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Interrogating Histories in Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories

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Abstract:

Saadat Hasan Manto, the Indo-Pakistan writer is quite known for his witty and subtle observation about human beings, especially those who were displaced by the partition. He was a journalist and a script writer also. He wrote in Urdu which was later translated into English. He intentionally kept himself away from all kinds of literary grandeur and refinement, thereby adopted an individualistic style of his own. Some of his noted works include *Thanda Gosht*, *Khol Do*, *Toba Tek Singh*, *Is Manjhar Mein*, *Mozalle*, etc.

This article is a study of the selected stories of Manto. It looks at how Manto makes use of his satirical wit and humour to look at the sociopolitical issues, from local to the global. In his stories he beautifully blends psychoanalysis and human behavior, chronicles the sentiments and madness of the displaced masses and speaks about the political slug fest that followed the partition of India.

Keywords: Partition, Subaltern, modernity, historiography.

“Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its inception but man was still slave in both these countries -- slave of prejudice ... slave of religious fanaticism ... slave of barbarity and inhumanity.” Saadat Hasan Manto.

Saadat Hasan Manto is regarded as a great craftsman of short stories and a chronicler of human passions and social hypocrisy. He transcends his time and nationality through the sensitive portrayals of human tragedy. Even if his stories are categorized along with the Partition stories, these stories move beyond the limits of nationalistic borders and ages. Manto discusses topics considered as social taboos in Indo-Pakistani Society. His sense of humour and satire are clearly evinced in his narration. His concern on sociopolitical issues from local to the global and an urge to reveal the socio-economic injustice, by giving a scathing insight into the human behavior through satire, that verged on dark comedy is reflected in all his stories. He beautifully blends psychoanalysis and human behavior, chronicles the sentiments and madness of the displaced masses and speaks about the political slug fest that followed the partition of India. As it is rightly observed by Mushirul Hasan about the writers during the Partition period, the writers' voice describes the other face of freedom. “Their portrayal of a fragmented and wounded society, engulfed in violence, must

command greater attention even if cynical and self-seeking politicians, impervious to human suffering and to the consequences of their ill-conceived and reckless designs, ignored their timely warnings and signed united India's death-warrant" (*Legacy of a Divided Nation* 101). Manto is remembered for the poignant way in which he details facts in his stories that are painful reflections of the traumatic incidents that happened during and after India's partition. His tool for narration is Urdu *Afsana* or short story. The strong sense of sarcasm in his short stories helps to offer a multifaceted exploration of the innate sense of human impotency when it faces a national crisis. Manto being an Urdu writer raises his question of language engulfed within the crisis of national culture, where he observes a cultural clash with a minority orientation and consciousness within a nationalistic culture, language, and religious consciousness. The question of partition is no longer a question of the political figures and leaders who are actively involved in the mainstream, but it is definitely a problem for the common man.

Manto's stories question the histories of that time. They perfectly portray an agonizing past and its post-colonial predicaments through powerful images and nuanced descriptions. Here, Manto exposes the inadequacy of numerous political narratives on Independence and Partition. It is the partition of India and Pakistan that freed the nations from the colonial yoke. Partition is much more than a historical event for Indians and Pakistanis. These stories represent the other side of Freedom. They are similar to the holocaust literature, where the dark, grim faces of men, women and children pose challenging questions at the world and nation builders. Partition Literature also describes such cruelties where ordinary people were maimed, tortured, raped, abducted and killed. The transfer of populations after the Partition created thousands of refugees and thousands of deaths. The people were confused by so many questions regarding their identity, positions and displacement. These queries were clearly marked by Yasmin Khan in the book *The Great Partition*,

Where was India and where was Pakistan? Who was now an Indian or a Pakistani? Was citizenship underpinned by a shared religious faith, or was it a universal right, guaranteed by a state that promised equality and freedom to all? Were people expected to move into the state where their co-religionists resided in majority? The tragedy of Partition was that by the time people started to ask and try these questions, unimaginable violence had escalated to the point of ethnic cleansing. (4)

