



THE LOSS OF WORD AND MEANING IN THE WORLD OF SAADAT HASSAN MANTO

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Abstract

In this paper I have analysed three short stories, 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Cold Meat', and 'Open It', written on Partition by an Urdu writer Saadat Hassan Manto. I have tried to argue through the short stories that violence is always not about physical violation; it is also about the wounds and injuries that one incurs in one's psyche. These wounds and injuries remain with the victims and the state of normalcy gets fractured. Thereby, the state of being and the ability of cognition get disrupted on the part of both the victim and the perpetrator of violence. Not only the common language is lost that paves the path to a permanent silence but also the ability to comprehend meaning gets obliterated.

Saadat Hassan Manto (1912-1955) is a widely read Urdu short story writer who migrated to Pakistan after the Partition of the Indian sub-continent. Like Manto there were several writers for whom the boundaries did not make any sense and in the scores of literary works produced on this event from the East and the West frontiers there is a common note of utter bewilderment and angst. Manto among all remains a master at depicting this bewilderment of the ordinary man tormented by this tragedy. Born into a Kashmiri Muslim family in Amritsar, Manto moved away from his family tradition of law practice and took to writing. Though a great storyteller, he began his career by writing film reviews and translating some great European literature into Urdu like the works of Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde, Anton Chekhov and Maupassant. Though Manto wrote on several aspects of society his popular subjects were women, sex and Partition.

In this paper I propose to understand the idea of violence, not only in the physical sense of the word but also the pain that remains unuttered. The sense of trauma is not only expressed in words but also conveyed through a kind of symbolic silence. Here I seek to understand the outcome of violence on victim and the perpetrator. Violence, during the time of Partition, as Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh have observed was 'quantitatively different' than the earlier communal riots. The violence around the time of Partition was mitigated with the sole intension of cleansing the other population. The form of violence was not only to kill each other but physical torture and maiming of bodies were prevalent. Manto, among all, could express the pain of Partition through his writings. The horror of an event led to a loss of ordinary language and its meaning. The victims of violence are observed to have no expression for their trauma; they are at a loss of words and signification. For my purpose I would like to discuss some of the short stories that Manto wrote after the Indian holocaust, like 'Open It', 'Cold Meat', and 'Toba Tek Singh'ⁱ, and try to understand the loss of meaning and the ability of cognition on the part of both the victim and the aggressor in the wake of Partition violence.

Veena Das and Ashis Nandyⁱⁱ citing Rene Girard's argument of the ubiquity of violence as a normal condition for most cultures, state that the omnipresence of violence is also a fact in the Hindu worldview. Also violence becomes legitimate in the regeneration of social order in modern India; that is in the nation building process. Writing about the style of violence, Das and Nandy distinguished between violence as a form of resistance to colonialism and another being the communal riot and modernized bureaucratic violence in concentration camp or prisons. Understandably, the state of victimhood also gets redefined with the various forms of violence. They ascertain that there is a breakdown of signification of language in the aftermath of the communal violence at the time of partition of India in 1947. I intend to understand this loss of signification of language on the part of the victims and the perpetrator of violence during the partition. How do we see the subjective positions of the victims and the perpetrators of violence?

'Toba Tek Singh' is one of the greatest short stories by Manto on the Partition. The story vividly portrays the pain that gripped the subcontinent after its Partition. The protagonist in the story, a madman Bishan Singh resists the idea of politicians to transport the Hindu lunatics to India and the Muslim ones to Pakistan. As his turn comes to cross the border he asks the

officials whether his village 'Toba Tek Singh' was in Pakistan or in India. The officials answered that his village 'Toba Tek Singh' has gone to Pakistan. Though the authorities forced him he was adamant not to go by their dictates and chose to stand in a place between the border, a place that was neither Hindustan nor Pakistan and stood there for fifteen years and then died.

