

Revisiting Partition through Manto's Short Stories, "A Tale of 1947" and "The Great Divide"

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ABSTRACT

The Partition was one of the most appalling and momentous events in Indian history. It entailed a saga of massacres and migrations, and an unfolding of human tragedies of enormous proportions. The bloody riots led many creative writers to articulate their experiences with deep sensitivity which was reflected in what came to be known as "Partition Literature". Saadat Hasan Manto, a prolific Indo-Pakistani Urdu writer portrayed rather starkly the event of Partition in his short stories. With his deep and instinctive insight into human nature, he penned many a story during the turbulent phase of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. An attempt is made in the present paper to bring to fore certain interesting aspects of Manto's writings by making a close reading of some of his short stories like "A Tale of 1947" and "The Great Divide". It is evident that his works are profoundly concerned with the sense of isolation and absurdity, violence and evil that seized people during the partition. The paper will discuss the socio-political context of the two stories in trying to fathom whether Manto is a subversive writer in portraying only the mass hysteria and bestiality of communal violence of partition?

KEYWORDS

Partition; Subcontinent Drama Film; Freedom of speech.

Introduction

Literature holds a mirror to reality and brings back to life a bygone era of life's significant events. The Partition of India was a momentous event in India's history. Writers who experienced the Partition articulated it with deep sensitivity and contributed to a new kind of literature 'the Partition literature'. The writers who adopted this genre of literature have been successful in recreating the apocalypse that it was – the saga of massacres and migrations, dispossession and displacement, riots and refuge, and more than anything else the trauma and wounds to the human soul and spirit. These writers gave voice to the heart-breaking tragedies in individual lives. The

aftermath of the partition that dislocated millions along religious lines became a subject for sensitive recapitulation of the people's plight of that period.

Among such a rich corpus of Partition literature, Saadat Hasan Manto's works stand out. As a writer, Manto's versatility is remembered for his forthright style of storytelling and intuitive portrayal of human nature. Born on May 11, 1912 in the small village of Punjab, Samrala into a family of Sunni Muslims of Kashmiri origin. Manto was a leading Urdu short-story writer of the twentieth century, a journalist, a critic and a script writer. Besides this, he also worked for All India

Radio during World War II, and also made his mark as a successful screenplay writer in Bombay before moving to Pakistan at the time of India's Partition. His grandniece Ayesha Jalal, a historian, describes him as a "terrific writer of memoir".

Manto is best known for his several stories about the Partition of the subcontinent immediately following India's independence in 1947. He chronicled the chaos which prevailed during and after the partition. Most of these poignant stories were written during the turbulent years in the history of India. He was a prolific writer who started his literary career by translating the works of Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde and Russian writers such as Anton Chekhov and Maxim Gorky. His first story was "Tamasha" based on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of Amritsar.

Many critics have likened Manto to D.H. Lawrence, for writing provocatively on themes that were a taboo in the conservative cultural milieu of early twentieth century India, particularly his focus on the subversive sexual slavery of the women at his time. Writing candidly, he wrote about bare truths that no one dared to talk about. Manto commented on his writings – "If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth." (Manto on his writing BBC Hindi.com website) Fatwas were issued against him. He was always embroiled in controversy during his life time and continued to be so even after his death. He is known for his scathing insight into human behaviour as well as for writing revealingly on the grisly animalistic nature of enraged people during the madness of Partition's communal fury. His stories are characterised by the brevity of his prose. His characters are mostly drawn from the margins of society and his concern was with the tragic loneliness and fragmented self. As a social realist he was profoundly

concerned with the sense of isolation and absurdity, violence and evil which found expression in his characters. Issues like deprivation, poverty, declining moral and ethical values, tactics of political and community leaders were interwoven into the texture of Manto's stories.

