

## Narratives of Disruption in Saadat Hasan Manto's Selected Stories

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*Selected Stories (Modern Classics) by Saadat Hasan Manto*

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### Abstract

In 1947, even as India began, in Nehru's famous words, a "tryst with destiny", the nation found itself overtaken by the cataclysmic event of partition. Partition of India was an event of tremendous social, political, religious, and ethical disruption with its accompanying

acts of violence, horror, and savagery. Amidst that violence, a writer who dared to narrate stories of this overpowering insanity was the celebrated Saadat Hasan Manto. That he could write with adequate detachment, fairly and poignantly, and capture the passions in reasonable language, without taking sides and without getting trapped within the communal logic, is indeed, as unbelievable as was the terrible reality of the world around. Keeping his focus on the predicament of ordinary people caught in the chaos, Manto lays bare the sheer ugliness and bestiality lying dormant within the human psyche. His raw portrayals have kept the cries of victims and the mindlessness of it all alive through time. The paper takes account of five of Manto's short stories to examine how the narrative of disruption continues to overpower years after it actually happened.

**Keywords:** Partition, Manto, Disruption, Violence.

### **Introduction**

India's independence began shortly at midnight on Aug. 15, 1947, with Nehru's famous announcement of starting, a "tryst with destiny". Even as the nation was rejoicing the independence got from the British after a long struggle, instantly the land found itself overtaken by the cataclysmic event of partition. The elation of independence was shattered by the anguish of partition. It was an event, in Gyanendra Pandey's defining words, "a moment of rupture and genocidal violence" (Pandey 1), an event of tremendous social, political, religious, and cultural disruption with its accompanying acts of violence, horror and savagery. Men and women, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, who had coexisted together in harmony for generations took to killings and other atrocities along religious lines with shocking abandonment. It was as if, not just individuals, but the whole communities had gone mad. As Mushirul Hasan succinctly summed up, "Partition cruelly displaced millions, divided India's past, wrecked its civilizational rhythm and unity and left behind a fractured legacy" (Jassal 23). There was thus a disruption, a cruel, heartless, meaningless, and never-ending prolonged breakdown of the social, moral, and communal life of the nation. Literary writers such as Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Ishmat Chughati, Khadija Mastoor, Saadat Hasan Manto, Yashpal, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh, etc. depicted the impact of this holocaust in their writings. Among them, Saadat Hasan Manto chose to place himself as if, within the gaping, raw wound of partition, attempting to measure the depth of the pain felt by the people caught in the chaos and convey it in his stories. Whether they were victims or perpetrators of violence did not matter as Manto laid bare the sheer ugliness and bestiality lying

dormant within the human psyche. It was only logical then, that those in power sought to ban his stories accusing him of portraying obscenity, even though all he was doing was to force readers to face their own obscene inner selves. His raw portrayals have kept the cries of victims and the mindlessness of it all alive through time. So much so that people go to his stories to know about the history of those days. The paper takes account of five of Manto's short stories that narrate the utter disruption in the social texture of those years.

### **Saadat Hasan Manto**

Manto, one of the most prolific writers in Urdu literature, produced twenty-two collections of short stories, one novel, five collections of radio plays, three collections of essays, and two collections of personal sketches. His depiction of both bright and dark sides of the human psyche has elevated him as one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Ayesha Jalal aptly says, "Amidst the darkening shadows of criminality, avarice and lust, he plumbed the psychological depths of his characters in search of some residual goodness that could help restore faith in human beings" (Jalal 3). Therein lies the secret of his continued hold on readers. It is indeed remarkable how he could still retain a sense of hope and positivity amidst the surrounding darkness and hopelessness.

### **Textual Analysis of Selected Stories**

For this paper, five of his stories are selected to examine how Manto narrates the effects of disruption on all aspects of civilized life. The best-known of Manto's partition stories is, his masterpiece *Toba Tek Singh* (1955). At his sarcastic best, Manto tells the story of how post partition, it is decided to transport Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu lunatics to asylums in India and Pakistan. The effects of partition thus have trickled down to everyone. The decision-makers in their wisdom have decided to transfer them along religious lines. The mad however display more sense as one lunatic climbs up a tree and declares "I want to live in neither Hindustan nor Pakistan . . . I'd rather live on this tree" (Manto, 2003, 214). The story revolves around the main protagonist Bishan Singh, who for the last fifteen years has not slept even for a moment and talks in gibberish, "Opar di gurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of the laltain" (215). Belonging to a village named Toba Tek Singh, he wants to know if his village is in Pakistan or Hindustan. No one seems to know for certain as Manto through Bishan Singh who symbolizes a complete breakdown of identity and nation.

