

Juxtaposing the Victim and the Perpetrator in Sadat Hasan Manto's 'Open It' and 'Cold Meat'

Abhishek Sarkar

Assistant Professor in English

Murshidabad College of Engineering & Technology

Berhampore, West Bengal, India

abhisheksarkar83@rediffmail.com

Abstract

In the compass of partition literature depiction of violence and its consequent trauma has been at the centre/ heart and in such delineation of violence – both physical and psychological- there is the unmistakable presence of a sense of being lost in a world of incommunicable experience on the part of the victims/ protagonist. The violence and the consequent trauma they experienced was a life-changing one and the haunting incident corroded them within. Often such nightmarish experiences seize their volition and sensibility to such an extent that they lose their sanity and equilibrium and become altogether different entity. People of all walks of life were its victims; however, needless to say that the worst and most ill-fated were the women on either side of the border. At the same time, on the other hand there are occasions, though rare, when the perpetrator of the violence himself has become the victim- a prey to his own bestiality and inhuman barbarity. In this paper my objective is to present this duality with reference to two short stories of Sadat Hassan Manto – '*Open It*' and '*Cold Meat*' and to light on the presentation of violence that overtly unlocks the gruesome exercise of atrocity and inhumanity.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Trauma, Victim, Perpetrator Etc.

Sadat Hassan Manto, the iconoclast author of Urdu short stories was one of the “most violently distressed voices”, as Arjun Mahey states in *Partition Narratives: Some Observations*. He addressed well the pain of partition through his writings. Sexual violence and the resulting trauma abound in the gamut of Partition literature and Manto being an artist faithful to reality makes room for the harrowing experience of the women caught in the period of communal anarchy. He detested the euphoria of communalism, exploitation of women and the senseless bloodshed that were quite rampant on the eve of partition of India. He was staunch realist and hence he was too hard to swallow for people who want to indulge in the dilution of truth. He never tried to present sugar-coated reality and thereby one can feel the presence of a simple, yet powerful and honest style of narrating a story. One of such outstanding renditions of the theme of sexual violence and the resulting trauma finds artistic treatment in his short story ‘*Open It*’- a profound exploration of the state of mind of a seventeen year old girl who has been subjected to inhuman brutality by being raped cyclically.

Though the story ‘*Open It*’ refers to physical violence, bloodshed and all sorts of atrocities that were widespread at the time of partition of India, the crux of the story is in its suggestiveness of the psychological trauma resulting from the most inhuman brutality in form of sexual violence. Sakina, a beautiful girl of seventeen might have never thought that the historic event of partition would completely render her life destroyed. It was a time of great unrest and murder, arson, bloodbath etc. created an ambience mistrust and hatred. Sirajuddin while trying to escape the rioters somehow loses track of her seventeen year old beautiful girl, Sakina and after regaining his sense rushes madly at different places to find her. He has already witnessed the insane atrocity of the rioters when his wife was savagely butchered and he could do nothing to save her. Even at the time of death she implored

Sirajuddin to go away from the place in order to save their daughter Sakina and Sirajuddin did so. However, unfortunately Sakina too is lost in the crowd.

The father finds a ray of hope when a group of young volunteers assured Sirajuddin with tremendous fervor that they would anyhow find his daughter if she is still alive. On their rescue mission they rescued several women, men, children and brought them to safety. In those days there were so many groups of volunteers involved in rescue operation and they did rescue a lot of helpless persons. However, there was another side of the coin as often quite ironically the rescued women were molested by some of these volunteers. Though ironic, yet a fact and often police officials involved in the rescue operation performed same kind of inhuman behavior. The story teller has presented such kind of volunteers who though tracked Sakina yet did not hand her over to Sirajuddin. They rather hypocritically promised Sirajuddin that they would find her soon.

Finally Sakina was discovered by Sirajuddin in a hospital fatally injured and lying on a stretcher like a corpse. The discovery made Sirajuddin ecstatic as after a long time Sakina is back to him. He was obviously overjoyed, although at that moment he was not aware of what awaits him. As soon as the doctor checked her pulse and pointing to the window asked him to ‘Open it!’ an unexpected sequence of action takes place that stirs the sensibility and humanity of all. The very phrase ‘Open it!’ meant for Sirajuddin led to the stirring of the body of Sakina so faintly and Sirajuddin exclaims with unbounded joy ‘She is alive! My daughter is alive!’. However, what the doctor witnesses next makes him break into cold sweat as he finds Sakina on hearing ‘Open it!’ with his lifeless hand slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar.

