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Nation-State, Community and Identity Crisis in the Selected Short Stories of Saadat Hassan Manto

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Abstract:

The three short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto, namely “*Axri salut*” translated as “The last salute”, “*Titwal ka Kutta*” translated as “The Dog of Titwal” and “Toba Tek Singh” “capture the pronounced crises in inter- community relations” (Saint 2012: 60) and dramatize the incompatibility of ‘national identity’ with smaller regional identities within the liminal space of individual’s fissured psyche resulting in the lapse of judgment and reason during and after partition. The paper is an attempt to illustrate how the stories through the trope of bewilderment, split identities and conflicting loyalties, bring out the violence that the overarching national identity unleashed upon individuals who could not align their loyalties to the territorial aspirations of the newly formed nation state (i.e. India and Pakistan) and upon identities of those at the margins, literally and figuratively. By the phrase ‘to be at the margins literally’ means the individuals at the locations and the geopolitical regions that got divided and had to encounter the trauma of ‘border disputes’. It also refers to ‘the agents of the state’; the soldiers who stationed at borders maintain the demarcations of territories by engaging in wars. To be at the margins figuratively refers to the individuals who are at the fringes of the society and its power structures with no control whatsoever on their own lives; who have no choice but to follow the dictates of the ‘political intellectuals’ and ‘law of the land’ even if the orders are detrimental to their own wishes.

Keywords: partition narratives, short stories, identity formation, nation-state, community

The term nation has been envisioned variously by primordialists and modernists and is enmeshed in bewildering contradictions. In this paper it has been used to mean “. . . not so much a cultural artifact . . . but a web of material relations and practices, which rests on classes, caste structures, gendered systems of production and reproduction, armies, laws, territories and yes, signifying practices as well.” (Ahmad 2007:40) The establishment of India as a nation-state upon Indian sub-continent not only conferred the people living within its political boundary a new overarching national identity of being ‘Indians’ above other ‘fuzzy’ identities based on caste, class, community but also brought in its wake the catastrophe of Partition that made the exclusionist and territorial aspects of nation-state quite evident. Sudipta Kaviraj in “The Imaginary Institution of India” explicates the idea of territorial demarcation of boundaries of the modern- nation state, as an imperative condition for enumerating its subjects in the process of nation formation for the purpose of administration and control. He also purports the concept of ‘fuzzy boundaries’ in Indian context with respect to identities and communities, resting his arguments on the dichotomous conceptual tool to categorize human social ties/ social networks namely *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, proposed by German sociologist

Ferdinand Tonnies. *Gemeinschaft* roughly translates as ‘community’ and signifies the bonds based on personal social interactions, values and beliefs, rooted in “subjective feelings” that may be “affectual or traditional” and are much common in pre-modern social forms. On the other hand, *gesellschaft* which roughly translates as ‘society’ signifies indirect impersonal relations based upon formal beliefs and values between individuals which are rooted in “rational agreement by mutual consent” which is an essential criterion for formation of nation-state. Kaviraj purports that the concept of identity, community and difference are inextricably linked and that the pre-modern social forms, in India were essentially community based and living within which fostered the feeling of “intense solidarity and belongingness” since, one did not “have to make interest- actuated decision to belong”; one did not have an “elaborately developed theory of otherness to conceptualize the other but knew how to handle the social complexity in the form of presence of others in their own life experience.” These groups apparently did not harbor a need to clarify, “where one’s community or even region ended and another began” and hence, these collective identities were not territorial, yet there was a sense of ‘region’ implied by attachment to one’s village and neighborhood. These groups even lacked a clear definition of the term ‘community’ since it was multiple and layered. As, “[o]n being asked to name his community (*samaj*) such a person could take, depending on the context, the name of the village, neighborhood, his cast, his religious denomination- but hardly ever his linguistic group, not to speak of a Nation.” (1992:26) According to Kaviraj such ‘fuzzy identities’ based on “fuzzy boundaries” of endogamous groups were detrimental to the function of the modern nation state, not enabling enumeration and classification, hence the need to fix boundaries and identities. The project of enumeration and classification called ‘census’ was indeed first introduced by the British, with the objective to colonize people of Indian subcontinent under the pretext of administration which set into motion the process of repression of multiple and layered fuzzy identities into fixed identities which in turn had a paradoxical effect on the psyche of people. On one hand it enabled them to assess their numbers and strength, and organize themselves as collective ‘we’ to oppose the British rule but at the same time it also promoted factionalism and sectarian politics within the ‘nationalist movement’ which ultimately led to the Partition. Along with this, it also began a process of corrosion of pre-modern social forms and *gemeinschaft* based identities in favour of establishing National Identity which is akin to *gesellschaft*. The ‘rational agreement by mutual consent’ in the formation of India, was essentially elitist and perhaps, the pre-modern means of identity construction based on ‘affectual bonds and solidarity’ between Hindus and Muslims, emanating from feeling of belongingness to ones village (*samaj*) and shared memories of syncretic and composite culture, had not been completely corroded, especially within people at the grass root level, by the time people of India and Pakistan came to acquire their new monolithic political identities as Indians and Pakistanis respectively, as forceful imposition of a new political identity which was territorial and religious brought in its wake traumatic experience of not only partition violence and but also acute sense of bewilderment emanating from the problematic of fissured self, in perceiving one’s identity, since the ‘other’ that had been pronounced so clearly on religious lines now, against whom the new political identity was constructed, had earlier been, for centuries, a part of the ‘self’, a part of the composite identity based on the *Ganga-Jamni Tehzeeb*. This problematic of conflict between the monolithic national