The Socio-Political Context

The socio-political context of the subcontinent in which Manto wrote his short stories was the holocaust of the Partition, which left millions insecure and displaced. He explicitly dealt with Partition's tragic themes in his stories and conveys multiple meanings through a single work. As both a victim and an analyst of the traumatic dislocation of partition, Manto depicts the dark and irrational drives of human nature through psychological realism. 'Manto' a biographical drama film was released on the September 21, 2018, directed by Nandita Das. (ABP News) The film stars Nawazuddin Siddiqui in the title character of Saadat Hasan Manto and set in 1940's post-independence period of India. One of the most prominent issues that surfaces in Manto's stories is the crisis of Muslim identity in India. After India's independence in 1947, Manto migrated to Pakistan with a hope to find a land of his own. Critics have pointed out and questioned as to why Manto opted for Pakistan? Some critics accused him of supporting Muslim nationalism, but the truth was that in the vitiated anti-Muslim atmosphere of post-Partition, he felt utterly alienated and insecure and reluctantly decided that he had no option but to leave India and migrate to Pakistan. It is a different matter that his writing was criticised in his new homeland on grounds of obscenity and immorality. Stories like "A Tale of 1947" and "The 'Great Divide'" underscore this point.

A Tale of 1947

The story "A Tale of 1947" describes how the idea of Partition affected relationships

between Muslims and Hindus. It records the uncertainty of this connection during the time of partition. A close reading of the story reveals Manto's perception of this in the wake of the savage riots and atrocities inflicted on women; the raping and abduction, and the massive loss of human lives, turning Hindus and Muslims against each other overnight. The story of "A Tale of 1947" has a linear plot and begins with a deliberated discourse on religion. The story revolves around two close friends, Jugal, a Hindu and Mumtaz, a Muslim. Mumtaz migrates to Pakistan because of the unpredictable and biased behaviour of his beloved friend Jugal. In Manto's story the two friends represent the displaced, insecure and psychologically torn people post-partition. It was the time when friendship, faith, belief, devotion, everything was at stake. The story is narrated by a third person omniscient narrator and at the very onset Mumtaz laments at the massacre. The religious grounds of the Partition are laid bare and the intense and powerful outpouring of feelings make us ponder over the impact of Partition on the lives of people. Mumtaz remarks:

"The great tragedy is not that two hundred thousand people have been killed, but that this enormous loss of life has been futile. The Muslims who killed a hundred thousand Hindus must have believed that they had exterminated the Hindu religion. But the Hindu religion is alive and well. And after putting away a hundred thousand Muslims, the Hindus must have celebrated the liquidation of Islam; but the fact is that Islam has not been affected in the least. Only the naive can be eliminated with a gun. 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 Bitter Fruits, Hasan).

Mumtaz decided to leave for Pakistan, the country about which he knew nothing. He left because of a deep sense of loss and insecurity. To him religion was equated with faith which makes him rise above and realise his humanity. Riots had erupted in India as well as Pakistan. Jugal in the meanwhile came to know that his uncle who lived in Lahore had been killed and he could not believe it. He said to his friend "If Hindu -Muslim killings started here, I don't know. May be I'll kill you". (216, Khalid Hasan). Totally disheartened, Mumtaz decides to leave for Karachi. The narrator tells us that Mumtaz tried to finish all his pending work with 'utmost aplomb'; his 'unending monologue' hinted at the sadness that prevailed and how he was disheartened as he bid goodbye to Bombay. The port was crowded with poor refugees trying to leave for Pakistan and Mumtaz was going to a country where no matter how long he lived he would always be a stranger. At the deck Mumtaz said, "Can you see where the sea and the sky meet? It is only an illusion because they can't really meet but isn't it beautiful, this union which isn't really there". The dilemma of the close friends is aptly brought forward by the writer. During that time people's outlook towards each other changed as they felt insecure and survival became a big question. Many critics have found that Mumtaz and Manto have many similarities, like Manto left Bombay, where he worked as a popular scriptwriter, for Lahore in 1948. Quite like Mumtaz, he left like many others because of a deep sense of insecurity. Jugal was sorry for being inhuman and telling Mumtaz that he would have killed Mumtaz if Hindu-Muslim riots began in India. This came as a shock to Mumtaz: "If you had killed me, you would have been sorrier," Mumtaz said philosophically. "You would have realised that it wasn't Mumtaz, a Muslim, a friend of yours, but a human being you had killed ...

