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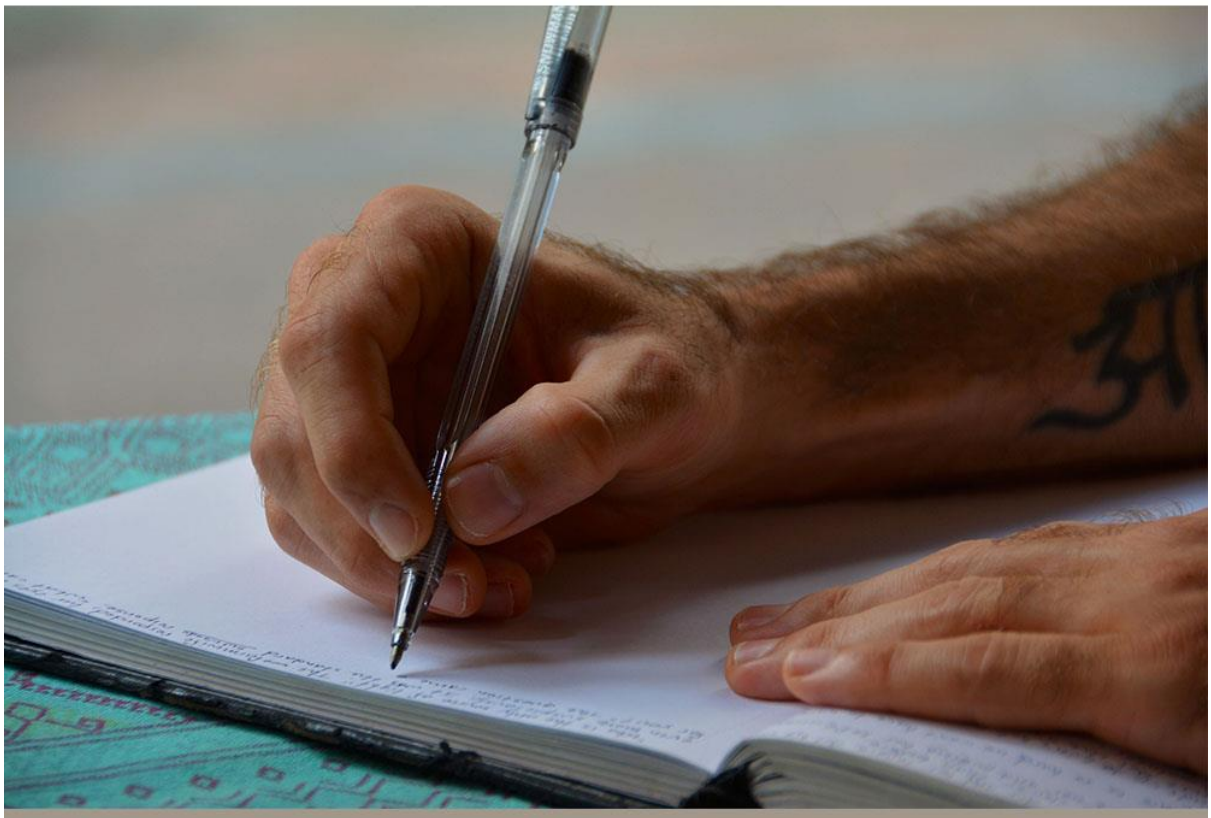

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Revisiting The Trauma of Partition in Manto's Life and Work: A Socio-Historico-Political Perspective

Abstract

As we step in 100th year of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the bloodbath on 13 April 1919, that marked the turning point in the India's freedom struggle, and signified the beginning of the end of the British Raj, forcing the colonial power to Quit India along ostensible religious lines in 1947, with Partition holocaust, is simply the most dramatic instance of post war decolonization based on arbitrary re-drawing of boundaries. The legacies of partition are still with us – in both the Subcontinent and in Britain – and the need to understand it has not diminished with time. Revisiting the trauma of partition in Saadat Hasan Manto's life and work, this article looks back at the Amritsar tragedy that provided Manto the raw material to write his first story "Tamasha" and also, the subject matter of his more mature stories, seeks to bring the history of the Writer, Society and State in the making into the broader context of the emerging international order of the Cold War in South Asia. Manto's popularity on both sides of the borders drawn in 1947 makes him an icon in South Asia.

Keywords: issue of Muslim identity, legacies of partition, psychological trauma, realism.