identity and composite regional identities is more profound and most evident, in partition narratives from people living in the provinces of Punjab and West Bengal, since they had to deal with the 'new frontiers' and the anxiety of not knowing, which side of the frontier, their village was going to fall.

Under the above mentioned critical framework, I here attempt to illustrate how the three short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto, namely "*Axri salut*" translated as "The last salute", "*Titwal ka Kutta*" translated as "The Dog of Titwal" and "Toba Tek Singh" by "capturing the pronounced crises in the social formations and in inter-community relations" (Saint 2012: 60) dramatize; the incompatibility of 'national identity' with smaller regional identities within the liminal space of individual's fissured psyche resulting in the lapse of judgment and reason; the violence the new political identities unleashed upon individuals who could not align their loyalties to the territorial aspirations of the nation state and upon identities of those at the margins, literally and figuratively; through the trope of bewilderment, split identities and conflicting loyalties. By the phrase 'to be at the margins literally' I mean the individuals at the locations and the regions that got divided and had to encounter the trauma of 'border disputes'. It also refers to 'the agents of the state'; the soldiers who stationed at borders maintain the demarcations of territories by engaging in wars, often inadvertently. To be at the margins figuratively refers to the individuals who are at the fringes of the society and its power structures with no control whatsoever on their own lives; who have no choice but to follow the dictates of the 'political intellectuals' and 'law of the land' even if the orders are detrimental to their own wishes.

The stories selected for analysis are from what Leslie A. Flemming classifies as Lahore phase of Manto's writings published between 1948-1955. In "Riots and Refugees: The Post-Partition Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto" Fleming mentions that "reflecting the dislocation in his own life, he made the effects of communal violence, on both victims and perpetrators and the difficulties of refugees . . . his particular concerns" and deals with "the peculiar conflict of loyalties in the fighting over Kashmir after partition" in his short stories namely "The Last salute" and "The dog of Titwal" published in the collection *Yazid*. It is "The Last Salute", which is Manto's one of the lesser known stories that brings out the tyranny of forced 'territorial national identities' on smaller identities based on affectual ties more vividly. The story is about two soldiers, one a Muslim (Subedar Rabb Nawaz) the other a Sikh (Ram Singh) who, though childhood friends and formerly members of the same regiment, having fought together in World War II against Germans and Italians, now find themselves on opposite sides shooting at each other's platoons in the Titwal region. In trying to get things to make tea for his men, during the respite Ram Singh gets mortally wounded mistakenly by Nawaz, who purely in jest fires at him thinking that he is protected by rocks. Combat follows and Ram Singh's position gets captured, but as Ram Singh lies bleeding profusely, Nawaz tries to stop the bleeding and requests for urgent medical help on the wireless from Major Aslam, waiting for which both friends indulge in harmless banter, reminiscing about their village and their school. In his last moments switching between delirium and consciousness, it is the manner in which Ram Singh salutes Major Aslam, his former commanding officer (but now an officer of the enemy camp) that brings out vividly; the confusion and trauma individuals had to bear due to conflicting loyalties. "A strange look of incomprehension suddenly suffused his face. His arm fell limply to his side and he murmured, 'Ram Singh,

you ass, you forgot this was a war, a war . . .” (189) unable to complete his sentence he looks at Nawaz one last time and dies. The sense of bewilderment that the characters face is brought out succinctly due to the merger of dichotomous terms like ‘enemy’ and ‘friend’ and ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ in the characters and “sympathy is evoked for the helplessness of the victim as well as the aggressor, both of whom are caught in the collapse of reason when they are wrenched away from the physical and psychological securities that have been built over generations.” (Kumar 2012: 104) It also ironically critiques the rhetoric of passion- blood, sacrifice, remembrance invoked by nation- state that renders these soldiers inhuman against their basic human instincts of compassion. But it is Subedar Rabb Nawaz’s musings about ‘homeland’ that dramatize the ‘split self’ or the fissured identity of the character, in his inability to accept his new political identity wholeheartedly. These lines also satirize the territorial aspirations of the nation state which leads to creation of the ‘other’ as enemy, more vividly:

