Revisiting Manto, Recovering Histories: Partition Violence and the "Little People"

Sameera Chauhan, Panjab University, India

The Asian Conference on Arts and Humanities 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
India's freedom came at many great costs. Communal riots and partition related violence preceded, as well as accompanied, independence in 1947. In Punjab, one of the provinces most plagued by rioting, violence was acute. Saadat Hasan Manto has bequeathed to us vivid sketches of the trauma. This article explores the complexity which imbues Manto's post partition short stories, as well as uses oral testimonies of survivors to corroborate the narratives of agony. In the face of glaring silences and screaming voids that pervade official historiography of the event, literature and oral histories have both emerged as formidable archives. They tip the balance in favour of partition historiography which bares the horrors of murder, abduction, rape, and displacement; moving away from statist narratives which relegate the pain and agonies of people, especially women, to the background. This article will examine the role of Manto's complex, imaginative and Kafkaesque literary works in recovering the trials of the marginalised and the voiceless, by reading them along with, and in the light of, Oral testimonies.

Keywords: Partition, India, Pakistan, Manto, Women, Subaltern, Violence, Oral History

Introduction

"Mainu te yaad hai ajj vi, te tenu yaad hovega
Jadon dohaan ne mil ke apni maan da qatl kita si
Meri dudh di umar maan de qatl sang qatl ho gayi si
Te thande dudh di oh laash tere ghar hi soan gayi si
Te jis noon yaad karke aaj vi mein chup ho janda
Tere hisse vich aaye ardh dhad vich roz kho jandan"
//
I still remember it today, and you must remember it too
When, together, we murdered our mother.
My childhood was killed with the murder of my mother
And its cold corpse was left behind in your place.
Even now, I become quiet when I remember that
And lose myself in the thoughts of that half-a-body that was your share[1].

The Partition of India was an event of monumental proportions with far-reaching ramifications. The enormous shadow cast by the accompanying communal violence and displacement looms large over the sub-continent even today, shaping politics and diplomacy considerably, in both nations that were born from the rupture. In that sense, the Partition which occurred in 1947, is hardly a thing of the past[2]. Despite what the ambiguities and nonchalant silences of official historiographies of Partition would have one believe, violence was more than just a peripheral occurrence. Violence was at the heart of the event; a dominant phenomenon that acted as the very knife with which semblances of new national and post-colonial territorial identities were cut into the heart of the land and the bodies of its people[3]. Narratives on Partition can serve as a great ingress to histories of genocide around the world and the making of ethnic and religious conflict in the 20th century. For this reason, these narratives need to be chosen carefully. It is pivotal that historians and scholars of Partition be weary of teleological explanations and accounts which render history in broad strokes.

The Partition discourse is a vibrant one, comprising narratives that are at once diverse and divergent. The fulcrum, of course, remains the niggling question as to why the Partition of India occurred at all. Over the years historians have offered a plethora of explanations. Some narratives explore the question in a dull causes-and-consequences format, investigating the role of British colonialism, and political exigencies of the British empire such as divide and rule. Essentializing narratives which draw heavily from orientalist and colonial discourses attempt to explain Partition as resulting inexorably from the acrimony which, supposedly, organically characterises the relationship between Hinduism and Islam. Scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey have drawn attention to the self-limiting nature of nationalist historiographical narratives which engage with Partition in light of nation building; the birth

---

[1] The rhyme belongs to acclaimed Punjabi poet, Shiv Kumar Batalvi, as translated by Suman Kashyap. see https://www.dawn.com/news/1499501.

[2] Gyanendra Pandey (2001), draws attention to the ways in which Partition has "re-made" the life and conditions in India, Pakistan and even Bangladesh. It has redefined Hindu, Muslim and Sikh identities, ascribing values such as "untrustworthy", "butchers", "others", and these endure even today. Partition is to a certain extent, the lens through which communities view each other even today, and the event is invoked each time there is an episode of communal strife in India.

[3] David Gilmartin**,** **'**The Historiography of India's Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity**'** in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2015, pp. 23-41.

of a new Indian nation and national identity, buttressed by a strong sense of territory and religious difference[4]. Pitted against the tidy and scintillating narratives of a new-born India steadfastly marching forward onto its glory road, the destitution of at least fifteen million persons on both sides of an arbitrary Radcliffe line, remained understated. In the bulk of these analytical thrusts in historiography of Partition, aspects of dislocation and trauma have been grossly underplayed. The recognition of the human element of Partition, the recovery of the "malleable, fuzzy and contextual" dimensions of everyday life, had to await their due place in history for a long time[5].