Introduction

As we step into 100th year of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the tragedy that proved to be the turning point in the freedom struggle, and signified the beginning of the end of the British Empire in Indian sub-continent, was also the theme-subject, Saadat Hasan Manto dealt in his first story 'Tamasha". The leading Urdu short story writer of twentieth century, Manto was first an Indian and then a Pakistani writer, who lived from 1912 to 1955. His short stories broke new ground in Urdu literature and enjoy a growing reputation to this day. Born in Punjab 11 May 1912, of a Kashmiri family, Manto witnessed the psychological trauma of 1947 at close quarters. His sensitive portrayal of the plight of uprooted humanity on the move, in his fictional and nonfictional accounts of partition, is unsurpassed in quality. Charged with obscenity by both the colonial and the postcolonial states for his brutally honest depictions of everyday life, he was condemned in conservative social circles for daring to write about prostitution and sexuality. Manto enthusiasts acclaim him as genius and a fearless rebel who defied conventions to drive home some plain awkward truth. Alcoholism killed Saadat Hasan prematurely, but Manto lives on. His work, spanning two decades of prolific writing, present an intimate historical understanding of partition and the consequences for ordinary people. By delving into Manto's personal tragedy and some of his selected post 1947 short stories, this paper's intellectual ambition is to bring the history of writer, society and state in the making into the broader context of the emerging international order of the Cold War in South Asia.

Partition was both the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia and a historical process that has continued unfolding to this day. It is common to hear in the subcontinent that the most pressing problems besetting India and Pakistan today have their

origin in the decisions of expediency taken in 1947. Painful memories of displacement and the horrific killing of kith and kin left deep psychological scars that have not healed. The traumatic memories have fuelled hostile relations between India and Pakistan, compounding the difficulties in resolving disputes like Kashmir, sharing of Himalayan river waters and the issue of Muslim identity in postcolonial South Asia.

An exploration of Manto's life and literature provides, a novel way to address the complex relationship between the event and the process of partition. Micro historical detail can illuminate the texture of macro historical change. Historical investigations of causation and experience have been running of late on parallel tracks and would benefit from being put on a collision course. The aim however is to seek innovative insights into the modern and contemporary history of India and Pakistan through the prism of fiction.

Studying the history reveals more about the text; studying the text reveals more about the history; the destabilizing effects of partition have been writ large on the politics of India and Pakistan with no respite in sight. Whatever the specific calculations and compulsions of the main political actors, the dislocations and disruptions of partition were ultimately borne by ordinary and mostly innocent men, women and children. Poets, creative writers, artists and filmmakers have captured the trauma of partition – quite as much as the trauma of war – for defenceless people far more effectively than have academic historians bound by their disciplinary conventions. Historians generally agree that literature represented partition better and more truthfully. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, in their book on Modern South Asian History comment – " The colossal human tragedy of the partition and its continuing aftermath has been better conveyed by the more sensitive creative writers and artists - for example in Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories and Ritwik Ghatak's films – than by Historians" (164). It is a fact that Sadat Hasan Manto, one of the leading writers of modern South Asia has portrayed the ghastly partition in all its naked reality. A historical portrayal

of the human tragedy that was India's partition through an innovative exploration of stories, memoirs and sketches can creatively trespass across the border between fictional and historical narratives. Manto's partition stories are a must read for anyone interested in the personal dimensions of India's division and the creation of Pakistan. In his stories Manto conveys, as no historian could, as no politician would, the disorientation, the mystification, the shroud of nonsense that fell upon the subcontinent in 1947. "If you are not familiar with the age in which we live," he told a group of students in 1944, "read my stories. If you cannot endure my stories, it means that this age is unbearable." (Black Margins 9).

This period of Indian history is very significant. It defined India and Pakistan as it is today. Manto was a social critic and a walking witness to history. For the purpose of this paper the stories chosen, *The New Law, A Tale of 1947, Yazid* and *The Dutiful Daughter* – together constitute the basis for an imaginative retelling of the cultural history of Indian subcontinent from 1919 to 1955. Manto's realist fiction sheds searing light on the meaning of the Amritsar massacre in 1919 that he witnessed as a seven-year old and which contributed significantly to the psychological alienation of the colonized from their colonial masters. The events at Jallianwala Bagh provided him the raw material to write his first story "Tamaasha" (The Show). In the story, the helplessness of people combined with their supressed anger is beautifully captured in young Khalid's conversation with his father. Khalid's rage against the colonial power and his father's realisation of its potency is aptly highlighted in the story in the omniscient narrator's intrusion into the narrative at one point; "Wish this little revenge is distributed among all people" (Siddiqui, Mohammad Asim, 19). The story is a moving autobiographical account of what Manto experienced as a seven year old on that fateful day of the anticolonial struggle in the subcontinent. Anti-imperialism, transnationalism and revolutionary transformations inspired Manto ever since his youth and constituted the subject matter of his more mature stories.