Manto's stories never depict any of the historical details with its statistics and figures during and after partition, where history achieves the status of a mythic system of representation. These stories delineate a history of politicization of the population. Manto problematise the concept of 'Indian' in his stories by looking at the religious identities of Indians and Pakistani masses as Hindus and Muslims. It is aptly noted by Dipesh Chakraborty, "Indian history itself is in a position of subalternity" (*Provincializing Europe* 27). This subalternity is reflected in the short stories. His protagonists evinced the bitter realities that turned them colonized within the colonies, which in a way made them mere objects. The violent breakup and the sprouting up of many nations shake the mental makeup of the subjects, for whom it is a difficult task to come up with affiliations, likes and dislikes with a short notice. These

stories attempt at rethinking the history of the partition, identity, nationality and nationhood. When the official history approves the recorded facts, milestones, and reforms, they ignored the silences, agonies, homelessness which later get marked as the subaltern, and Manto's characters are the voices of the silenced. This is what Gyanendra Pandey speaks about in *Remembering Partition*, “. . . even when history is written as a history of struggle, it tends to exclude the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion, by normalizing the struggle, evacuating it of its messiness and making it part of a narrative of assured advance towards specified (or specifiable) resolutions. (4-5)

The violent severance of India which has been regarded as a united and independent entity can be regarded as a tragic blow in the world history. Manto's stories look at the historical blunders and grave inscience based on various policies and decisions that are of great significance. The basic principle behind the partition was based on the Two Nations Theory, which was greatly used by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The basic ideology was one that is linked on religion. One could link this with the Lahore Resolution, which is purely political, and it demands greater autonomy for Muslim community within India, which later asks for a separate Muslim country, Pakistan.

Instead of reaffirming the unity of undivided India, the then political factions and political leaders hastily drawn the marks to divide India, and millions of refugees moved towards Northern India; though it is regarded as a journey towards the promised land, one cannot give the exact count of people who were murdered, lost and died. The crime of dividing British India is jointly committed by the political leaders along with the British rulers of that time. While uprooting 14 million people from their homelands, they could have taken some security measures to transfer these people through the borders. They had a moral obligation to ensure their security which they failed to perform as they did everything in haste. The tragic error of Judgment committed by the then British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee and his officers in India, was one of the initial reasons that led to the rupture of the nation. This was termed by the then Opposition Leader of the British Parliament, Sir Winston Churchill as a “Shameful Flight”. This term was later used by Stanley Wolpert who in his book on the last of British Empire in India, speaks about the absurdness of partition impetuously committed by the British and Indian leaders.

Partition maps revealing the butchered boundary lines drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe through the Sikh heartland of Punjab and east of Calcutta in Bengal were kept under lock and key on Mount batten's orders, hidden from any other eyes for precious days within New Delhi's vice regal palace. [. . .]. But Mountbatten had resolved to wait until India's “Independence day” festivities were all over, the flashbulb photos all shot and transmitted worldwide, [. . .]. Only in the desperate days and weeks after the celebrations of mid-August did the horrors of Partition's impact begin to emerge. (*Shameful Flight: The last Years of the British Empire in India* 11. Print)

For Manto, writing was not just a creative expression or an artistic call, but it was an institution. His stories always carry with them a strong sense of history and reality. The

greatest source of inspiration for most of his stories was the newspaper stories. As it is rightly narrated by Mohammad Asim Siddiqui in his article that speaks about the resistance of Manto's stories and how Manto tried to squeeze stories out of newspaper articles, he says, "Many of his stories must have been a result of this process. And predictably enough, newspapers in his times were full of stories of communal violence and the assertion of grand myths of the nation and nation building" ("Saadat Hasan Manto's Poetics of Resistance." 24). His stories represent the frenzied madness of the mob who were for and against the Partition of their motherland. He looked at the ambiguity involved in the violence and conflicts that spread like a wildfire. Fragmentation of India's national integrity and the disturbances it caused among the people are evident in his stories.