One thing Subedar Rab Nawaz could understand. They were fighting this war to win Kashmir. Why did they want to win Kashmir? Because it was crucial to Pakistan’s security and survival. However, sometimes when he sat behind a gun emplacement and caught sight of a familiar face on the other side, for a moment he forgot why they were fighting. . . . this was his country before the establishment of Pakistan . This was his land. But now he was fighting against men who were his countrymen until only the other day. These men who had grown up in the same village, whose families had been known to his family for generations. These men now had been turned into citizens of a country to which they were complete strangers. They had been told: we are placing a gun in your hands so that you can go and fight for the country which you have yet to know, where you do not even have a roof over your head, where even the air and water are strange to you. Go and fight against Pakistan, the land where you were born and grew up. (Hassan 2007:181)

The lines present a telling critique of the artificiality of borders that divide people on the pretence of providing security but instead create fissures within communities and neighborhoods that otherwise lived in cooperation and harmony. The story also presents a critique of the grand myths and false claims that nation- states employ to unite people under one spurious unity, for instance ‘Nation’ which is “actually a product of conjuncture of modernity” is falsely arrogated “to be a community which was lost-to be regained” (Kaviraj 1992:21-22). Mohammad Asim Siddiqui purports that many of Manto’s stories capture the failure of the grand-myths of nation building and its inability to take different sections of society into their fold, since writing about his creative process, Manto casually mentions in his essay titled “Manto”, getting up early to squeeze stories out of newspaper reports, which predictably enough, carried assertions of grand-myths about India and Pakistan. For instance one of it was India tracing its continuous glorious past from ancient period and that of Pakistan which literally meaning pure and sacred land, professed a nation for Muslims. The following lines from the perspective of Nawaz, reveal the bewilderment caused due to collusion of statist project with religion and his inability to comprehend the validity of this myth.

Rab Nawaz could not unravel this puzzle. And when he thought about Kashmir, he became even more confused. Were the Pakistani soldiers fighting for Kashmir or for the Muslims of Kashmir? If they were being asked to fight in defense of Muslims of Kashmir, why had they not been asked to fight for the Muslims of princely states of

Junagarh and Hyderabad? And if this was an Islamic war, then why were other Muslim countries of the world not fighting shoulder to shoulder with them? (Hassan 2007:182)

“The Dog of Titwal”, is a sarcastic story about the unnecessary suffering of Jhun Jhun/Shun Shun a hapless dog, who dies, caught between the crossfire of conflicting loyalties. The story allegorizes the imperative demand the modern-nation state imposes upon its citizens to adhere to the common political identity or nationality and those who fail to align themselves to it, are labeled as traitors and are exterminated, which becomes evident in the story, in the casual remark made by a soldier that “[n]ow even dogs will have to be either Indian or Pakistani” and that “[I]ike Pakistanis, Pakistani dogs will also be shot.” (Hassan 2007:175) The story also highlights the ‘unnaturalness’ of borders and the irrationality of conflict by juxtaposing in the narration the description of nature that continues its course unmindful of the warring humanity.

. . . The birds sang as they always had and the flowers were in bloom. Bees buzzed about lazily. Only when a shot rang out, the birds got startled and took flight, as if a musician had struck a jarring note on his instrument. It was almost the end of September, neither hot nor cold. It seemed as if summer and winter had made their peace. (Hassan 2007:174)

