath of Partition and narrate the gruesome levels of human debasement when confronted with such an unexpected disruption of social and political structures. His stories present first hand impressions of the acute agony and morbidity faced by his characters testifying the gross injustice and psychological distress in the wake of the newly achieved Independence which came with an irreplaceable loss.

There is a huge corpus of Partition literature produced by several eminent writers like Ismat Chughtai, Bhasham Sahni, Khuswant Singh, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mushirul Hasan etc but what differentiates Manto's art of story-telling is that he strikes at the central nerve eliciting a plethora of painful emotions and memories that cannot be ignored in the discourse of Partition. Having been born in 1912, in the Ludhiana district of Punjab and receiving education from Amritsar and then Aligarh Muslim University, Manto shifted to Bombay after a brief association with the All India Radio, where he worked in the film industry till he migrated to Lahore after realising that a general intolerance and scepticism was brewing against Muslim workers. Though he loved the city of Bombay very much, he was disillusioned and offended when during a conversation with his fellow actor Shyam on the atrocities and violence perpetuated by Muslim groups in Lahore on the Sikhs, Shyam in a fit of rage expressed his general prejudice towards Muslims and that Manto was no exception if his religious sentiments were hurt. Shyam's words bewildered Manto and in one of his excerpts, he writes—"Shyam's words gave me a jolt...when I pondered over the matter I felt a world of difference between this world and that. It helped me to understand the psychological background of the gory events in which daily hundreds of innocent Hindus and Muslims were being put to death "(quoted in ibid 23). Despite his migration to Lahore, Manto could not reconcile himself to the new conditions of life and always suffered from a sense of 'dual belonging'.

Manto's brilliant story '**Toba Tek Singh**' captures the identity crisis and perplexity of the chief protagonist Bhashen Singh who just like thousands of other victims of Partition feels dismayed in regard to his place of belonging and citizenship. Employing the metaphor of madness, Manto emphasizes how the traumatic experiences of Partition can

compel people to lose their mental sanity, being overwhelmed by an unexpected dislocation of the self in trying to situate oneself as belonging either to India or Pakistan. After the new lines of division that were drawn in a thoughtless exercise of authority and power without even taking into sentimental consideration the deep attachment of the people to their land of birth and to the people inhabiting it. The mental derangement that Bhishen Singh suffers from, is symptomatic of the greater madness of the political leaders and high government officials who exhibited their imprudence and short-sightedness in failing to understand the pitfalls and drawbacks in using religion as a pretext to the division of the country. 'Toba Tek Singh' testifies the cataclysmic impact of Partition presented through the character of Bhishen Singh who suffers from a deep sense of isolation and alienation in having to figure out his new identity in the changed circumstances. The homelessness and disintegration that he suffers from, represents the larger picture of the socially challenging times that million others were also victims of as refugees wandering in search of stability and rehabilitation in a distant and unknown land. The man Bhishen Singh, in his madness resembles the plight of several other lunatics in the asylum who belong to several religious groups and places but what binds them together is the similar narrative of trauma, of forced displacement, of losing loved ones in communal violence and a failure to adhere to the new notions of the 'nation-state' which happened all of a sudden. In the story, Manto also raises a very significant question as to whether the new political dimensions that have come to alter mass human lives would pave way for further divisions or not.

"Nobody knew whether it was in India or in Pakistan. Whoever tried to explain would slide into confusing speculations that if Sialkot which had once been in India was now in Pakistan. And who could say with any conviction that one day both Pakistan and India would not be wiped off the face of the earth'. (TASEER p. 5)

Even amidst insanity there are traces of human understanding and comprehension that can be seen in his personal self. His crisis can also be seen as an existential anguish born out of a sense of split, a failure of reconciliation with the present state of affairs.