Before the sun rose, a piercing cry arose from Bishan Singh who had been quite and unmoving all this time. Several officers, and the guards ran towards him; they show that the man who, for fifteen years, had stood on his legs day and night, now lay on the ground, prostrate. Beyond a wired fence on one side of him was Hindustan and beyond a wired fence on the other side was Pakistan. In the middle, on a stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (Bhalla Vol. III 7)

Before he dies there is a 'piercing cry' a cry that unleashed the pain and agony of being homeless and displaced. He would keep muttering to himself some gibberish, 'Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhania di mung di daal di of laltain' (Bhalla Vol. III 3). The lunatic's gibberish was incomprehensible to anybody else. He on the other hand did not decipher the whole idea of displacement that was imposed on them like many other millions of people. Bishan Singh was renamed as Toba Tek Singh for his attachment to his homeland, which was called 'Toba Tek Singh', a village that became part of Pakistan. For Bishan Singh the forceful displacement is a violent act for him to bear. Being a mad man his eccentric behavior detests the violence of the state, which forcibly fixes and identity upon the lunatics. One can read a sense of sanity in his unwillingness to comply with the identity fixed by the state. Like Toba Tek Singh's gibberish talk the victim of the story, 'Open It', Sakina also loses the sense of ordinary language. She becomes a victim as women during the partition were subject to a special form of violence. Mutilating their bodies and violation of their sexuality is an accepted practice in communal strife. Talking of rape as a political act, Purushottam Agarwal writes:

In a collective context, rape becomes an explicitly political act and in the context of an organized aggression, it becomes a spectacular ritual of victory--- the defilement of the autonomous symbol of honour of the enemy community. (Butalia and Sarkar 31)

While running away from a communal frenzy Sakina is separated from her father Sirajuddin. A group of young men engaged in the recovery of the abducted women promise to get back

Sakina. However, ironically it is found that Sakina is raped several times by these social workers. When her father identifies her in the hospital, she is in a semi-conscious state. The doctor after examining her asks Sirajuddin to, 'open the window'. The young girl who was in a semi-conscious state on listening the word, 'Open' reacts by groping her hands for the chord of the salwar and then unfastening it and pulls her garment down and opens her thighs. Why did Sakina conclude such a meaning of the doctor's command? Why has the common literal sense of the word changed in a particular scenario? The bodily mutilation of the victim gets manifested in the form of the mutilation of language and erosion of meaning. Can she regain her normal state of comprehension? Will she be able to get back the normal order of signification? Das and Nandy in their analysis write that:

As the story proceeds, the climax is reached by showing how the experience of bodily mutilation would permanently mutilate the use of language. A simple command to open was to become for Sakina a re-transportation into a nightmare that her living death could not obliterate. There is no question here of return to normalcy, for normality itself has become fractured and bruised. (Das and Nandy 190)

The horror of the partition violence is confronted in the father's remark after seeing his daughter's gesture, as he was overjoyed to shout, 'my daughter is alive'. This is an irony as Sakina and victims like her are reduced to living corpses being treated as an object on which the perpetrator has his claims. Even the father fails to comprehend her gestures, for him his daughter's death and life have the same meaning. The doctor remains awestruck and is capable of distinguishing life and death. This story was banned in Pakistan for reasons of further instigating communal sentiments and also on charges of pornography. Manto draws his characters from the margins of society like the pimps, prostitutes, alcoholics and self-loathing writers. His language is also abusive and scatological but then Manto was dedicated towards reality. He vehemently attacked the conventional norms of propriety and morality. Writing about Manto's ideology, Harish Narang writes:

Manto's choice of prostitutes and pimps and people living on the periphery of society as subjects was not accidental. It was an essential part of his Ideology –an ideology which foregrounded the lives of the marginalized and the subaltern with the clear objective of not only changing the course of the majority discourse but to subvert it. (Bhalla 1997 87)