Since Manto usually avoided frivolous descriptions in his stories, adopting an objective stance to achieve realistic portrayal and exhibits preference for well delineated plots and unexpected endings, the description of nature holds specific significance in the story and is not ornamental but brings out in contrast with itself, the un-naturalness of war ethics that the nation- state promotes for its vested interests. The climax of the story where the poor perplexed dog is unable to understand the cause of firing and comprehend the direction he should move, dramatizes the forced displacement of natives who become refugees on their own land. Initially in the story, both Jamadar Harnam Singh and Subedar Himmat Khan try to claim the dog as their possession by offering it crackers, by naming it and tying around its neck a cardboard claiming it to be a Hindustani and Pakistani dog respectively. Wanting to belong to both sides, the dog visits both the camps in search of food, spotted coming from the Pakistani side, Jamadar Harnam Singh fires at it. Seeing the dog turn around and run backwards, Subedar Himmat Khan fires at the dog to scare him and soon it becomes “ a game between the two soldiers , with the dog running round in circles in great terror” (Hassan 2007:179) while both Harnam Singh and Himmat Khan laughed boisterously . In the end the dog is shot dead by Jamadar Harnam Singh, who dismisses it by muttering “He died a dog’s death.” The story evokes a sense of confusion, by highlighting the irrationality in the act of killing the dog, by an inversion of the norms of ‘civility’ and ‘bestiality’ where the animal in its innocence becomes symbolic of the humanity as well as refugees and both Jamadar Harnam Singh and Subedar Himmat Khan display, barbarism, cruelty, inhumanity in killing a harmless creature who was earlier their companion. By this inversion Manto ridicules Harnam Singh and Himmat Khan who symbolize bigotry. The story also raises question about the loyalties of the poor; caught in the everyday struggle to procure food and livelihood. How do they envision this rhetoric of nation? With whom do the refugees identify and since it is the region that provides a sense of identity, forced into exile how do these refugees construct their identity? This problematic of conflicting loyalties is succinctly portrayed by this short story.

Fleming calls “Toba Tek Singh”; published in 1953 in an Urdu magazine, *Savera* ; “an allegorical story dealing with the supposed exchange of insane asylum inmates following partition . . .” Old Bishan Singh is not only symbolic of the people on the fringes of the so to say the ‘rational’ society, with no agency to express themselves but also “ . . . in his tenacious refusal to give up not only his home for the last fifteen years (the asylum) but the country to which the very core of his identity, his ancestral village, belongs, he stands for all refugees, on both sides, who were forced to leave their homes and lost their identities.” (1979:82-84) In “The Long Shadow of Manto’s Partition Narratives” Tarun K. Saint mentions that “The story achieves remarkable critique of statist efforts to establish control over mixed population . . . and the absurdity underpinning the seemingly rational calculus based on demographic measurements used by bureaucrats and planners” (2012:56) To Saint, “Bhishan Singh’s sense of integrity of the self emanates from a sense of belongingness to his village of birth and his bewilderment is to be located in the inability to ascertain the location of his village within the “new political geography created after the drawing of national boundaries.” (Saint 2012: 57) Stephen Alter reiterates Saint’s view that the story depicts the “relationship between person’s home and identity” which is shown by deliberate mixing up of the name of the character and village by Manto in the narration and that the madness signifies the “sense of separation, the distorted loyalties and the dislocation of self.”(1994:97) Along the madmen and even those “. . . who weren’t completely mad were in some perplexity as to whether they were in Pakistan or in Hindustan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was this Pakistan, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it that a little while ago, though staying in the very same place, they had been in Hindustan.” (Trivedi 1999:106) The bewilderment of the inmates, becomes the literary trope to portray the fissures that erupted in the composite, layered and ‘fuzzy’ identities of people due to the imposition of an overarching monolithic national identity upon the fuzzy boundaries of ‘community’ and ‘region’ since this new political identity was antithetical to “affectual bonds” of the village community . Moreover confusion also emanates from the fact that, these people on the margins had no agency to express their consent or dissent regarding identification with this new political identity, which requires “interest- actuated decision to belong.”(Kaviraj 1992:20)

Alok Bhalla, in “Memory, History and Fictional Representation of the Partition” makes a critical assessment of many novels on partition and asserts that there is hardly a novel that presents partition as a logical consequence of animosity between the Hindu and Muslims. In fact fictional memory does not presents accounts of feeling of alienation between religious communities in their quotidian lives in pre-1947 India and “the element that informs nearly all the novels and stories about partition is the note of utter bewilderment.” (2005: 90) Moreover, such novels often evoke the memories of ‘home’ or ‘*basti*’ with “collective rites and traditions, songs and legends” (2005: 90) All the three stories, as analyzed above also reveal thematic connectedness around the trope of bewilderment and the conflicting loyalties and divided identities emanating from identity crises and lapse of reason. Being a witness himself, to the fratricide and bloodbath that accompanied the partition, Manto with his sardonic humour and brutal irony mocks the creation of the two new sovereign states. The stories not only illustrate the fact that the modern nation -states are “. . . at once cohesive and divisive: cohesive in the sense that they bring together people of one land-unit to live in a bond of solidarity; divisive since it

thrives by sustaining difference from and antagonism against the ‘other’” (Vijayshree 2007: x) but also, interrogate the notion of nation-state from the perspective of those at the margins, to expose its power dynamics and hegemonic nature of national identity.

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