

# Violence And Trauma Of Partition: Construing Selected Short Stories Of Saadat Hasan Manto

**Dr. Soma Das**

*Assistant Professor Department of English Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam . Email:*  
[sd.assam2009@gmail.com](mailto:sd.assam2009@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

It is an acknowledged fact that the partition of India brought about much turmoil for the people and unleashed a long history of sufferings. The people who once were friendly and shared the same space soon turned hostile to one another. The intense hate turned one community against the other in a cruel game of refutation demanding blood for blood, life for life, violence for violence. The brutal aggression laid its hold on the collective consciousness of the masses which completely swayed and transformed itself into a rampant conflagration and swept away the masses. This partition cost a heavy toil not only on individual human lives but also shattered their kith and kin and social relationships. There was large scale violence and genocide. The resultant effective was the trauma which percolated down the memory lanes. Saadat Hasan Manto, a renowned short story writer of South East Asia depicts the psychological and physical sufferings of the people in India and its subcontinent during the partition of India in 1947. His short stories are the true representation of the ruptures that the people of India and Pakistan faced at the time of partition. The contention of this paper is to analyse how the acts of violence and victimization recreate a sense of shock by transmitting the trauma within them in a few short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto.

**Key Words:** Partition, violence, victim, trauma, suffering.

## **Introduction**

Many writers of Indian sub-continent consciously or unconsciously hint upon the issue of the catastrophic violence of 1947 when the subcontinent of India was expurgated into two parts—India and Pakistan. This emergence of the two nations gave birth to two opposing and disputing diasporas. The division of the country and the resultant violence and displacement that followed has been nearly a topic of discussion and debate among writers and scholars ever since. This has led to the production of an immense body of literature. Some writers and theorists focus on the causes of violence while others deal with the sufferings, loss and trauma associated with this division of Indian

sub-continent. Hence, over the last seventy years we find a variegated focus among writers who write about the history of Partition and correlated literature. The creative writers have not only written about the Partition and its unprecedented violence and the resultant trauma but they have also described the victims' coping with the catastrophic violence to reposition themselves by reconstructing their distinct and collective lives.

While in the preceding years emphasis was more on finding out the reasons of the Partition and perpetrators of the country's tragedy, in the recent times emphasis is more on the stud of pain and trauma of the victims. Families and progenies of the victims and survivors of Partition have started digging into

the suffering and loss caused by the holocaust of the Partition. They also analyze the role of the subalterns with special emphasis in Partition on sexual abuse of women and their oral testimony. The publication of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* in 2000 marked a new beginning in the study of partition literature. Butalia, a granddaughter of a partition victim finds that the very history of Partition "seemed to lie only in the political developments that had led up to it," and has put aside the more vital human dimensions like traumatic memory, alienated and separated hearts, and the struggle of several communities to reconstruct their lives. She thus emphasizes on the oral stories, the personal and collective memories of "smaller, often invisible people, women, children, schedule castes" (Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, 9) and thus provides a more inclusive history of Partition. She also points out that we cannot understand Partition if we do not look at "how people remember it" (Butalia, 10). Butalia also gives much importance to the violence upon women which included the stories of seizure and rape, something which was kept suppressed for a long time.

Gyanendra Pandey appropriately points out the need to write the history of Partition from the point of view of the victim while focusing on the trauma and hardships suffered by the masses, instead of being indifferent to the sufferings and describing just the story of the march of progress as the historiographers do. Pandey stresses on the inclusion of "little histories," long ignored by the historiographers so as to have a better understanding of the partition. Cathy Caruth contends that trauma and ordeal must be recounted and given importance so as to understand one another's history. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states that there is a profound link between history and trauma as "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, [...] his-tory is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (192). In "Trauma and Experience: Introduction," Caruth says that since one's