This depiction is an engrossing one to make us realize the state of mind in which Sakina responds to ‘Open it!’ What a powerful way of suggesting the fact that how a traumatic experience has completely shattered the sensibility of an individual. Needless to

say that Sakina at the hands of those young volunteers was subjected to gang rape cyclically. The woeful experience has been so reiterative with her that she lost her sense absolutely and the ultimately she becomes only a corpse upon which men went on exercising their virility. The phrase 'Open it!' has been internalized by her so intensely that it becomes a part of her reflex action. One can painfully realize that how much brutality she has been subjected to repetitively that as soon as she listens to 'Open it!' Sakina without realizing where she is starts performing her routine activity. In her subconscious mind she has internalized that whenever 'Open it!' is articulated by a male voice what she is expected to do.

Manto's presentation has been so rich with psychological connotation that the last few lines of the story enforce the readers to be ashamed of being human beings. The barbarity of the perpetrators has rendered Sakina into a corpse like entity. Such act of sexual violence has been so harrowing that it can be assumed that Sakina has lost all sorts of humanitarian connectivity and linguistic potency. An emotionless and soulless individual Sakina now only responds to the fulfillment of bodily appetite and she realizes it to be the ultimate truth of her life. Truly Manto's rendition of the theme of sexual violence and its traumatic impact in the short story 'Open it!' has been not only artistic but also hauntingly unique. The reaction of the doctor at the concluding line is not only that of the doctor but also of all sensitive human beings who shudder intensely even at the thought of such an act.

In '*Cold Meat*', another interesting story of Sadat Hassan Manto we come across the theme of violence and its resulting impact; however, quite interestingly, the story teller has tried to present a unique perspective as here the perpetrator himself is also the victim and this is undoubtedly the most fascinating aspect of the story. Writers of partition literature have more or less focused on presenting the atrocity and barbarity exercised by men against women and there are so many heart-rending and profound depictions on such issue. Manto

himself has worked on the same theme in many of his short stories. In this context, '*Cold Meat*', is an important exception as Eesher Singh, the victim in this short story is also the perpetrator. It is this dramatic swing at the end of the story that unravels the unique treatment by the story teller.

The story opens with sensuous suggestion and develops with continuous insinuations towards the impending amorous encounter between Kalwant Kaur and Eesher Singh. However, the rising of passion somehow does not reach the climactic point and Kalwant feels the lifeless voice of Eesher in such moment of heat. Later on Eesher in order to dismiss the suspicion of Kalwant once more fuels his passion and starts fondling her. Gradually he applies all the weapons of a lover as part of foreplay. When Kalwant starts to boil like a hot pot on a blazing stove being overpowered with sexual intensity, Eesher ironically realizes his incapability to plunge into the drive. Kalwant, disappointed and infuriated fails to surmise his impotence and accuses him of infidelity.

On being repeatedly asked and ultimately stabbed by Kalwant, Eesher recounts the story of his own bestiality as he participated in the loot, arson and rape. As a part of the frenzied mob that looted a Muslim household, Eesher killed six members of the family and the seventh member being a beautiful young girl was spared only to be seduced later on. He carries her away on his soldier and when he is about to rape her near the river by the bushes Eesher realizes she is dead- "She was dead, Kalwant, it was a dead body ...a cold flesh..." Eesher is utterly shuddered by the trauma of that experience and he has lost the stability of mind. The perpetrator himself becomes the victim of his own act. It is ironic enough that the act by means of which the perpetrator intends to establish his supremacy over the victim in itself becomes a haunting one that not only destabilizes his being but also disempowers his masculinity. Otherwise a virile man, Eesher is now reduced to the status of impotency.

The intensity of the shocking experience has been so poignant that it taxed upon his sensibility and crushed his masculine virility. The very foundation of his existence is thoroughly shaken and becomes a shadow of his past. When he asks Kalwant to hold his hand his hands were colder than ice and this is enough to suggest the fact that Eesher has lost the vitality and warmth of life resulting in complete disintegration of his being. Much like Sakina in 'Open It!' Eesher Singh in 'Cold Meat' becomes a mere physical entity without emotion and volition. The intensity of the trauma reduces the perpetrator into a victim. In both these cases there has taken place spiritual death of Sakina and Eesher and they just go on living as mere corpses. Truly the story 'Cold Meat' explores effectively the profound impact of a traumatic experience on an individual who starts as a perpetrator though ends up being an unfortunate victim.

Thus Sadat Hassan Manto's short stories like '*Open It*' and '*Cold Meat*' portray psychologically evocative experiences of different characters whose memories have been invested with indelible impressions that become part and parcel of their existence. Interestingly they comprise two different aspects of Manto's approach to violence and the resulting trauma and indeed such variety well testifies to his wide ranging insight to life and subtlety of perception.

References:

- Manto: Selected Short Stories translated by Aatish Taseer, New Delhi: Penguin Books India
- Butalia, Urvashi (1998) *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Menon, R. and K. Bhasin. (2000). *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto Author(s): SUDHA TIWARI

Source: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 48, No. 25 (JUNE 22, 2013), pp. 50-

58 Published by: Economic and Political Weekly Stable URL:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23527974> Accessed: 25-03-2020 10:31 UTC