On the day of exchange at the border, as Bishan Singh comes to know from the officer that his town Toba Tek Singh is now in Pakistan, he refuses to leave. Resolute in his refusal to move, he stands there “. . . in the middle, in a posture that seemed to suggest that no power on earth could move him from there” (20). Alternatively called Toba Tek Singh by Manto, he stands literally between nations on the boundary refusing to budge, he becomes a symbol of utter disruption, a sign of paralysed self as well as a figure of resistance against the carrying out of partition. So, he screams repeatedly “Opar di gurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of the Pakistan and Hindustan of the dur fite munh” (219) refusing to accept the new lines of boundaries. The guards leave him alone as they fail to lead him away. Bishan Singh is found dead at dawn, the next day at the same place. Manto thus creates an enduring image of disruption and the utter chaos that continues to haunt readers on both sides of the border. “Over there, behind the barbed wires, was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh” (220) Manto thus uses the image of a lunatic struggling to comprehend the mindlessness of the event to enhance the impact of partition and mark his resistance against the might of a ‘mad’ state.

While Partition resulted in dislocation of a vast number of people, its consequences on women of all communities were huge, in fact much beyond what could be captured in words. As Veena Das in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007) rightly observes, partition was actually acted out on the bodies of women.

Manto in his stories accomplishes the task as he superbly conveys, in understated manner, the horror and trauma faced by women. The women suffered humiliation, rape, abandonment as they became not merely the victims but also evidence of revenge taken against the other.

In *Khol Do* and *Thanda Ghost*, Manto portrays the inhumanity of people, a destroyed moral realm, so much so that there is nothing left to recover. There is no hope of humanity as people act like beasts. The story *Khol Do* (1948) crushingly makes one face the soul hidden within the female body. The woman is abducted and raped during the turmoil of partition; her ordeal is beyond the sense of language itself. The story is of a father and daughter trying to escape from their habitat because of the fear of perpetrators who have killed her mother. While travelling on a train carrying Muslim refugees from India to Pakistan, Sirajuddin’s daughter Sakina disappears. Overcome by grief, Sirajuddin goes to the nearby refugee camp to inquire

about his daughter and beseeches them to find his daughter. After a lot of searching, the rescue group is able to find Sakina. Instead of returning her safely to her father immediately, they rape her repeatedly until she becomes unconscious.

As Manto portrays, the protectors also become the perpetrators, the rapists. Manto thus mocks at a society that regards one side of women as mothers and sisters but for those on the other, they believe they are justified in raping and killing to take revenge. As the attending doctor asks for the window to be opened, Sakina comes to life and “Her hands groped for the cord that kept her shalwar tied around her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs” (Manto, 2011, 10). The doctor stands drenched in sweat while her father gives a shout of joy as he sees her action merely as a proof of being alive. Veena Das interprets the father giving a shout of joy to mean that he “does not speak to give voice to a scripted tradition.

In the social context of this period, when ideas of purity and honor densely populated the literary narratives as well as family and political narratives, so that fathers willed their daughters to die for family honor rather than live with bodies that had been violated by other men, *this father wills his daughter to live even as parts of her body can do nothing else but proclaim her brutal violation*” (Das 47). Manto thus leaves the readers with another haunting image of a girl who with a single movement of her hands gets frozen in time and collective memory as a personification of the horror of partition.

Like *Khol Do, Thanda Gosht* (1950) is another masterpiece of Manto. Rape is the central theme of this story as well. Manto in the story while narrating the violence of partition, where women faced with the stark brutality of the crowd that killed and raped the neighbours and friends in the name of religion and nation during 1947, also presents the perpetrators as real-life men. Ishar Singh, one of the mobs has participated in the looting and killing of Muslim shops and houses. During the operation, he comes across a Muslim girl who simply becomes an object to his revenge on the ‘other’. As he carries her away to rape her, it is only after the sinister act, he realizes that she has been long dead, she was just a heap of cold flesh.