"Though his name was really Bishen Singh he was known to all as Toba Tek Singh. He had no concept of the passage of time, neither what day or month it was nor how many years had passed. But every month when the time for his friends and relations to visit drew near, he would instinctively know and would inform the warden". (TASEER, pp.5-6)

The most striking aspect of the story is the incomprehensible words of Bhishen Singh, '*Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhyana di munnng di dal of the laltain*' which symbolically captures the limits of human insanity and craziness propelled by a rational dislocation of the senses. Manto's endeavour of protest can be seen through the character of Toba Tek Singh who defies the logic of 'maps and boundaries' that are based on religious difference and shatters the false constructions of stereotypes which played a major role in widening the communal rift. The story ends on a note of profound introspection as Manto depicts the successful resistance of Toba Tek Singh to the rules and regulations of the newly formed nation states thus emphasizing the absurdity and irrationality of the political leaders who supported the idea of Partition. Even being an insane man Toba Tek Singh epitomises the firm resolution of not being categorised and chained to an identity which he does not naturally associate with. What is remarkable is the scathing satire evident in the last lines of the story.

"There behind barbed wires, was India. Here behind barbed wires was Pakistan. In the middle on a nameless piece of earth lay Toba Tek Singh"

Manto's skilful art of narration can be seen in the ending lines of the story which leave an indelible imprint on the mind of the readers who are driven out of their comfort zones to fathom the deep psychological conflict that works in the mind of the chief protagonist, to feel the same trials and tribulations of life and find a way out of it. Manto with his acute moral vision and farsightedness reveals the inherent deceits in the political system and the double standards of religious and social norms. What strikes the readers is how Manto abstains from pronouncing any judgement or accusation to anyone in his stories. His quality of faithful representation without taking any sides is what separates him from the writers of his own times. He never preaches any lofty ideas through his stories but stirs our conscience making us ponder over the intricacies of The Partition trauma. Manto is an omniscient narrator and expresses true fidelity and realism by presenting the dark and disdainful side of humankind in the broad daylight of his stories. He does not improvise his tale to make it seamy but depicts life as it is, untainted by any personal prejudice or belief. What matters to Manto is the realistic appeal of the social occurrences that he witnesses around them and as an artist tries to make an honest portrayal of the physical and psychological impact of violence, abduction, forced migration, religious discord and the problems of rehabilitation and accommodating to the new ways of life.

Manto primarily deals with the event of Partition but he never targets a particular community or religion. We rarely find words such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', 'India' or 'Pakistan' in his stories as he does not talk about the personal self of his characters but the inhuman torture and suffering that they face on account of the violence and religious fanaticism. He never sees his characters with a lens of morality or judges their actions, but simply exhibits their



tumultuous journeys, abstaining from creating any binary through which they could be evaluated. What is left to the readers is the narrative of violence, despair and dislocation through which his characters seem to establish themselves and their persistent struggle and hope to come to terms with the arbitrary division of borders.

In stories like **'The Assignment'** and **'The Return'** or **'Khol Do'**, Manto presents how during the partition crisis, even the notions of trust and faith were subverted and betrayal, deception and disloyalty became common responses, and how even one's neighbours and co-religionists became enemies adamant to destroy and shatter the very humanitarian bonds of fellow feeling in a bid to quench their political desires. It is Mian Abdul Hai's firm belief in the story **'The Assignment'** that things would 'soon return to normal' and thus there was no reason to worry or to leave Amritsar, but Mian Abdul Hai is completely disillusioned in comprehending the fact that in times of communal riot and conflagration people do not work along rational lines but in an impulsive fit of madness and bestiality. He might have had a good knowledge of law and crime but he failed miserably to judge the consequences of the communal discord fuelled by the sectarian sentiments of the mob who vandalised and destroyed his house in the end of the story. Religious fanaticism and hostility completely seems to override the finer human emotions when confronted with a question of identity and assertion. Sughra as a seventeen year old girl realises the gravity of the situation and urges her father to shift to Sharifpura, a nearby Muslim locality to ensure their safety but Mian Abdul Hai sidelines her apprehension as baseless imagination and convinces her that nothing ominous will happen to them because of the self-respect and honour that he enjoys in Amritsar. Manto's stories depict the continual struggle of mankind in opposition between his convictions and what actually turns out to happen, shattering the notions of goodwill and mutual trust that was once shared by the Hindu and Muslim communities prior to the dreadful event of Partition.

