



## Atrocity and Trauma in the Select Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto (“Khol Do”, “Toba Tek Singh”, “The Dog of Tithwal”)

Saloman Kumar (Research Scholar)

N Suman Shelly (Research Scholar)

Department of English,

Sambalpur University,

Odisha.

### Abstract

Arguably, one of the best short storytellers of the twentieth century, and one of the most controversial as well, Saadat Hasan Manto, brilliantly chronicles the collective madness that prevailed, during and after the Partition of India in 1947. As a renowned Urdu short story writer, Manto has poignantly disrobed the human behavior in connection with intimidating issues like sex, violence, body politics, etc. in stark detail. Stories such as “Khol Do” (1948), “Toba Tek Singh” (1955), and “The Dog of Tithwal” (1987) map the shaking saga of the wrath of Partition towards the common people. This paper aims at locating the trauma and atrocity in the psyche of the victims and offers deep insights into the tragic and unsavory realities of life that are engendered and endangered by Partition.

**Keywords:** Partition, Atrocity, Trauma, Body Politics, Violence, Sex

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-54) is one of the best short story writers the Urdu literature has ever produced. Strangely enough, he spoke Punjabi, but he wrote his stories in Urdu, mastering a language whose roots lie in Persian, Arabic, Old Hindi and Old Punjabi. So far as his works and the narrative structure of his stories are concerned, he is often compared with the nineteenth century French short story writer Guy de Maupassant. As a representative of the Naturalist school, Maupassant discussed human lives and destinies and the forces of society in a disenchanted and despairing manner. However, the comparison is broken down by history because Maupassant could not have imagined what Manto saw.

Although Manto's critics disapproved him of depicting perversity and violence in their most horrible aspects, yet Manto always defended himself as a realistic observer of India's terrible days. In his partition stories, Manto conveys the message of sheer senselessness emerging out of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

During Partition, everywhere across the subcontinent there was an unprecedented kind of confusion and bewilderment. The air was charged with chaos and confusion. Since the newly demarcated line (Partition) had destroyed the houses, there was no trace of the home and the hearth. The only solace for both Hindus and Muslims could be found in the imaginary homeland – a pre-partition India. Manto's personal life and his short stories about the trauma of partition foregrounds this fact very poignantly and tells the reader about his "internally - exiled" state ; his nostalgia for a homeland of the past, where both Hindus and Muslims co-existed peacefully and fraternally without frowning upon each other's cultural or religious leanings. Stories like "Khol Do" (1948), "Toba Tek Singh" (1955), "The Dog of Tithwal" (1987), and many others by Manto highlight the same human tragedy in great detail and make the readers aware of the massive damage that left millions in psychological trauma and loss of common-brotherhood.

Set in post-partition Lahore, Manto's "Khol Do" (Open it) published in 1948 is one of the most debatable short stories. Amidst pools of blood, charred bodies, dust and deafening noise, Sirajuddin, the protagonist, wakes up to the screams and shrieks of hundreds of men and women and children, recalls the pre-conscious state when he was not alone but with a family – a wife who was mercilessly butchered and a dear daughter, now lost and disappeared in the chaos around. In search of his daughter, the offer of assistance comes from a group of volunteers who came forward to help people in such adverse situations. Luckily but finally he meets his beloved daughter in a relief camp hospital in a semi-conscious state, uttering the words, "She is alive. My daughter is alive" (Manto, 14).

Here, it could be clearly observed that the meaning of the word/expression 'Khol Do' is, in stronger terms, grounded psychologically. The word/expression has a deep psychological impact upon the assaulted and mutilated daughter and hence, her passive and mechanical response to it. Sakina's (daughter's name) mechanical response to the word/expression 'Khol Do' can also be interpreted as a dissociative disorder in which the person under trauma feels detached from physical and emotional experience, a detachment from reality. Manto's ability to capture the delayed effects of traumatic violence on the body comes especially to the fore in his stories about the sexual violence during the

Partition. In Sakina's case, her dissociative state manifests itself in her disconnection from the social domain of language as evidenced in her mechanical response to the doctor's request to 'open it'; she numbly lowers her salwar, after being subjected to repeated violation by the volunteers. In *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault argues that "where there is power there is resistance" (95). With reference to power relation, Foucault talks about the struggle of power as not merely reducible to dominant-oppressive relationship, but where there exists domination through power, there also exists resistance and retaliation. It is important to note that resistance is not always active and voiced, but it is in many cases passive and represented through silence. In such situations, silence turns out to be a mightier weapon of protest.

