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Perennial Partitions: A Critique of Saadat Hasan Manto's Selected Short Stories

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Abstract: The division of India and Pakistan was a man made calamity of unimaginable proportions. It still lingers not only in the consciousness of the survivors but also in the memory of those who heard it from their relatives as a first person narrative or read it as a piece of journalism/history/story. Today literature dealing with partition exists as a separate category, i.e. partition literature. Mulk Raj Anand, Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa have revisited partition in their works either as a main theme or a side issue focussing on how it affected people on both sides. Saadat Hasan Manto's stories give as a realistic portrayal of the chaos that prevailed during and after partition. Manto was among those who have to left India because majority of Muslims felt unsafe in India in the wake of riots in the name of religion. On the one hand partition was a geographical division, on the other it gave birth to communal violence, hatred and bloodshed. Women were doubly victimized first as human beings and then as a gender/class. They were killed by their family to save them from enemies so as to save themselves from the indignity of sullyng their honour on being raped by the other party. Partition created an environment in which animals were also branded as Hindu or Muslim. The present paper is an attempt to explore different dimensions of partition in the selected short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto.

Keywords: Partition, Communal violence, Gender.

Partition of 1947 brought with it world's largest migration of uprooted people, sectarian violence and religious hatred. It is one of the most debated issues till date among both Indian and Pakistani writers. The division of India and Pakistan was a man made calamity of unimaginable



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Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-55) was a famous short story writer born in British India. Manto himself was among those writers who left India after partition because majority of Muslims felt unsafe in India during partition riots. He is famous for his short stories about partition which give realistic portrayal of chaos that prevailed during and after the partition. His first hand experience of partition gave him ability to penetrate beneath the post and pre-partition brutalities indulged in by both Hindus and Muslims. His stories are different from other writers' in the sense that he incisively portrays dark shades of human psyche that got free play during partition riots.

In dealing with taboos of Indian and Pakistani society, Manto is often compared with D.H. Lawrence for his frank portrayal of sex which is still considered to be inviolable in both Indian and Pakistani society. He was tried for obscenity six times, three times in British India and thrice after partition. His reply against the charges of obscenity represent his commitment to social reality



against aesthetical propriety: “If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living is dirty. With my stories I only expose the truth” (1). The dominant vision in his short stories is related with his understanding of human imprisonment by religious bigotry and beastly, mindless cruelty. Manto admitted that despite all the bonhomie on the birth of a nation and freedom from Britishers, Indian and Pakistani societies are still enthralled by demons of prejudice and fanaticism. He bemoaned the fact that although both Hindustan and Pakistan had become free in 1947, people in both the countries were still slaves of prejudice and religious bigotry.

Women were the worst sufferers during partition. It is estimated that nearly 75, 000 to 1, 00, 000 women were kidnapped and raped during partition unrest. Violence against women took different forms and manifested itself in consonance with physical torture, deformation and rapes. Along with the suicide committed by some of them to save themselves from dishonor, many were killed by their own family members. The effects of horrors of mass rapes and defiguration lingered on them long after the physical torture ended and included arousal of a feeling of shame in those who were not accepted by their family members, fear regarding their polluted status etc. The status of fallen women conferred upon recovered women led to their rejection by their families who were pushed to margins of indignity and starvation. A few women who converted to another faith and married their rapists to survive, were hollowed from inside without nothing to sustain them. As a result of these collective brutalities, most of the female victims of partition lost their will to live and remained mired in passivity of their existence without any outlet to their fractured selves.

‘Khol do’ is a tragic story of Sirajuddin who lives in a refugee camp and has lost his daughter Sakina in the chaos of migration. He continues to ask people about whereabouts of his daughter and gives description of his daughter to some rehabilitation volunteers, a group of eight young men, who are part of rescue operations. These volunteers assure him that they will try their best to recover his daughter. The story moves onto an encounter between the volunteers and Sakina near Amritsar where they identify her and give her a lift in their truck to take her to her father. The story moves ahead with Sirajuddin waiting for his daughter and when he encounters the volunteers, they assure him that they will continue their efforts to find his daughter. After some days, Sakina is found unconscious near railway tracks and is admitted to a hospital. Sirajuddin identifies her as his



lost daughter, but when the doctor referring to the windows asks him to ‘open it’, Sakina who is still unconscious “undid her salwar and lowered it” (Taseer 54). The story ends abruptly with the expression of shock on the face of the doctor.

The horror of partition is revealed to us through an economical use of words and images in the story. The terseness of the prose becomes a statement of looming ambience of loss and inertia. It seems as if the narrator is traumatized by the sudden shock of bestiality in human beings, leading him to avoid verbosity and communicate only in a sparse, thin language shorn of all literary pretensions to bring forth monstrosity of the events. Along with it, the disjointed nature of floating images passing through the consciousness of Sirajuddin evokes a mental landscape wherein the connections of rationality have yielded to a jumbled chaos. The narrative attempts to combine four separate scenes—gaining of consciousness by Sirajuddin, his appeal to volunteers to find his daughter, discovery of his daughter near railway tracks and her treatment in hospital. There are carefully crafted missing links in the chain and the narrative does not offer any explanation as to how Sirajuddin got separated from his daughter or what happens to Sakina who reaches from Amritsar to Lahore with volunteers. The kaleidoscopic imagery reveals to the readers the poignancy of partition and its effect on the psyche of its victims who lose all markers of time and place. The amnesia which horror of partition produced in the victims is used by psyche to retain its sanity in case of trauma and the story reveals this psychical defense mechanism through loss of gory details of murder and rape.