The New Law (Naya Quanun) captures the mood and aspirations of the common people about freedom. Mangu, the irrepressible kochwan (tonga driver) has been conceived in vivid detail. His fellow kochwans at the adda (stand) consider him knowledgeable about the affairs of the world and call him "Ustad"(master). Ustad Mangu enjoys his reputation and has his own perception about the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War and colonial rule in India. He has great antipathy towards the British rulers of India as well as towards the fawning Indians whom he characterizes as "toady boys". In his unlettered mind he somehow connects the Government of India Act of 1935 with the independence of the country and refuses to put up with the insolent behaviour of the gora (whites). His unrealistic expectations of seeing tangible changes around about the efficacy of political process for bringing about substantial changes in the human situation. The story makes it clear that the expectations attached to the India Act were misplaced. It would be reasonable to say that Manto wove into the texture of the story his own political perceptions regarding the 1935 Government of India Act and the "gradual" home rule that was being doled out in driblets. The story prophetically shows the disillusionment of the common people with independence in both India and Pakistan. "The New Law! What the hell are you talking about? The law is still the same", said the police officer sternly (56) and then Mangu is unceremoniously tossed into prison, summing up how the expectations of the common people will be thwarted. "Naya Quanun" was published in Humayun in May 1938 and widely hailed in literary circles for its simple and effective narrative. It established Manto's reputation as a skilful observer of the human psyche.

An astute witness to his times, Manto's *A Tale of 1947* (Saha'e) gives an immediate and penetrating account of those troubled and troubling times. It also gives us some clue to the reasons for Manto's own migration to Pakistan. The story is set in Bombay. It is about two friends Jugal and Mumtaz. When Jugal came to know that his uncle is being killed by

some Muslims in Lahore and he said to his Muslim friend 'if Hindu-Muslim killings start here, I don't know what I'll do'. 'What'll you do?' Mumtaz asked. 'I don't know. May be I'll kill you', he had replied darkly. Mumtaz kept quiet and for the next eight days he didn't speak to anyone; on the ninth day he said he was sailing for Karachi that afternoon (216). In the meantime Manto told a story of Sehai (a hindu) to his friends to make himself clear in front of Jugal. Sehai, a victim to communal violence, spent his last moment of life in Mumtaz hands. And he gave him money and ornaments as a trust, "There's a packet in there… it contains Sultan's ornaments and her twelve hundred rupees… I wanted her to have her money and the ornaments… would you please give them to her… tell her she should leave for a safe place… but… please… look after yourself first!"(220-221). At the time of partition nobody was willing to trust on anyone. But Sehai did. At the end of the story Jugal understands his friend but it was too late. "Mumtaz waved at them from the deck. One of them thought Mumtaz was waving at Sehai, eliciting Jugal's wistful reply; 'I wish I were Sehai' (221). Manto in the mouth of the narrator of the story puts the idea that by killing hundred thousand Hindus or Muslims, neither the Hindu religion nor the religion of Islam can be exterminated. Religion is a matter of faith. The liquidation of any religion by killing its votaries is impossible. Religious faith of any brand cannot be wiped out from the mind of a person with the help of a gun. Mumtaz at the beginning of the story says passionately, "Why can't they understand that faith, belief, devotion, call it what you will, is a thing of the spirit; it is not physical. Guns and knives are powerless to destroy it." (216)

Partly autobiographical, *A Tale of 1947* efface the distinction between fictional and historical narratives and together with the broader corpus of his better-known partition stories, establish a riveting symbiosis between Manto's life and work at the moment of an agonizing historical rupture.

His best known post 1947 stories, *Thanda Ghost* (Cold Meat) and *Khol Do* (Open it) tackled the horrors of partition. His depiction of women and young girls being kidnapped from refugee camps, trains or even their homes and the subsequent horror they went through is sadly, only conveys the reality of that time. Manto stormed the literary circles with *Toba Tek Singh,* which he wrote in 1954 after spending time in Lahore's mental asylum for his alcoholism. Regarded as his magnum opus *Toba Tek Singh* is a scathing comment on the absurdity of the decision and the policy of the two postcolonial states to split up the inmates of the mental asylum according to their religious affiliation – "The majority of the lunatics were against this exchange. This is because they could not understand why they were being uprooted from their homes" (219). Manto's message is searing but clear, the madness of partition was greater than the insanity of all the inmates put together. The illogically of borders between India and Pakistan was the theme of several of Manto's stories, including *Titwal ka kutta* (The Dog of Titwal) and *Aakhri Salute* (The Last Salute). But it was in his short story *Yazid* evocatively translated as "" When the Waters will Flow again" that Manto provided the most thought-provoking insight into the real nature of Indo-Pakistan enmity.