own trauma is always related with another's "trauma itself may provide the[...]link between cultures," and suggests the possibility that recounting of one's trauma or listening to the trauma of another can result in cross-cultural understanding and the formation of new communities (11). Cathy Caruth adds that traumatic experience puts forth a kind of paradox as the most direct witness of a vehement event has no ability to feel or know it at the moment but knows about it after the event. She defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 208). Kali Tal argues for the need of trauma survivors to recount and narrate their stories to the collective cultural memory or the community at large. He is of the opinion that violence must be recognized and acknowledged, and the traumatic tales must be voiced so as to create a healthy community and personal life. Dominic La Capra feels that trauma needs to be "worked through, "in a therapeutic manner that re-traumatizes the victim. The situation enables the victim to recognize the symptom and trauma as his or her own, also acknowledges and realizes that the trauma is still active, and that he or she is linked to its destructive effects. Hiding, crushing or repressing the traumatic feelings does not necessarily end them rather they remain dormant only to emerge later in some more dangerous forms. Unlike Pandey, Caruth, Tal and La Capra, historian Javed Alam holds a different opinion. Alam upholds that violence brought about by partition should not be discussed so that people may forget the trauma and live in peace (Alam, 101). He is of the view that recounting trauma re-opens the wounds which have healed with time and troubles the communities learning to live together in harmony.

Saadat Hasan Manto is considered as a writer who embodies "cosmopolitan humanism," and writes about his own

experiences with an unwavering faith in humanity and also without trying to “glorify or demonize any community” (Jalal, 23). Manto impartially and honestly depicts the brutal violence carried out by humanity that had gone mad. Imputing neither Hindus nor Muslims, he epitomizes the brutality of the 1947 violence with a sad realization that men can go for inhuman acts during terrible times. Some of his stories are just a line or two which describes the brutality and the intensity of the violence, embracing the stand point of an observer who is detached. His longer short stories have ironic endings that not only create scenes of violence but also shock the readers by conveying the trauma to them.

Some of his characters cannot understand their own situation and they either go mad or remain confused. Manto, in his short stories and vignettes recreates the cataclysmic violence and traumas brought about by the Partition of 1947. He opposed Partition and considered it to be an irrational and inhuman act that led to ethnic killing and genocide. Ayesha Jalal, in *The Pity of Partition*, correctly states that for Manto, Partition “was not an aberration to be dismissed as a fleeting collective madness. It was part and parcel of an unfolding drama that gave glimpses into the best and worst in humankind” (24). He saw the irrationality of the people on both sides of the border and wrote stories from the victims’ point of view, recreating the trauma suffered by the unknown and unidentified millions on the margins. He, too, was one among the suffering millions. As a sufferer himself, he very well realized that the history of Partition was the history of dislocation, separation, competing loyalties, loss of self or identity, religious intolerance, communal hatred, riot, rape, arson, plunder, irrationality, absurdity, and madness. He expresses all the pain and trauma suffered by the victims of partition in his short stories. They “give a more

immediate and penetrating account of those troubled and troubling times than do most journalistic accounts of partition” (Jalal, 23).

Regardless of the enigmatic quality of the stories, they also convey an unprejudiced record of a critical moment in South Asian history. Stories such as “Open It,” “Cold Meat,” “Khuda Ki Kasam,” “Toba Tek Singh,” and the vignettes or capsule stories in “Black Margins” provide blatant and honest representation of the violent history that still affects the people. In *Black Margins*, Manto created thirty-two vignettes of scenes that bear testimony to the catastrophic event. The narratives are narrated by a third person narrator in an impassive tone and without any development of character. Some of the narratives “create a nightmare landscape of random violence; a scandalous world where victims and predators interchange places endlessly and unpredictably.” (Alok Bhalla, “A Dance of Grotesque Mask,” 21). Both the victims and the victimizers in the narratives belong to all communities—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. In the story “Sorry” translated as “Mistake” by Khalid Hasan, Manto writes:

The knife slashed his stomach all the way to his navel. His pyjama cord was severed.

Words of regret escaped the knife wielder’s tongue,

“Tsch, tsch, tsch...I’ve made a mistake!” (Manto, *Black Margins*, 186)