Through the Partition we witnessed the death of India as a nation state. This partition of a nation state was not just leading to the murder of a nation, but it paved way for the transformation of a unified polity into different layers of identities, social orders and existences based on religious and other factions. Rewriting identities based on borders and reallocation of orders, happened as result of this Partition. People started looking at their newly constructed identities through the border exchange, which in a way disturbed the sense of belongings.

Unlike the progressive writers of his time, who were under the Nehruvian ideologies of progressiveness and moralistic upheaval, his stories were greatly criticized for discussing sex, and describing obscene scenes. Yet another reason is his style of writing stories adopting satire as a major trope. The newly formed governments of both countries were not prepared for the atrocities and emergencies that followed the partition. The borders they created based on the religious affiliation forced them to flee from their safe positions to the "promised land." Manto was equally bothered about the history of Partition as well as the disturbances it caused to the human consciences, and he used memory as a tool to look and analyze the sufferings and how the histories got ingrained into one's memories, thereby changing the very notion of history as a list of facts that one can find in history textbooks and historical data. The members who were in the Radcliff Commission never visited the original borders or land, but they were inside their office cabins busily drawing the borders of Pakistan and India.

Partition Literature is often considered as a kind of 'subaltern testimony' (Bernard, Anna. *Trauma and Memory* 13 Web). The stories and novels juxtaposed under this category offer another genre of counter narratives, and works of constructivism and alternate visions. They offer a counter reading to the documented narratives where one come across facts and figures neatly arranged in a systematic and scientific manner without any consideration for human feelings or sentiments. The partition is not just an event that happened at some point in our history but it should be considered an avalanche of experiences felt by millions of people. The only thing that was silenced was the human cries. The historical partition reshaped not only the Indian subcontinent but also human minds as well. To put it in Ian Talbot's words; "human voices are greatly silent". (*Literature and the Human Drama of the 1947 Partition*.228. Print).

“Toba Tek Singh” is an excellent story that deals with the absurdity involved in Partition and proves that Partition is a lunatic action on the part of nationalist leaders by portraying events in a lunatic asylum. Manto has a very ambitious aim to laugh at the white men’s political greed by portraying such a situation. That is why even if he tells about the helplessness of Muslim and Hindu inmates at the asylum; there is an instance where he speaks about the situation of two Anglo-Indian lunatics. There is one more aim behind this story. Even if the story portrays events inside the lunatic asylum, Manto wants to tell his readers that the whole country is a lunatic asylum, what the mad people observe inside the asylum are the thoughts of an ordinary person.

He speaks about the two Anglo-Indian lunatics in the European ward. He describes their reaction and attitude when they were informed about the British government’s decision to go back after granting independence to India, “they went into a state of deep shock and were seen conferring with each other in whispers the entire afternoon. They were worried about their changed status after independence. Would there be a European ward or would it be abolished? Would breakfast continue to be served or would they have to subsist on bloody Indian chapati?” (*Mottled Dawn* 4 Print).

The queries that these Anglo-Indian lunatics ask each other truly reflect the debasing, egoistic attitude of the white colonizers who are there to loot a nation and to enrich themselves at the expense of others. And the story ultimately ends up with a portrayal of the real situation of a true Indian or Pakistani, “There, behind the barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh” (*Mottled Dawn* 10 Print). After Independence, this becomes the true predicament of an average Indian or a Pakistani individual, where his real home is not in India or in Pakistan but somewhere in the border. This becomes a perplexing question for one’s existence.

“The Return” is one of the shortest short stories written by Manto and it presents the bleakest picture involved in the freedom movement. It tells the story of a father, Sirajuddin who lost her daughter Sakina, during his journey from India to Pakistan, and ultimately he entrusts the duty to find her girl to four men in the refugee camp, who later rescued and raped her; she is later identified by the father in a hospital. It really shocks the readers that, if freedom carries with it such atrocities and cruelties, then what is freedom, and who is the real independent being?