Yazid, set against the backdrop of partition violence that had resulted in the death of protagonist Karimdad's father and his wife's brother, the story questions the absurdity of expecting fairness from an enemy. While his wife wallows in grief for her dead brother, Karimdad adopts a stoical position. He counters the villagers' condemnation of his father's murderers with the statement" Whatever has happened has happened due to our own fault" (102). When war between India and Pakistan seems imminent, the news spreads that India is about to divert the river to starve the village of water. Villagers liken India's threatened blockade of the river water to the legendary cruelty of the Ummayad caliph Yazid toward the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husain, and his small party of followers prior to their massacre at Karbala.

Manto's allusion to a universal motif of resistance and martyrdom in Muslim consciousness, albeit one with greater emotive meaning for Shias than for Sunnis, underscores the depths of the grievance felt by the Pakistani villagers. India as a whole and Jawaharlal Nehru in particular are reviled. Upon hearing the village headman abuse India, Karimdad stops him and asserts that nothing can be achieved through vilification. Challenging the rhetoric of Indo-Pakistan hostility, Karimdad asks the village headman how a country considered to be an enemy can be expected to show any kindness. Given the opportunity, Pakistanis too would block the flow of India's food and water. After the exchange Karimdad returns home to find that his pregnant wife has given birth to a son. He is delighted and names the boy *Yazid*, much to the horror of both the wife and the midwife. When his wife asks him how he can give the child such a name, Karimdad says, "What's in it? It's only a name!' It needn't be the same Yazid… that Yazid had closed the river, our son will open it" (111) Written a few years after partition, Manto's *Yazid* embodies a moral message that resonates even more loudly today when the two estranged nuclearized neighbours have to weigh the pros and cons of war and peace, of power and principle, of pride and magnanimity in the face of new and more threatening internal and external challenges. So long as the people of the subcontinent remain shackled to their narrowly defined nationalist paradigms, utterly resistant to thinking outside their comfort zones, Manto's life and work will not lose its relevance in reminding them of the trauma that was partition, and the trauma that partition continues to be.

In the Dutiful Daughter (Tayaqqun), Manto derided the efforts of the two newly independent states of India and Pakistan to sew together the tattered pieces of women's honour by rehabilitating those who were abducted during the communitarian frenzy in Punjab. The heart breaking story revolves around a dishevelled and crazed woman who is desperately looking for her daughter. The liaison officer communicating the story tells the

old woman that her daughter had been killed and she should accompany him to Pakistan. She refuses to believe that her beautiful daughter could have been killed. One day she spots her daughter walking down the street with a young Sikh, who upon seeing her tells the girl, "Your mother" (101). The young woman glances at her mother and walks away. The distraught mother calls after her daughter. The liaison officer once again tells her that her daughter is dead. The anguished woman screams; "You are lying" (99). When the liaison officer swears on God's name that her daughter is indeed dead, the woman's certitude finally crumbles, she falls down in the square and dies. Besides drawing attention to the irony inherent in terms like "abducted and rehabilitated women" Manto leaves the truth mystifyingly unclear, the reader never knows, whether the young woman had run away with the Sikh or, if she was kidnapped, had made her peace with him and no longer wanted to be reunited with her hapless and tragic mother. The story is a brutal witness to the psychological trauma that woman faced during the partition. He was grieved by the carnage, the rapes and the looting that came in its wake. He wrote, "When I sat down to write I found my thoughts scattered. Though I tried hard I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India …my mind could not resolve the question; what country did we belong to now, India or Pakistan". (Mahey, Arjun, 153)

Blending hard facts with elements of realistic fiction Manto documented the multifaceted partition miseries that have eluded professional historians due to the methodological limitations of their craft. His life and work serve as a prism to readers to capture the human dimension of sectarian conflict in the final decades and immediate aftermath of the British raj. Salman Rushdie, the author of Midnight's Children and one of Manto's biggest advocates, describes him as "Unparalleled in his generation". "There are few writers," says Rushdie "who straddle both India and Pakistan as he does, and who engage with deepest problems of both countries." (The Guardian).

Conclusion

Manto acted as bold chronicler of history that no one could wish away. His personal struggles and setbacks gave him a perspective on the uneasy nexus emerging between state and society, making him particularly discerning spectator and critic of the post-colonial moment. Today Manto stands taller on the literary horizon than others who wrote about the mass migration of 1947. If Margaret Bourke-White froze the scenes of this event with her black-and-white photographs for LIFE magazines. Manto archived this historic foolishness of Partition in his stories. His popularity on both sides of the borders drawn in 1947 makes him an especially valuable source for the historian, scholar, artist, anthropologist and social scientist to glean innovative insights into the modern and contemporary history of South Asia. A reunification of the two countries like that of West & East Germany is impossible. However, had Manto been alive and were asked if he had a message for the people of the subcontinent on the 100th year of Jallianwala Bagh bloodbath, he would surely say, 'Yes, make peace." Accessible to a broad readership without sipping into shallowness or superficialities, Manto is a realist painter rather than a photographer in his depiction of partition.

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