assuming that he was a Muslim, you wouldn't have killed his Muslimness, but him. If his dead body had fallen into the hands of Muslims, another grave would have sprung up in the graveyard, but the world would have been diminished by one human being." (218 Hasan)

The futility and hypocrisy associated with the mass killing during Partition is heightened when Mumtaz further added that "It is possible that after you had killed me, my fellow Muslims may have called me a martyr. But had that happened, I swear to God, I would have leapt out of my grave and begun to scream, 'I don't want this degree you are conferring on me because I never took the examination.'" (218 Hasan). In Lahore a Muslim murdered your uncle. You heard the news and killed me. Tell me, what medals would that have entitled you to? And what about your uncle and his killer in Lahore? What honour would be conferred on them? I would say that those who died were killed like dogs and those who killed killed in vain."

Manto makes a dig at religion and faith when through Mumtaz, he conveys to the readers that 'when I say religion or faith I do not mean this infection, which afflicts ninety-nine per cent of us. To me, faith is what makes a human being special, distinguishes him from the herd, proves his humanity.' The sadistic killing assassinated religious beliefs and destroyed the notion of faith and asserted that humanity is higher than being a Hindu or a Muslim. The story has a story within, retold by Mumtaz about Sehai, who was a 'diehard Hindu of the most disreputable profession, but he had a resplendent soul.' Sehai was a pimp but an honest man who never cheated upon anyone. In fact Mumtaz discloses that the

girls engaged in his business were treated by him as his own daughters. He had opened postal savings accounts in their names and one of the Hindu girls was even married off to his Muslim client, and had gone to the shrine of the great saint of Data Sahib. It was only the day when he discovered Sehai in a pool of blood and heard him say 'My day is done; this was Bhagwan's will', that Mumtaz forgot about the religious barriers and at the moment said to himself:

"I don't know what Bhagwan's will was but I knew mine. I was a Muslim. This was a Muslim neighbourhood. I simply could not bear the thought that I, a Muslim, should stand here and watch a man, whom I knew to be a Hindu, lie there dying at the hands of an assassin who must have been a Muslim. I, who was watching Sehai die, was a Muslim like his killer. The thought did cross my mind that if police arrived on scene I'd be picked up, if not on a murder charge, certainly for questioning. And what if I took him to the hospital? Would he, by way of revenge against Muslims, name me as his killer? He was dying anyway. I had an irresistible urge to save my own skin, and I might have done that except that he called me by my name (220 Hasan).

In the meanwhile, Mumtaz heard the faint voice of Sehai, he unbuttoned his shirt and with great strength took out a packet which contained Sultana's ornaments (one of Sehai's girls) and some money. Sehai asked Mumtaz to hand the valuables over to Sultana, which she had saved for 'bad times'. He also requested Mumtaz to tell her to move to a safe place as riots had begun. Mumtaz fell silent and "the two voices had travelled to that distant blue point where sea and sky met." The ornaments were handed over to Sultana safely by him. It was time to leave for Mumtaz as he waved.

It appeared as if he waved goodbye to Sehai and Jugal said, "I wish I was Sehai". The last moments of Sehai's life with Mumtaz has deeper undertones and poignantly reflects the divided and alienated self of Mumtaz who was torn apart by the inevitable circumstances over which he had no control. The religious killings and the Partition had put friendship at stake. Manto excelled in depicting the psychological upheaval in the mind of his characters and brings to the fore the dilemma which the people underwent to secure a place to live. At the time of Partition nobody was willing to trust anyone, but in this story, Sehai did. The idea driven home here is that the mass killing had destroyed the trust of people, people who had trusted each other as long as they had known.

The Great Divide

"The Great Divide" is yet another interesting story set in the post-Partition years when the upheavals of 1947 had subsided. Manto depicts a Punjab village where:

"A great deal has happened in their village. Hundreds of young and old people had been killed. Scores of girls had gone missing; others had been brutally raped. Those whom the upheavals had affected directly would not be able to forget their misfortune or the cruelty for the enemy for a long time."