The second select short story "Toba Tek Singh" published in 1955 has earned the reputation of being one of the most anthologized artistic creations. It also engages the readers' minds with the same traumatic events caused in 1947 by Partition. The story opens with the Indian and Pakistani governments agreeing, two or three years after the Partition, to exchange their respective mental asylum inmate populations on the basis of religious affiliation. Through this mutual transfer, it was decided that, the Muslim inmates in Indian asylums are to be sent to Pakistan and the Hindu and Sikh inmates in the Pakistani asylums are to be sent to India. After the government officials put the transfer order into motion and fix a transfer date, all of the Hindu and Sikh inmates in Pakistan are transported to the border with India. As the story continues what happens to those inmates remains uncertain. However, the inmates could not ascertain any specific details or answers from any sources and their confusion grew into a collective disorientation. Amidst this disorientation, we meet the story's central character, Bishan Singh. Little is known about him except that he is an elderly Sikh man who grew up in a small village named Toba Tek Singh. Besides, his family brought him to the asylum fifteen years ago after he had suddenly and unexpectedly went mad.

On the day of the transfer, Bishan and his fellow inmates are transported to the Wagah border, where Indian officials meet them. Chaos between the inmates on the one hand and Indian and Pakistani officials on the other, prevail as the refusal to be transferred sparks discord among the inmates themselves. When it is Bishan's turn to cross the border, he once again asks, "where is Toba Tek Singh? In Pakistan or in India?" (1999:572). Upon hearing the Indian official's response that his village is in Pakistan, Bishan runs back to the line of inmates and refuses to be transferred. Attempting to guide him back to the transfer point, the Pakistani officials assured him that "'Toba Tek Singh' is in Hindustan now – and if he is not there, yet, we'll send him there immediately" (1999:573). Knowing that Bishan is an otherwise harmless old man, the Pakistani officials allow him to remain standing to the side as they continue transferring the other inmates. At this point of time, the narrator intensifies the trauma experienced by the readers when Bishan Singh lies on the ground, prostrate, a part of the body on Indian side and the other part on the Pakistani side. In the middle of the land lies Toba Tek Singh symbolizing both the individual identity and the soil deeply tied to it.

Here, Manto interestingly shows the resistance of Bishan Singh in the forcible transportation of people from one country to the other. He allows the collapse of Bishan Singh to his death, face down on a nameless stretch of land in between Pakistan and India, and thus without an identity under the new national schemes produced by the Partition.

When looked at from a different perspective, there exists a textual ambiguity between Toba Tek Singh, the man and Toba Tek Singh, the place. This kind of an ambiguity makes Manto's story particularly compelling for a discussion about the trauma of the Partition. During the time of the exchange of the lunatic inmates between India and Pakistan it is Bishan's increasing disorientation that emerges from his inability to locate the place he once called home is an important allegory for the profound confusion that has actually felt among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike. Another important point to be mentioned here is that throughout the story, Bishan's individual identity is systematically erased as the textual ambiguity between Toba Tek Singh the man and Toba Tek Singh the village which replaces his name. The map of the land, both the Indian land and the Pakistani land, changes as new borders are drawn and thus Toba Tek Singh, in other words, is at once in Pakistan and India – for it is the present cartographic reconfiguration that locates Toba Tek Singh in Pakistan and it is the past memory that suspends it in India.

To be more precise, the moment that Bishan's face joins the land, no longer able to be seen by those around him, the process of his erasure ends, and thus the ambiguity between Toba Tek Singh and the man ceases to exist. It is the precise instant in which there is no difference between land and man, between geography and identity ; for they become one in the same spatial, corporeal entity defined by virtue of its irreversible tie to the other. The land becomes Bishan's face and Bishan's face becomes the land, and thus the nameless stretch of land acquires the new name of 'Toba Tek Singh'. The Partition has rendered Bishan entirely foreign himself, suspended between a past that was known through memories of his village, and a present that lies not between India and Pakistan but in both places. In their seminal book *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer impressively interrogate the political significance of such storytelling:

That life writing also “accumulates political import”: In local contexts, the storytelling constitutes a social action on the part of the individuals or communities, resonating through multiple cultural contexts, including the moral, aesthetic, political, and legal (Wilson 1999, 7). As stories circulate beyond extended national and transnational communication flows, they enable claimants to “speak truth to power,” to invoke Foucault (4).

Another short story entitled “The Dog of Tithwal” (1987) by Manto also clearly portrays the trauma and suffering of millions of people who become homeless and victims of Partition. At the beginning of the story, the reader is introduced with an elaborate account of a pleasant weather – “The weather was pleasant; the wind was wafted across, spreading the scent of wild flowers” (Manto, 2). This kind of beginning of the story in which nature is supposedly in a state of repose is indicative of the state

of tranquility between the two countries. Similarly the equal height of the two hills, behind which the soldiers hide to protect themselves from the opponent camp, symbolizes the equal power of both the camps. The mountain between them exists as a barrier between the two countries whose submissiveness to each other seems impossible. The stony structure of the mountains stand as the unbreakable mindset of the two states – India and Pakistan. The clear sky suggests that the clouds are just over and the entire valley is replete with the rays of hope and new life with the advent of the sun. The armistice (ceasefire) as reflected through the pleasant weather is not permanent. This is also suggested with reference to the cycle of season. It is as if the “winter and summer were negotiating peace with one another” (Manto, 2).