The story reveals a hidden, often neglected side of partition which was pushed under carpet by warring factions. Partition has been mistakenly projected as to be about different religious identities colliding with each other. It was basically a power play, a ruse to smother the egos and gain political power. In this struggle common people were nothing more than pawn in the hands or under legs of titans fighting for inheriting the earth. Once people were goaded to participate in it in the name of religion, the impulses of greed and acquisition took hold of them and women, as part of booty, were the worst sufferers. In the melee of rioters and murderers, often the worst wounds were inflicted by one’s own co-religionists who found opportunities to aggrandize themselves with whatever booty they could get their hands on. The fate of Sakina, who seems to have escaped from



her tormentors in Indian side, to find that her co-religionists were no better when it came to a helpless woman, clearly undercuts hollowness of solidarity based on religious identities. Manto's awareness of it and its presentation in the story reveals in a striking way the pathetic way in which women were used as sewers by the warring factions without discrimination.

Another story 'The Dog of Tithwal' begins with Indian and Pakistani soldiers taking position on the border just after partition somewhere near the boundary of the two countries. The adversary positions are indicative of a kind of standoff between two new nations. Despite the man made animosity, the weather is friendly, flowers are in bloom, birds are singing and clouds are floating in the sky. The opposite camps in both sides are manned by Harnam Singh in Indian camp and Himmat Khan in Pakistani camp. One night Banta Singh, belonging to Indian side, finds a stray dog in their territory and puts a rope on it with a cardboard, thus christening it with a name Chapad Jhunjhun and tags a declaration that it was an Indian dog. Next morning the dog strolls to the Pakistani side where it is captured and soldiers are astonished to see Indian label on the dog. They remove cardboard box from it and replace it with another name Sapad Sunsun and tag another declaration that it was a Pakistani dog. Himmat Khan, the corporal on Pakistani side then orders it to move bravely towards Indian side. On seeing an alien name attached with it, Indian soldiers refuse to let the dog enter into their territory and fire upon it to scare it away towards Pakistani side. The Pakistani soldiers too fire upon it to shoo it towards Indian side. The dog is caught in a Catch 22 situation and runs from one side to another with bullets being showered upon it from both sides. Slowly the dog is injured by the bullets and dies on boundary line with an adage from Corporal Harnam Singh that "He died that death that is a dog's alone" (Taseer 22).

The story, situated in the idyllic landscape of Tithwal, counterpoises militarized bunkers of India and Pakistan with the bounty of fruitful nature of the land. The nature "oblivious to the sound of war, went busily about her duties. The birds squalled, the flowers bloomed, and hovering drowsily over them, in their same old way, slow-moving honeybees suckled out their nectar" (Taseer 11). The soldiers on both sides, despite all their bravado, do not reveal much difference in their shared lores and love for their families at home. While Harnam Singh reveals his longing for his beloved through songs about Heer and Ranjha, Bashir sings in the same vein about his love:



“Where, darling, did you pass the night ... daring where” (Taseer 17). Despite this commonality of shared heritage the jingoism of nationalism effectively converts these soldiers into unfeeling brutes for whom all reality around them is marked with partisan labels.

The death of the dog is a powerful symbol of minds ruled by fanaticism and hatred wherein reason and humanity are the first martyrs. It is representative of dumb and silent victims who were tossed over from one side to another and were marked with labels which had nothing to do with their own identities. The imbalance of power equation between the victim and the ruler reveals itself in the ability to confer titles and identities by the leaders to groups, thus effectively sealing their fate as part of a mindless brutal struggle. The story powerfully reveals fate of masses which was decided by political masters on a sudden whimsical move and once nationalistic identities were conferred upon them, they were mercilessly brandished by the manipulators as their exclusive reality.

The stories of Manto thus effectively reveal trauma of partition through his memorable characters in his short stories. These stories question of garb of religious fervor and jingoism which was put on to hide the animal instinct of loot and plunder during partition riots. Manto seems to agree with Urvashi Butalia regarding her assertion that “both sides were equally guilty” and further that “in case you want to look at partition and what happened, you have to have a great deal of honesty” (Ashraf 1) as during this cataclysmic time and its remembrance still evoke feelings of fear and suspicion. To understand partition one would have to see it as a part of struggle between enclosing nets of conservatism and efforts to find and embrace humanity in all its evanescent differences. It would entail a different approach to historiography wherein the rootedness of violence and brutality may be seen as a natural consequence of our too much reliance on values of acquisition, greed, virility and power. To ward off partition once again, as it seems to be resurfacing one again among our midst, we have to accept and celebrate the values of difference as well as oneness of humanity.



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