The above lines record a strange weird incident of the eccentricity that prevailed during the Partition. The mistake here is connected with the identity of the person that was inscribed in the genitals, an identity that is realized only after the brutal killing. The killer and the killed belong to the same community, either Hindu or Muslim. Hence the act turns out to be a mistake. The mistake

may have occurred because the killers are Hindus and the man is not circumcised or because the man is circumcised and the killers are Muslims. In “Jelly” the innocence of a child turns gruesome when the child says “Look Mummy, jelly!” aiming at the clotted blood of the ice seller that mixed and merged with the ice cream (Manto, *Black Margins*, 187). In “Correction,” a Hindu man, Dharamchand is killed by his own brothers because he undertook circumcision in order to save his life. In spite of his struggle to prove himself a Hindu by yelling Hindu slogans from the Vedas he is asked to show his genitals. When he admits that though being a Hindu, he had done the mistake of going for circumcision, a Hindu mob leader orders his men to “Chop off his mistake,” which leads to Dharamchand’s immediate death (Manto, *Black Margins*, 184). In “Appropriate Action,” a Muslim couple looks for shelter in a Jain household. The couple, fed up with the life of fear, asks the occupants of the house to kill them: “We’ve come to surrender, please kill us” (Manto, *Black Margins*, 183) but the occupants of the house say that “Killing is as in our religion” (Manto, *Black Margins*, 183) and refuse to indulge in the killing but hand over the couple to the neighboring residents for appropriate action, that is, murder. In “A Respite Needed”, the victimizer wants to let go of the victim because he is tired attacking the victims and needs some break:

‘He isn’t dead yet.  
See, see, he is still  
gasping for breath.’  
Let it go, yaar (my  
friend). I am already  
exhausted. (Manto,  
*Black Margins*, 185)

In “Out of Consideration” a man’s daughter is spared her life only to be raped. Manto writes:

‘Don’t kill my  
daughter in front of  
me.’

‘All right, all right.  
Peel off her clothes  
and throw her in with  
the other girls!’  
(Manto, *Black  
Margins*, 189)

In “Concern for Cleanliness”, when a man proposes that his friend cut a victim’s throat inside a train, the friend replies:

“Are you crazy!” cut in  
his friend.

“You want to mess up  
this nice carriage?  
Slaughter him on the  
platform.” (Manto,  
*Black Margins*, 192)

The irony is the man who is ready to kill a human being without any regret recommends against committing murder inside a train just for the fear of dirtying it.

Most vignettes in *Black Margins* are bitterly ironic. The effect of the narratives lie in the gap between what the characters comprehend about their situations and the observation of the readers. These capsule stories hinge on for their effect on the readers’ understanding of the wit and verbal ironies which they exemplify. Manto uses irony poignantly as if his sardonic writing correspond the scene of violence. In the story “Sharing the Loot” the owner of a building helps the looters to raid his own house telling them “Brothers, this house is filled with wealth, innumerable priceless objects. Come on, let’s take it over and divide up the booty” (Manto, *Black Margin*, 180). The plunderers, plundering the house in great turmoil, are soon sent towards a ferocious dog which actually belongs to the owner. It attacks one of the plunderers while the others run away. When the plunderer sees that the dog answers the command of the man, who asked them to loot, he asks: “who are you?” To the great surprise of the plunderer the man

answers, "The owner of the house" (Manto, Black Margins, 180). "Karamat" ("Miracle") is another story where the readers know the reality much earlier. People light lamps in thanks on the grave of a man who fell into their well and turned the water sweet. At the end of the vignette, Manto writes:

Water drawn from the well the next  
day tasted sweet.

The night candles were lit at the  
man's grave.(Manto, Black  
Margins, 182)

The man was actually trying to hide bags of sugar which he had stolen but accidentally fell on the well.

'A complete  
range of building materials sold here.'  
(Manto, Black Margins, 184-185)

In "Hamesha Ki Chhutti" ("Vacation Forever"), a man who is chased by two murderers is called shikar. He is granted vacation forever (hamesha ki chhutti) when he asks the attackers not to kill him because he was on his way to his home on vacation (chhutti). "Ghate Ka Sauda" ("Losing Bargain") presents two men who by mistake buy a girl belonging to their own religious community. The sauda (bargain) turns out to be a loss (ghata) as they realize that the girl belong to their own community. They realize that they are cheated, and one of them says: "That bastard double crossed us. He palmed off one of our own girls! Come on, let's take her back" (Manto, Black Margins, 185).

Manto does not write with an aim to appeal to the emotions of his readers. He rather depicts the essential human condition and aims at the intellect of the readers. Almost all his stories are capable of conveying the trauma to the readers because of the tension between emotional and intellectual appeal and the ironic treatment of the subject. His literary "Sardarji, have you completed your assignment?"  
The young man nodded

"Should we then proceed with  
ours?"he asked.