As riots and communal conflicts increased, there was not a single Muslim left in the locality except Mian Sahib and a mob of Hindu chauvinists planned to do away with him by trying to lay a treacherous trap. Santokh Singh was used as a pawn in order to wreck violence on Mian Sahib's family as he turned up knocking the door of the house on a pretext of fulfilling his father Gurmukh Singh's duty to gift sawwaiyaan to Mian Sahib in return for a kindness he had shown towards him many years ago. Mian Sahib assured of the kind intentions and genial love of the Sardar ji asked Sughra to receive the gift of love warmly. Santokh Singh however had not come to fulfil his father's duty but to guide the mob to the house which was bent on destroying every Muslim member in the locality, with the judge Saab being no exception. The character of Santokh garners greater limelight as how he uses the benevolence and love of his father and subverts it in the most evil and malicious way, thus defying the kindness and grace of his dead father. The characters of Basharat and Sughra also stand testimony to how many naïve and flawless individuals too had to bear the brunt of Partition violence despite any kind of involvement. The greatest mistake Mian makes in the story is his total failure to interpret the chain of violence and bloodshed, and bestowing firm trust on Santokh expecting that he too will be as generous and cordial as his father, and thus has to sacrifice both his life as well as his children's life who stand for the innocent victims who suffer undeservedly.

Gyanendra Pandey in his book **'Remembering Partition'** states that how the narrative of history has been homogenised and the issue of violence has been relegated to a state of absence. Pandey therefore argues for the need to give emphasis to the lesser talked about aspects of violence and the latent truths that rarely surface in the discourse of history. Taking a close note of Pandey's arguments, we can find Manto's stories trying to recreate those moments of insanity and strife, suffering and struggle, encountered by his characters who at times rebel against the unjust and inhuman order of the things while at some intervals succumb to the pain and trauma of it, filled with a sense of resignation and destitution. Manto exposes the hypocrisy of a religious facade in giving a justification for inhuman atrocities and killings as we can see in the last lines spoken by Sughra to Tarlochan -
"Take away this rag of your religion,
I don't need it."

The resistance and reprehension can be evidently felt in her words, and Manto ends the story on an abrupt note leaving his readers startled and shocked at the tragic unfolding of the events in the life of the protagonist. Manto himself never lets his ethical perspective dawn over his narratives but leaves it to the readers to find a meaning and substance in his tirades on society. He appeals to the conscience of his readers entrusting them with the most difficult of questions, confusions and contradictions that do not have one fixed solution. His stories have the potential to unsettle even a calm mind by the sheer intensity of their narration, a woeful testament of solitude, pain and sorrow the scars of which are renewed and brought to the fore even today.

The **Assignment** therefore becomes one of the most poignant and agonising treatise on the frailties of human relationships, of debilitating mutual bonds in a world where neighbours kill their neighbours in suspicion and distrust, ripping apart the strong mutual reliance and faith that one has in friendship and community. To elaborate further we need to take into consideration another of Manto's short story **'Khol Do'** which as the title symbolically suggests is a gruesome account of sexual abuse and torture faced by the character of Sakina, Sirajuddin's lost daughter whom he

desperately searches for and finds at the end but she is not the old Sakina that he knew, she has been transformed into a living corpse, lifeless and battered after repeated rape. Manto recreates the harrowing conditions of migration and the despondency and helplessness of human beings when confronted with such a great debacle.

“He lay very still, gazing at the dusty sky .He appeared not to notice the confusion or the noise. To a stranger he might have looked like an old man in deep thought, though this was not the case. He was in shock ,suspended as it were over a bottomless pitA succession of images raced through his mind .Attack....fire.....escape, railway stationnightSakina . He rose abruptly and began searching through the milling crowd of the refugee camp.” (Hasan, 39) The unfortunate father figure Sirajuddin is thrust into a state of delirium and uncertainty looking for his daughter Sakina .He heaves a sigh of relief when he notices some young men who are searching for the lost people and uniting them with their families. Sirajuddin with a renewed hope recounts the vivid description of his daughter to them and prays for their success. What is striking here is the fact that how during Partition even saviours turned into perpetrators of violence devoid of any moral responsibility and value. The intensity of bestial brutality and horror can be evinced from the flashback that Sirajuddin experiences pertaining to the dreadful murder of his wife.