Another component of nature i.e. the stream has been used very proficiently. The stream comes as a source of life, as water is considered to be the other name for life. The stream here may be interpreted as beacon of hope for the two countries, but its zigzag way indicates the inconceivability of their hope. At another level, the stream can be compared with a snake because of its zigzag way. A snake remains harmless, having a clasp of venom, but if it is in danger, it at once makes the proper use of its venom. Similarly, the stream which apparently looks like a harmless one, has enormous power, and can burst out with all its strength.

In the whole story, nature has been portrayed as different powerful forces controlling the behavior of the soldiers on two sides of the mountains.

Jamadar Harnam Singh, a member of the troop on Indian side sings a song of melancholic note. Suddenly this song is battered by the barking of a dog whom Banki Singh, the youngest of the crew discovers. The dog gets the name ‘Jhunjhun’ that lies beyond its knowledge. The sight of a cracker restores its natural instinct, and it starts wagging its tail. Harnam Singh suspects the dog to be a Pakistani one and refuses to offer it any food. He creates such a situation in which the eternal question of the helplessness of the weak who long for the mercy of the stronger arises.

Identified as a Pakistani, the dog does not receive a warm welcome from the Indian camp. As it was first a visitor to the Pakistani camp, the soldiers think that they have right to know why and where it disappeared at night. To prove their authority over the Indians, Bashir, the Pakistani soldier invents the name ‘Sunsun’ for the dog to counter the Indian name ‘Jhunjhun’. The Indians claim it to be an Indian dog but Himmat Khan claims, “This is a Pakistani dog” (Manto, 7). Here, the identity of the dog is in question; it portrays the highly suspicious mentality of the two nations against each other, and this is exposed in their effort to impose an identity on the dog. But at the time of welcome, it is greeted with a cracker, though in an unwilling manner by the Indian camp and with a pebble by the Pakistani camp, though with some food. The dog does not get food at the first instance. Further, Himmat Khan warms him, “Look friend, don’t commit treachery...Remember; the punishment for a traitor is death” (Manto, 8). The instance of inscription, of names on the dog’s collar is only but a warning to the opponent camps that they own equal power.



The futile dispute between the two camps finally leads to the tragic death of the dog. In the process of their fighting against each other and the display of power, the dog is shot dead by the bullet of Harnam Singh, the Indian Jamadar. It becomes the victim of a game between the soldiers of two camps. The dog is caught in a maze of firing and runs for help to both camps, but with no result. They take it to be a mere plaything that can live on at their mercy.

The dog stands for these millions of people who became victims at the face of destiny. Here, I am reminded of the words of Gloucester in "King Lear" – "As flies to wanton boys we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport" (IV, I, 41-42). A dog is considered to be insignificant animal on the world; similarly, its death is also insignificant. Manto's centre of attention is a dog which is thought to be the most trustworthy animal for man. But the truthfulness of a dog is questioned when Himmat Khan says "The punishment for treachery is death". This is a sheer irony that Manto uses mockingly at the whimsicalities of the two independent countries. With reference to this, even Michel Foucault severely critiques the traditional models of power i.e. power used to tyrannically gain authority over other classes by domination. In his opinion, power shapes freedom rather than restricts it. In his *The History of Sexuality, Volume. One*, Foucault debates, "if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?" (36). This important question truly opens up new vistas for interpretation.

The condition of the dog as delineated in the story recalls the circumstances that Manto himself had to undergo after the partition. His biographer Jagdish Chandar Wadhawan sums up his condition in the following words:

The harsh reality of the partition stood mountain-like before him. The India of his imagination, the united India, solid and whole, lay shattered before his eyes. Even in his wildest imagination he could not have thought of such countrywide butchery, arson and loot in the name of religion. Lahore, with which he was once so familiar now looked alien to him and its atmosphere foreign (Wadhawan 28).

Manto portrays the miserable condition of thousands of people who faced severe consequences and were butchered on the basis of their religious identity. As Alok Bhalla rightly notes,

Manto's short stories about the partition are more realistic and more shocking records of those predatory times (than those of his contemporaries). They are written by a man who knows that after such ruination there can neither be any forgiveness nor any forgetting (Bhalla xvii).

The two countries won independence, but at the cost of massive carnage, and along with it excessive butchery of humanity.

Being a short story writer, Manto with a rare gift of potent imagination was able to capture a photographic traumatic dislocation that took place in South Asian society during 1947. He understood too well the anger, bitterness, paranoia, and secret fears of each and every individual caught up in the cobwebs of the turmoil and violence. In the stories that have been discussed, madness is taken to be a

metaphor, not only representing the upheaval surrounding Partition but also the tortured and fractured identities. Most importantly, he possessed enormous capacity for blurring the lines between reality and imagination, and thus igniting in the readers' minds an unfailing experience of the factual horrors as well as the innermost tragedies suffered by his characters.

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