Manto breaks up with the totalizing theories of modern histories and reveals a true picture of the common man, who needs a *terra firma* to keep his feet firm. His stories show how modernist narratives of history ignore the societal interdependencies and social bondages irrespective of communal factions. His stories are modernist reflections of fragmented conditions of history untold and they reflect the meta-histories in-scripted in the lives of common masses. The political histories that arrived later and the legitimized historiography of the two nations, uphold political repression and cultural homogenization, and Manto’s

stories are a vehement attack on all such moves. Here we can see how the colonial hegemony give way to the power of fundamental groups that are practicing their dominance, by forcefully demanding the consent from the popular masses.

Still in the midst of growing rivalry between Muslims and Hindus that has been sown among the people by the political leaders only, the story "The Assignment," tells about the inter-dependencies that Sikhs and Muslims share with each other. In the story, Sardar Gurmukh Singh's son, Santokh brings home-made noodles and says thus to Mian Abdul Hai, "For the last ten years, on the occasion of Id, I have always taken my small gift to Judge Sahib. After I am gone, it will become your duty.' I gave him my word that I would not fail him. I am here today to honour the promise made to my father on his death-bed" (*Mottled Dawn* 21 Print). The Assignment discussed in this story is similar to the assignment given to the Nazi soldiers of Germany during holocaust period. Here the Sikhs are in search of any Muslims within the Indian border. That is the condition of a modernist Independent India.

The disillusionment that followed the beautiful dream of independence is thoroughly captured by Manto in his stories through his satire. The disappearance of women and children and how they were mistreated, and the utter silence of the political leaders were thoroughly captured by Manto.

The history of Partition and the brutal events that followed, show how the hegemonic power gets into the hands of the political leaders and intellectuals. Here the masses or the common people are weak and they have no other choice than to be submissive to the rulers British or Indian. To put it in the Gramscian terms, "The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group,; this consent is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production." (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.12 Web)

The events described in Manto's stories deal with the social disintegration and cultural fragmentation. The concept of power and discipline get operated through the masses and mob which is very much similar to the sophisticated forms of moral policing we have in our country right now. The social realities reflected in his short stories are the bleak realities that accompanied the long-awaited independence from the foreign rule. These stories heralded the arrival of another monster among the common masses to take away the peace and happiness that once settled among them. His stories work through the connectedness and interdependence between different levels and different religions of social groups. While he charts out the contours and winding paths of human emotions and ethos involved in the partition and displacement, he reflects the actual historiography of a nation torn apart due to its own ludicrous policies.

"Colder than Ice" also discusses the lust and loot involved during the transfer of people from India to Pakistan and vice versa, like in "The Return." Here Ishwar Singh describes Kalwant Kaur what happened to him during one night of house raids that happened along with the transfer of people from across the borders. He like any other looter enters into one

Muslim house and “there were seven people in there, six of them men . . . whom I killed with my kirpan one by one . . . and there was one girl . . . she was so beautiful . . . I didn’t kill her . . . I took her away” (*Mottled Dawn* 28 Print). Later he rapes that girl and then only he realizes that it is a dead body. Here Manto explicitly speaks out that giving freedom and independence to a country and dividing it into a two countries is purely a political move on the part of nationalist leaders, but the whole avalanche of horrible incidents that accompanied the creation of two countries are unpredictable and unimaginable especially within a modernist nation.

“The Dog of Titwal” is another short story where Manto laughs at the uselessness of war on the borders between two nations that almost shares same cultural heritage and borders. The most interesting factor about this story is that Manto laughs at this idea of the war between two nations by introducing a dog among two warrior groups, who in turn compete to give Indian name and Pakistani name to the dog. It can be considered as a metaphorical representation of an average Hindu or Muslim, who have to shift his locale between the borders during the partition. Here is a poor dog who becomes a victim of the rivalry of the Indian and Pakistani soldiers. The reader wonders whether the dog’s status is elevated or deteriorated when he dies a martyr’s death. “Subedar Himmat Khan sighed, ‘The poor bugger has been martyred.’ Jamadar Harnam Singh ran his hand over the still-hot barrel of his rifle and muttered, ‘He died a dog’s death’” (*Mottled Dawn* 37 Print). That is how they describe the sad plight of a dead dog. Manto makes the reader imagine everything in a nationalistic spirit, even if it is a dog’s death.