“Then it came to him in a flash –the dead body of his wife, her stomach ripped open. It was an image that could not go away”. Women in Manto’s stories often become the crux around which the narrative of trauma and misery is recreated. The sufferings of his women protagonists depict the darker and bleaker aspect of Partition times as women’s body was continuously taken to be a site of continual conflict and social oppression. Instances of rape, physical and domestic violence, prostitution, abduction were common and such women were often seen with indignation and scorn. His stories strike at the very root of these falsifying notions of honour and respect and gives us a peek into how his prostitutes, debauches and fallen women as society refers them, have a better moral insight and are in a continual fight with the so called dominant discourses of the time which never talked of their identity and plight. The psychological shock that Sakina has to endure on account of repeated rape forces her to lose the sense of language itself. Her disassociation of language is symbolic of the layers of trauma that she internalises within her mind thus growing distant and estranged from the social function of language. Sirajuddin is elated to get his daughter back physically but perhaps he can never get her earlier self. Both Sirajuddin and Sakina have paid a very high price to get a place in the new political discourse of the newly constituted nation state. He has lost his family and Sakina has lost her normal self. The chilling sight of Sakina opening her shalwar in the hospital highlights her bloody and dismal experience of rape.

“The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs ... The doctor broke into a cold sweat. This abrupt ending comes with a very serious and grim realisation of profound agony and alienation that cannot be understood by someone who has not experienced the catastrophic event of Partition. Manto through the character of Sakina chronicles the adversity and oppression that was inflicted on millions of such faceless and harmless victims who without any fault were relegated to a life of utter subjugation, harassment and dehumanisation. It is not only the doctor who is shaken at the incapacitation and powerlessness of Sakina but we too as readers shiver at the deplorable condition she undergoes leaving us to contemplate over the erosion and desiccation of humane feelings in a world where fair is foul and foul is fair. Manto through these stories lifts the veil of false pretences and protestations of morality and ethics and presents the dark and dreary reality of his times as it appeared to him. He uses the medium of fiction not to convey fanciful and fabricated lies that take on the garb of truth but cuts through all the sham and hypocrisy of his society to give a clear and truthful portrait of the ugly and bitter circumstances that existed at that point of time.

Nandita Das in the biopic of the writer gives a faithful rendition of his struggle and literary journey of being pitted against the travails of Partition. The film captures the problems Manto faced on account of his Muslim identity in Bombay and most importantly by the direct and straightforward depiction of Partition reality in his stories. In majority of his stories we find characters who belong to the lowest sections of society, marginalised and disenfranchised lot, ranging from prostitutes to refugees, slum dwellers to migrants etc who are the worst victims of Partition violence .Manto through the sufferings of his characters explores the notions of the helpless surrender of humanity in the face of savage cruelty. The film set in the backdrop of Bombay and Lahore renders a historical and social basis which forms the crux of his stories. Having been charged multiple times for obscenity and perversion in his stories like Thanda Gosht, Boo, Dhuan and Khol Do the film depicts a court trial in which Manto is asked to explain his stand before the jury and he utters some of the most crucial words that can only be expected from a true artist and writer who believes that stories stem from a particular context and if taken on a different plane lose their relevance and touch.