In "Mourning the Dead," Manto writes of a man who tries to hang a garland made of shoes on the sculpture of Sir Ganga Ram. But he is shot and is sent to the very Sir Ganga Ram hospital for treatment. Likewise, the story "An Enterprise" also presents the weird human acts with a touch of irony:

Fire broke out.  
The entire mohalla  
(hamlet) went up in  
flames. Only one  
shop escaped. The  
signboard on the  
shop read,

works force people to confront anew the shocks of the original trauma. Manto thus recreates the partition violence in the text to enable the readers to experience it visually and vicariously and to receive an intellectual and emotional shock.

Manto's longer stories also intensely communicate the effect of violence with flagrant realism. In his story "The Assignment," Manto portrays a baleful situation of the destruction of trust and love. Santokh Singh, son of Gurumukh Singh, helps the rioters to set fire to the house of Mia Abdul Hai, the retired judge. Mia Abdul had helped Santokh Singh's father, late Gurumukh Singh in a court case and the latter out of indebtedness used to bring a gift for him every year for the last ten years. This year also, as promised to his father, Santokh Singh hands over the gift to the daughter of the ailing judge. As he was leaving the house after completing his "assignment," the following conversation can be heard taking place between him and one of the mob members:

"If you like," he replied and walked  
away. (Manto, Selected Stories,  
11)

The readers can apprehend that the mob will now do their duty of setting fire to the house, and the occupants of the house will perhaps die in the fire.

In "Toba Tek Singh," Manto portrays a character who is so confused by the bizarre notion of dividing a land into two parts and sending its inhabitants to a new and unfamiliar location. The trauma of displacement so affected the character that he collapses in a no-man's land between India and Pakistan. Manto writes:

Just before sunrise, a deafening cry erupted from the throat of a mute and immovable Bishan Singh. Several officials rushed to the spot and found that the man, who had remained on his legs, day and night for fifteen years, was now lying on his face. Over there, behind the barbed wire, was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (Manto, *For Freedom's Sake*, 148)

After presenting the protagonist's denial of an artificially constructed identity through nationhood, which is expressed time and again in the question- Where is Toba Tek Singh, in Pakistan or in India?-, Manto takes Bishan Singh toward this pitiful end. Bishan Singh lies on the ground and the piece of ground itself becomes, at that moment for him, the place Toba Tek Singh where Bishan Singh always wished to be. Bishan Singh refuses to move either towards Hindustan or Pakistan but prefers to die on the boundary, the no man's land like when a lunatic earlier in the story says with rage, "I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree" (Manto, *Selected Stories*, 11).

Manto portrays Bishan Singh in such a way that it is difficult to differentiate him from the place he comes from originally. In his death Bishan Singh seems to reach his home in Toba Tek Singh. Bishan Singh remains paused between the two nations representing the traumatic condition of those displaced by the division of the land. Bishan Singh's lack of

clarity about Toba Tek Singh's exact location and also the prisoners' misperception about India and Pakistan show the similar situation faced by millions of people of the sub-continent at the time of Partition.

The ambiguity and pain in Bishan Singh's cry and death reflect the pain and grief of the millions, who, like Bishan Singh, were compelled to leave their hearth and homes (Leslie Flemming, *Riots and Refuges*, 107). Bishan Singh is shown repelling or resisting the artificial line of division which resulted in death and destruction, tension and trauma to millions on both sides of the border. Bishan Singh's death in the no-man's land generates a kind of bond of compassion and sympathy among the victim, the writer, and the readers eliminating all the gaps. The story does not merely portray the tragedy of the dislocated but also appeals to their mind and implicates them in the tragedy. The readers also bear witness to the human tragedy and share the trauma of the uprooted with all its horrors.

A defender of the disadvantaged, Manto never lost sight of the predicament of women during the violence of Partition. He paints the sufferings of abducted or raped women in stories such as "Khol Do" ("Open It"), "Xuda Ki Kasam," and "Mozail." At the time of Partition, the female body became a kind of territory for assault and invasion. The opposing community briskly attacked the physical body and respect of the women of the other community. A woman's body served as "a trophy of victory or a blot on the Collective honour" (Asaduddin, *Black Margins*, 31). Thousands of women, both married and unmarried were raped and killed, sold and bought like commodities, or forced to be mistresses by the males belonging to the other community.