His short stories offer a glimpse at the darkness of the human psyche, and how the human values deteriorated during the partition, by emphasizing the dismal social and political climate. Manto recaptures the experience of pain behind the partition. The historians described Partition as a historical event, by enlisting facts and figures; whereas litterateurs like him highlight the actual impact of Partition on common man’s life through the stories. Manto also looks at the other side of silences and violence during the partition period by articulating the unauthorized histories that have been sidelined for a long time.

In “The Last Salute”, Manto makes the readers seriously ponder about the necessity of war whether it is between two neighbouring countries or between common enemies. The soldiers who are involved in this fight are always confused at their position. Rab Nawaz thinks, “Before the Partition of the country, they used to fight one common enemy who was not really their enemy perhaps but whom they had accepted as their enemy for the sake of employment and rewards and medals. Formerly, all of them were Indian soldiers, but now some were Indian and others were Pakistani soldiers. Rab Nawaz could not unravel this puzzle” (*Mottled Dawn* 40 Print). Manto here not only discusses the helplessness of the soldiers but also thinks about the futility of war. And in spite of all the modernist ideologies and nationalistic urges, Manto never glorifies war, but instead, he says that the soldiers enlist themselves in the war because all they are in need is a job, and waging war gives them a decent job with decent income. Manto here looks at the other side of a bleak reality that many nationalists and historians often ignore.

At times, an average Indian feels that the political movements that occurred along with the Independence struggle and the nationalist urge for a political unity only by dissecting the country happened as a result of the British ploy, but there are many political leaders from India and Pakistan who silently nodded for such a move. This nationalist political desire for creating two nations is a modernist reflection of the current scenario, where superpowers encroach upon the freedom of a weaker nation and then dissecting it into many factions. In the case of India and Pakistan, two nations are created on the basis of the religious factions.

“The Price of Freedom” is yet another story that discusses the real freedom that any individual cherishes, that the nationalist figures and political leaders promise the people and ultimately fail to keep. It tells about two Muslim youths engaged in the freedom struggle hailing from Punjab. They wanted to marry each other and they are seeking the blessings of a prominent political figure, Baba who blesses them and tells them that their relationship shouldn't be one based on lust. Ghulam spirited by Baba's convincing speech takes an oath that he will not touch his wife before India's independence. For a long time, he keeps his promise but later, started to use condoms to prevent childbirth so that he can at least make belief Baba that he still keeps his word. Later he becomes a business man, but still he detests anything that is made up of rubber. He cannot even withstand his kid playing with the rubber balloon. Manto presents a hysterical Ghulam here, “Like a madman, Ghulam Ali pounced on the balloon. There was a bang and all the child was left with was a piece of string with a shrivelled piece of ugly rubber dangling at the other end” (*Mottled Dawn* 77 Print). Manto unveils the brutality of the Indian politics and unmasks the real intention of the political leaders when they dissected the nation into two.

In his stories, Manto describes not only the psychic condition of the people who are caught in the mire of war, but he presents good character studies of people who belong to different religious sects and different nationalities. “Mozail” is one such story where Manto presents a Jewish lady who defines her true love by letting her save her lover's sweetheart. Along with such a highly personal story of a man's love for two ladies, Manto describes the cruelties committed by the people in the name of nationalism. Here Mozail, the Jew sacrifices her life for saving a Sikh and the story ends with a violent attack on religion by Mozail. When Tarlochan tries to veil her nakedness by his turban cloth, Mozail pushed aside the turban with which he had tried to cover her nakedness and says, “Take away this rag of your religion. I don't need it” (*Mottled Dawn* 95 Print).