“If you take my stories to be obscene and unbearable it is because we live in a world which is unbearable .It is up to your discretion to like or dislike my stories. Literary critics can debate if it meets the standard of literature or not. But my stories are literature and literature cannot be obscene. In their daily lives thousands use the words that my character speak .Don’t people use such language. Why can’t reality be shown as it is? I write what I know and see. Will

denying reality make us better human beings? Ishar Singh's language maybe filthy, the context maybe heinous but the story shows that despite his beastly nature Ishar Singh is not bereft of humanity and nor is the writer Manto lacking humanity. Instead of understanding this, putting me on a trial is a joke. My stories are mirrors for society to see itself. If someone has a problem with what they see, how am I to blame?"(Das, Nandita)

The above words leave a resounding echo in the minds of the readers establishing him as a writer who had the courage and conviction to speak truth to power. To see his stories regarding prostitution and sexual abuse as full of nudity and violence is to be oblivious to his central philosophy and vision of life which is based on a humanitarian doctrine of fellow feeling and mutual respect. Manto always regarded an individual to be human above all rather than belonging to one particular religious, political or cultural organisation. Through his stories he laughs at the follies and inadequacies of his characters and his satire is always directed at the inability and failure of human beings to transcend petty differences of religion and sect.

Reading Manto almost seventy years after Independence we are confronted with the same questions and confusions that plagued his mind. Time and context may vary but Manto's themes still resonate in the everyday trials and tribulations of life that citizens in both India and Pakistan suffer from. Communal discord, geographical disputes, moral policing, oppression and abuse of minorities and the marginalised sections of society, religious chauvinism and a rhetoric of forced nationalistic jingoism are the new forms through which the state controls and influences the lives of its citizens. Writers, thinkers, intellectuals and social activists are restricted from voicing their opinions in public through repressive measures such as censorship and litigation carried out at the behest of people in positions of power and authority. There is no doubt that Manto's time was much more challenging and difficult but there is also no doubt that present problems faced by the people in most dictatorial regimes and repressive state apparatuses trace their origin to the same old conventional beliefs and ideologies along which the governments in power operate.

Manto's opinions about what constitutes true literature, who decides the limits of representation that must be allowed in a piece of literary work, who decides what should be censored and what is fit and worthy of showing in public, who decides what is obscene and vulgar and hence a threat to the civil morality are very valid and relevant in modern life. Manto was not only a writer but also an insightful thinker and keen observer of life, a person much ahead of his age and time, a misfit if we can say.

The image of Manto we conceive of through his stories is that of a person whose literary excellence and sensibility was deeply ingrained in the politics of his age. His stories and satires became more sharp and incisive as he went on seeing and understanding life more and more after migrating to Lahore and his subsequent addiction to alcohol, as well as his disillusionment and detachment from the society he was a part of engaged in a never ending battle of sectarian passions. Manto devises his endings in such a way that the role of the reader is given a greater importance because he leaves it to his readers and their sense of justice to derive their own conclusions and interpretations from his stories, thus imparting a sense of agency on the part of the reader to weave the complete tale in their minds if there is any chance of further commentary. The readers are left in a lurch, from where they need to steer their thought processes in hope of arriving at a rational standpoint to judge the actions of his protagonists who despite their adversities exhibit a possibility of redemption as we see in Toba Tek Singh who resists all attempts by the state to confine and chain him to one fixed identity demarcated by the borders.

In response to the question posed in the title of his essay "Is Manto necessary today?" the Urdu critic Salim Akhtar has stated: "My answer is an unconditional yes, not because Manto is a very great short story writer or artist, nor because he wrote very enjoyable stories. These features can be found in other short story writers. What is, in fact necessary today is that kind of moral courage, free from the taint of hypocrisy that man embodies. Manto had the courage to face bitter truth, to analyse it and to express it openly. He fought all his life for the right to speak the truth. He endured not only the censure of religion and the courts but also eventually the rejection of his fellow progressives. Still he remained on his path" (Akhtar, Salim).

The essence of Manto's literature lies in its universal and humanistic appeal as in a world which is divided in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, class, gender and colour, stories and narratives of abuse, oppression and pain are intrinsic to it. Manto is the powerful master of those emotions and feelings as his stories form a thread between the reality and the reader in which he finds a similar sense of attachment.

A review of Manto's short stories by the Times literary supplement very aptly summarises his powerful and effective art of narration. "What is characteristic of Manto's best work is a wry, sardonic refusal to be shocked. His attitude is that of a man who can no longer be surprised by the things people do to each other, but who nevertheless retains his humanity and compassion".

Had Manto not written, the impact of Partition violence could never have been felt as the way we know it today.



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