Like the story 'Open It', in another story 'Cold Meat' (Thanda Gosht) too, rape is the central trope in the story. Manto's stories like 'Cold Meat' not only depict the form of violence and the state of victims but he also humanises the perpetrator. In the story, Ishwar Singh is seen in an intimate position with his beloved Kulwant Kaur in a hotel room. The sensuousness and warmth in their relationship make the readers anticipate an erotic encounter between the two. However, ironically Ishwar realizes that he is not capable of the sexual act and Kulwant is surprised at his impotence for he was otherwise a virile man. When Kulwant confronts Ishwar and accuses him of infidelity, he narrates the experience of his own bestiality as Ishwar Singh participated in the loot, arson and rape; he was a perpetrator of violence. As part of the mob that looted a Muslim household, he had killed six members of the family and the seventh individual was spared, as she was a young girl. Ishwar carries her away and just as he is about to rape her he realizes that she is dead. '... I had carried a dead body ... a heap of cold flesh ... Janni, give me your hand' (Bhalla Vol. I 96). Kulwant touches the cold hands of Ishwar. Ishwar is not only maimed by the experience but he also fails to reconcile to the horror of the experience. This inability to register the common meaning and signification remains a concern in the kind of violence we see around us. Manto's world can be as much our contemporary society because neither violence nor its pathology has changed across time and borders.

The defeat and fragility of the perpetrator of violence redefines the subject position of Ishwar where he loses his idea of machismo identity. In this context Priyamvada Gopal writes:

Ishwar Singh's own masculinity is denaturalized and destabilized by the death of the gendered other who cannot perform the cognitive act of acknowledging the aggressor's power and difference from herself. By dying, literally becoming 'not women' and 'not human,' the potential rape victim disallows the enactment of gendered power relations. The burden of cognition falls then on Ishwar himself and the result is trauma. (Kaul 253)

'Thanda Gosht' in Urdu was published in a new journal of Pakistan, Javed in March 1949. However, there were extreme charges of obscenity against the story, especially by an old, conservative authority in the censorship board, Chaudhury Mohammad Hussain. Summarizing the story for the English editor of the civil and military gadget, Hussain expressed outrage that the central meaning of 'Thanda Gosht' was that 'we Muslims are so

dishonorable that the Sikhs did not even spared one of our dead girls' (quoted in Jalal 155). Manto on the other hand defends the story as a reformist one, as he insists that in the story one gets to see the goodness of human being even in a time of fracture in the whole social engineering. In response to the accusation he wrote:

I am sorry that a piece of writing telling human beings that they are not separated from humanity even when they become animal-like should be considered obscene and sexually suggestive. (Quoted in Jalal 156 – 157)

Thus Manto not only reaffirms his faith in human values but also humanizes the perpetrator of violence. The very act of near necrophilia on the part of Ishwar Singh pushes him into the world of lifelessness like that of the corpse and thereby to world of silence. Manto is not only relevant today for his production of some great literature, his artistic excellence and an alternative voice of history of the Indian Partition but also for a creatively out going and being a rebel at heart. Little has changed since the days of Manto. For as Manto was persecuted at least five times for his work and we know several authors who have been marked out for their work like Salman Rushdie, U. R. Anantamurty, and more recently Perumal Muruganⁱⁱⁱ. Manto remains one of the pioneering artists who was creatively extraneous and did not accept any yardsticks of writing as pronounced by the progressives, the religious bigots or the censor board.

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¹ The original Urdu titles of these stories are *Khol Do*, *Thanda Ghost* and *Toba Tek Singh* respectively. I have referred these stories from the book *Stories About the Partition of India* Vol. II, Vol I and Vol III respectively.

² Veena Das and Ashis Nandy in their work, 'Violence, Victimhood, and the Language of Silence', have analysed the philosophical approach to the concept of violence. Violence being the most primitive instinct among the human kind, it is in a certain sense is legitimised in various cultures. They have also discussed the association of silence with violence.

³ Perumal Murugan is a Tamil writer whose work *Maadorubagan* published in 2010 and translated into English as *One Part Woman* in 2013, became controversial. He was persecuted for having written this work.