It is quite amusing to see that Manto makes use of his stories as a trumpet to say aloud his view regarding the partition of India and the efforts that followed it to settle the people in the respective countries. In “The Dutiful Daughter”, he speaks about the rehabilitation programme, “It always amused me to see that such enthusiastic efforts were being made to undo the effects of something which had been perpetrated by more or less the same people” (*Mottled Dawn* 96 Print). He looks at the grave problem of young girls who are sexually molested by the abductors. He wonders whether it is India or Pakistan who is going to claim

their authority and their kids' responsibility. He says that such women are forcefully taken from their homes by the intruders and later they are termed as abducted women.

Modernity in its clear sense refers to “a philosophical and in particular an epistemological condition . . . it refers to an historical, empirical instance” (Wagner *Theorizing Modernity* 3). If it refers to the dissolution of a borderless society and the reemergence of a new kind of civil society then definitely it is helping the society. In these stories, he looks at the modernity of social configurations. If the freedom at midnight granted complete freedom to the popular masses, the reverse effect happened in Pakistan and India. As it is clearly narrated by Wagner, “. . . the modern condition is characterized by freedom and democracy, and it is safeguarded by institutions that are based on the same principle of free aggression. The most important of these institutions are the democratic polity, the market economy and the autonomous pursuit of truth, called science” (*A Sociology of Modernity* xiii).

“Three Simple Statements” is one of the shortest among the stories written by Manto, where he says that Congress House and Jinna Hall are the government official places and they no longer belong to the common man. For the common man, they have the public lavatory to express their ideas freely, to let out their emotional outbursts as inscriptions and engravings on the bathroom walls. He presents an Independent India's picture thus, “Both Congress House and Jinnah Hall were under the control of the government, but the *mootri* was free, free to spread its stink far and wide, free to receive the garbage of the local community at its doorstep” (Manto *Mottled Dawn* 102 Print). This story offers polyvocal perspectives of partition. He renders the language to experience the pains behind the partition, how it unsettles and displaces the people. One's nation itself becomes a contesting territory where one has to compromise upon various factors and still could claim as a free and independent being.

Manto never considers the nationalist aspirations or power struggle and conflicts of the upper middle class or the elite section in his stories; rather, he looks at the common man, his dilemma, and confusion at the strange turn of events. He never looks at the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim, but his stories look at the clash between an Indian and a Pakistan individual. The social, political, cultural and religious ills of Pre-Independent and Post-Independent India get reflected through his characters. Postcolonial history is like the post-nationalist form of historiography. The aftermath of partition is a clear reflection of caste discrimination and the anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu discriminations that happened in India and in Pakistan.

The freedom that India and Pakistan gained during 1947 brings along with it such an ambiguity of the modernist condition that on one hand it granted freedom whereas on the other hand it completely curtailed the free movement and expression of these people as Hindus and Muslims residing in two regions. Historical reflections of modernity differ a lot in the non-western world. If modernity meant the rise of individualism and democracy, the growth of social power, Indian modernity has accommodated a series of developments along with its modernist growth. Even if modernist expectations in the Western world favoured a

homogenous world view, Indian modernity blindly tried to imitate such a homogenous version by ousting people belonging to other caste and religion. As the history of modernity depicts, in most of the third world nations, a new form of the collective agency has started developing and it is reflected in the development of armies, war strategies and a new condition of nationalistic development. Manto's stories look at this development of modernism that happened in India and Pakistan. The political reforms that happened during the freedom movement ultimately created a paradoxical situation by dissecting the nation into two factions based on religious differences. This is the political reformist ideas handed over to India by the Western modernist outlook.

His stories look at the cardinal confusion involved in the nationalistic practices of the modernist world and the way it is reflected among the people. Even if freedom, equality and discipline come as part and parcel of modernity, modernist reflections of freedom of our country aim at taking these things from others. Thus, the Independence of India always carries with it an ambiguity that is well reflected in the stories of Manto. This kind of modernity is reflected in the construction of new boundaries, the transgression of policies and in the traumatic displacement of thousands of innocent people from their settlement.

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