Manto employs the method of irony in "Khol Do" not only to astound but also to affect the readers by the trauma either of the victim or the executor of the violence. "Khol Do" represents how the author comes to grip

with the human pain of Partition, surveying with a blend of anger, cynicism, and tenderness the effects of the violence and dislocation on its victims. Sirajuddin, an old man desperately tries to find his only daughter, whom he has lost while escaping the miscreants. When he wakes up in a refugee camp, he at first feels completely numb, unable to recollect anything about the night in which his daughter Sakina disappeared:

At ten in the morning when Sirajuddin opened his eyes in the camp and saw the tumultuous crowds of men and boys around him, he almost lost his wits. For a long time he kept staring at the sky. The camp was filled with noise but it seemed as if old Sirajuddin's ears were sealed. He couldn't hear anything. . . . But he had become senseless. It was as though he was suspended in space. (Manto, For Freedom's Sake, 131)

After regaining his senses, he engages the help of eight volunteers to search his daughter. After ten days of waiting, Sirajuddin is present when the shattered body of a girl found on the road side is brought to a make-shift hospital. When the doctor turns on the light, Sirajuddin, to his amazement recognizes the girl as his daughter. But soon comes yet another painful discovery no less disturbing than the first one.

The doctor looked at the body lying on the stretcher and felt its pulse. Then he

pointed toward the window and said to him, 'Open it.' The body stirred slightly on the stretcher. Life less hands untied the waistband. And lowered the shalwar.

'She's alive! Mydaughter's alive!' Old Sirajuddin shouted with joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat. (Manto, For Freedom's Sake, 134)

Sakina is so much afflicted with trauma, and is in such a state of mind that she cannot differentiate the voice of a rapist from the voice of a doctor. The father is only happy to find his daughter alive, but the doctor knows the pains awaiting the future of a raped girl left to live. Manto's narrative art dramatizes the gruesome facet of humanity and shocks the readers.

Likewise, Manto paints the anguish and pains of an abducted woman in "Khuda Ki Kasam" (God's Promise). Told in the first person by a liaison officer concerned with the recovery of "abandoned" women, the story depicts an old Muslim woman's frantic search for her only daughter. The grieved mother has undergone all the violence and sufferings of Partition only hoping to find her daughter alive. But when she finally comes across the daughter, the latter turns her face away and moves out. The old woman desperately shouts for the young woman and informs the liaison officer that she has seen her daughter. The officer however replies: "Your daughter is dead." . . . "I swear on God your daughter is dead." (Manto, Orphans of the Storm, 170). The old woman drops down dead after hearing the news from the officer and also because the daughter does not acknowledge the identity or the existence of her mother. The daughter refuses to acknowledge and recognize the mother because as an

abducted woman, she knew she would not be accepted by anyone. The story brings out the pain of broken relationships that followed the Partition violence including the social death of the women victims.

All thirty-two “capsule stories” in *Black Margins* contain the ability to shock. We can say that in these capsule stories or vignettes, Manto has recreated the gruesome scenes of violence with the intensity in which they had occurred. “Sorry,” “Fifty-Fifty,” and “Correction” are some of the examples of the precise depiction of the violent and brutal scenes. The ironic technique adopted by him also gives the readers a glimpse of the true history of the Partition violence when millions of people on both sides of the border experienced the trauma of dislocation, arson, madness, rape, and booty, and registers their repulsion against them. “Khol Do” and “Khuda Ki Kasam” suggest how Partition cost human lives, slaughtering not only individuals but also their kith and kin and social relationship. Bishan Singh’s pathetic death in the no-man’s land in “Toba Tek Singh,” Sakina’s impulsive action of untying the waist band of her salwar at the command of male voice in “Khol Do,” and the catastrophic death of the old mother in “Khuda Ki Kasam,” not only disturbs the readers, survivors and witnesses of the violence but also make them question the very act of Partition. In an unprejudiced manner, he portrays the cruelty of human beings and the brutality perpetrated by them. He raises himself above the social, cultural and religious boundaries of the time and portrays the bleak realities of the time. He is “able to construct a text which is more immediate and incisive than most journalistic accounts of Partition” (Alter, 99).

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