"The Great Divide" is a story about Karim Dad and Jeena. Karim Dad was proud of the bravery of his father who had fought thirty armed men single-handed, till he fell. He was mercilessly killed. Karim had never counted the losses and believed that whatever happened was because of his own mistake. He married Jeena, who had lost her brother in the riots and missed him immensely. Now this couple was expecting the birth of their first child. It was during the month of Muharram that Jeena asked Karim Dad "to fulfil her ardent

desire ...to watch the Muharram procession go past with its riderless horse and commemorative floats. At the same time there had been rumours that a war would break out between India and Pakistan."

Manto adds here that "...the moment Pakistan was born, it somehow seemed to have been decreed that there would be a war". Jeena was terrified and Bhakto, the village midwife, said that the baby would be due in ten days. She also got the news that the Indians were going to dam the rivers which brought water to their villages in Punjab (in Pakistan) and that the Indians were planning to take away the water so that the land in Pakistan turned to waste. In the village it was Chaudhary Nathoo who was abusing the Indians the most. He said "It is mean and unfair; it is a bastardly act, a great sin, the greatest ever. It is what Yazid did when he dammed the river that brought water to Karbala where Hussain and his brave companions were fighting for survival. Many of them died of thirst, and that is what the Indians are doing" (226 Hasan). Yazid remains one of the most controversial figures in Islamic history. He is popular as the tyrant and was the sixth Caliph of Islam. Many censure him for killing Muhammad's grandson, for the laxity of his lifestyle and for his indifference to the values of Islam. (Yazid web)

Karim Dad didn't approve of this and asks Chaudhary Nathoo not to abuse Indians. He further adds that, "when it is war, everything is permissible. Haven't you seen two feuding wrestlers in a ring, fighting to the finish? There are no holds barred in such contests."

Karim Dad was of the view that "It may appear to us as an act of cruelty, but it is no such thing to them.... we are their enemies too. Had it been in our power we would have seen to it that they neither received water nor food to eat. I just don't

think it is wise to call the Indians mean, bastardly and cruel” (228 Hasan). Karim Dad tried to explain to Miran Bux that it’s foolish to expect your enemy to be kind and to complain that he is using heavier guns or bigger bombs. Karim Dad turns out to be a humanist. He tells Miran Bux that “Don’t expect the enemy to dig canals for you and fill them with milk and honey; expect him to poison your water so that you drink it and die. You will call it barbarism. I don’t. If it is a war, then it is a war.” (228 Hasan)

Bhakto was about to deliver the child and Karim Dad had decided to call him Yazid, even though it was the name of the evil Yazid at whose orders Hussain, the Prophet’s grandson, and his companions were deprived of water and finally massacred. A healthy, pink and plump boy was born to Jeena and Karim Dad touched him on his cheeks and said, ‘My little Yazid....it is not necessary that this little one here should be the same Yazid. That Yazid dammed the waters; this one will make them flow again.’ The story ends on a positive note, leaving many questions unanswered.

Conclusion

Manto juxtaposes the Hindu-Muslim divided identity in both the stories. In “A Tale of 1947” Manto accords his characters a distinct identity by depicting their dilemma at the time of Partition when people had to choose between friends and

religion. There is a philosophical relevance of every character carved out by Manto. The reader remembers Mumtaz leaving for Pakistan with a heavy heart, while “The Great Divide” is characterised by Karim Dad’s argument with Chaudhary Nathoo and Karim Bux regarding diverting the water through construction of a dam. Manto never endorsed any particular political ideology and his works reflect the core of liberal humanism and the frailty and truth of human existence. His writings acquire a distinct identity and he has said that the facts narrated in his stories are related to that part of the mind which is usually reserved for one’s own self.

Manto exposes the utter meaninglessness and bestiality of the Partition violence in the name of religion. Dr. Asadudin calls the Partition of India “a momentous event in Indian history, [which] continues to tantalize historians, haunt the Indian psyche and cast its shadow on our social and political life.” (Asadudin 312-13). Manto addresses the Partition violence, as depicted in “A Tale of 1947” as an “act of collective madness” while his delineation of the crisis of identity whether it was Jugal or Mumtaz; or Karim Dad or his newly born son Yazid, reflected his innermost conviction that Partition had inflicted an indelible scar on all who experienced it, Hindus and Muslims alike.

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