It is almost as if the cold of the dead body is contagious, Ishar Singh turns impotent even when he is with his paramour Kalwant Kaur. The story thus effectively demonstrates the consequences of the loss of human sensibilities. Manto also portrays how the acts of violence always claim two victims; the perpetrator too has to suffer the consequences. Priyamvada

Gopal's essay "Bodies Inflicting Pain" in the book *The Partitions of Memory* by Suvir Kaul offers a persuasive reminder that Manto's stories, ". . . of the traumas of Partition focused not only on the victimage of women but on crises of masculinity, especially as that masculinity was reconfigured in the theatre of sexualized mass violence" (Gopal 24). No wonder that the event of partition was engulfed in deafening silence on both sides of the border.

In *Khuda ki Kasam* (The Dutiful Daughter), Manto reveals the unpredictable ways of partition impacting the world. Partition disrupted the lives not only of women who were forcibly abducted, raped, abandoned, or killed during the madness of this carnage, but also of those, who were left behind, powerless to rescue them. The story presents a paradox of partition where volunteers were assigned during the recovery and rehabilitation process just after partition, to repair what they had caused during the riots. Here, Manto mocks the society involved in an enthusiastic effort to undo the effects of violence that had been perpetrated more or less by the same people. A liaison officer in the story tells about two abducted Muslim girls in Saharanpur who were brutally raped and how they had no courage to face their parents after this. As Manto portrays, the crime of rape is not merely one event, it has multiple consequences.

The protagonist wonders "When I thought about these abducted girls, I only saw their protruding bellies. What was going to happen to them and what they contained? Who would claim the end result? Pakistan or India? And who would pay the women the wages for carrying those children in their wombs for nine months? Pakistan or India?" (Manto, 2008, 188) The violence of 1947 thus ruined the entire framework of family ties. As Anis Kidwai says "But now a different problem arose. The majority of the girls did not want to go back" (Butalia 17). This was true for some women who did find a new life after being abducted by ignoring their parents or families.

As in the story, now married to a young Sikh man, Bhagbari does not want to take the risk of reconnecting with her mother and start life afresh. When the man said to her "Your mother," . . . 'The girl looked up, but only for a second. Then, covering her face with her chaddar, she grabbed her companion's arm and said, "Let's get away from here." (Manto, 2008, 190) Even as the mother runs after her, Bhagbari walks away, reconciled to her present life, thus rejecting her closest family ties.

Similarly, in *A Tale of 1947*, Manto brings out the distance that has crept in close friendships. Having autobiographical overtones, the story is built upon Manto's personal



experience when his friend Shyam told him that he might kill Manto on hearing about stories of atrocities against the Hindus. Shyam replied, 'Not now,' . . . 'but when I was listening to them, . . . , I could have killed you'" (Manto, 2011, xviii). In the story, the two friends Jugal (Hindu) and Mumtaz (Muslim) are unable to keep their bond unaffected as they listen to stories of communal violence. Even though having deep love for his friend, Jugal tells Mumtaz that he might slaughter him. He says, '. . . if Hindu-Muslim killings start here, I don't know what I'll do. . . . Maybe I'll kill you' (120). Though Mumtaz does not reply, he immediately decides to leave for Pakistan. Manto thus brings out the tragic impact of partition where even within the family or amidst friends, it gets very difficult to maintain sanity and balance.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, Manto in his stories thus has narrativized disruption for all times to come. He authentically records the actual happenings in all their poignancy, yet without letting it lapse into a cold presentation of facts and figures. Without taking sides, he in his stories narrates the reality of actual happenings bringing out the horror and trauma as experienced across borders. One cannot help but wonder if Manto had not been there to write about it all the way he did, whether the subsequent generations would have had an idea of the deep traumas partition left behind. Manto's stories fill the vast empty spaces which the victims, perpetrators of violence, and also the witnesses chose to shroud in silence alone. Manto's portrayals have kept the cries of victims and the mindlessness of partition alive through time. His writings not only narrate the disruptions caused during the carnage but also depict the sagas of survival. His characters carry the pain silently and stoically focused only on moving on with life. As Jalal said "Manto, the individual and writer, is ideal fare for the historian of Partition. As astute witness to his times, Manto crafted stories that give a more immediate and penetrating account of those troubled and troubling times than do most journalistic accounts of Partition." (Jalal 23) So much so that people go to his writings, so they are able to look critically at issues related to history, nation and politics. And every time communal violence takes place anywhere in the country, we find its echoes and warnings narrated years before in Manto's short stories.

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