The dawn of a new historiographical trend in the 1980s by Ranajit Guha and his subaltern studies group sparked a reassessment of Partition. They advocated an exploration of histories of groups that were either consigned to the margins, or not documented at all[6]. Many historians have now committed themselves to rethinking the history of Partition to produce new perspectives, posing new questions and pointing out pitfalls of traditional approaches[7]. This article will examine the role of Manto's complex, imaginative and Kafkaesque literary works in recovering the trials of the marginalised and the voiceless, by reading them along with, and in the light of, Oral testimonies. The employment of both literary works as a window to gaze at events of the past, and of memory as a historical tool, has its limitations. The scope and objectivity of both are widely debated. However, it is my argument that when read together and synergistically, the two can result in new and empathetic ways of mapping past realities. By navigating the world of Manto's stories with the use of stories narrated by survivors of Partition, the paper hopes to underscore the extent to which Manto's work, especially his partition stories, was more than just fiction, and did in fact artistically render real suffering. Manto's Partition stories are better understood when seen as a "critique of nationalism's divine ambitions"[8]. When retellings of the lived reality of Partition are understood in the light of Manto's attempts to dislodge narratives of national modernity and identity, the picture of displacement and flimsy territorial logic of Partition, as well as the hollow resolutions of nationalism, begins to emerge more starkly. Studied together, the short stories and the oral testimonies reveal the fiction of two separate nationalities which constituted the nationalist politics and its cultural inscriptions.

Manto's world of complex social reality, teeming with subaltern characters is a place where the flotsam and jetsam of society, the "little people", emerge from the shadows[9]. His stories

---

[4] Pandey dwells on the importance of rethinking histories of Partition. He explores "questions of violence, nationhood and history" and how these may be associated with the violent founding of new states.

[5] Pandey (2001), pp. 204.

[6] See Guha 1997, *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, University of Minnesota Press.

[7] Good examples of the vibrant work being done would include: Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian state and Abduction of Women During Partition' and Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender' in *Economic and Political Weekly* 'Review of Womens' Studies' (April 1994), Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1998), Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness' in *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi, 1994), David Gilmartin, 'Partition, Pakistan and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative' in *Journal of Asian Studies* (57:4, November, 1998), Mushirul Hasan, 'Partition Narratives' in *Oriente Moderno,* Anno 23 (84), Nr. 1 (2004), Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Delhi, 1998), Pippa Virdee, 'Remembering Partition: women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947' in *Oral History* (Vol. 41, No. 2, 2013).

[8] Mufti (2007), pp. 178.

[9] I borrow the term from Leslie A. Flemming. She has broken new ground in the critical evaluation of Manto's work by viewing it in the light of his personal travails and state of depression resulting from his own displacement. By illuminating the psychological trauma of Manto the man, she helps establish Manto the writer as an authority on the empathetic and humane view of Partition and the ruthless perturbation of ordinary people's lives.

are populated with women who have suffered brutalisation (in his story *Khol Do* / "The Return"), those who have been aggressors themselves and taken life *(Thanda Gosht* / "Colder than Ice"), some who have transcended barriers of religious and cultural difference to personify humanity by acting as protectors (in *Mozel* / "Mozail")[10]. Manto does not pigeonhole his women. In fact, in Manto's post Partition literary creations, women go beyond playing just characters. They become a metaphor for humanity torn asunder[11]. His artistic genius catches the pulse of life in the streets, the back alleys and the marketplaces; exploring the unlit corners of not only cities but also of the mind, to allow a peek into the lives of the insane, the frenzied, the vindictive and the opportunists.

'Toba Tek Singh'

In the satirical *Toba Tek Singh*, India and Pakistan exchange their lunatics and prisoners. The story portrays the ambiguities of Partition. Even the insane are being claimed as territory. Bodies of the unsuspecting mad, become spaces for a contest over an arbitrary border. The insanity and savage mania of the supposedly sane real world, acts as a foil for the heartrending agony of the eponymous protagonist who only speaks in an incomprehensible concoction of strange words… "*Upar di gur gur di annexe di bedhiyana di moong di daal of di Pakistan and Hindustan of di durr phitey mun*"[12].

Bishan Singh, pines to be united with his homeland, Toba Tek Singh. The question of whether Toba Tek Singh was appropriated by India or Pakistan, consumes him. The character evokes pathos and compassion as he collapses into a fatal hysteria, finally realising his displacement. Bishan Singh's dear village, Toba Tek Singh, is left behind in Pakistan and his body, claimed by the new state which has wrested control of him, lies perished between the barbed wires, finally asleep. The irony is unmistakable, as Manto depicts the grotesque madness of the real world exhibited in the violence of 1947. Bishan Singh embodies the chaos, confusion, ambiguity, upheaval and death surrounding Partition, echoing the pain and helplessness of the millions who were displaced. Manto illumines the psychological aspects of the horrible vivisection.

Manto was born to a Kashmiri family in Samrala (East Punjab) in 1912. His love for Bombay as a city to live and work in, is widely known. Manto moved there in 1934, writing for magazines, newspapers and scripts for the Hindi film industry. The Partition of India disrupted his love affair with his favourite city, as well as his literary pursuits when the family migrated to Lahore in Pakistan in 1948. He died there in 1955 from cirrhosis of the liver. In a sense then, *Toba Tek Singh* may have emerged from Manto's own experience of

[10] Most of the English translations of titles (unless specified otherwise) as well as the quoted texts are taken from Khalid Hasan's translations of Manto's stories published in 1997, unless specified otherwise.

[11] The cultural function of literature as well as the use of literature as historical evidence are themes which historians struggle to tame. It is important for this reason to check in with who and what is represented in the literature consulted, and who the audience is. Gordon Kelly remarks that what category of literature gets called upon to perform a historical function, has much to do with who consumes and treasures those works, thereby leading to the preservation of some literary works and the ruin of others. Moreover, the use of literature as a repository of history must be done after due corroboration with other archives. ('Literature and the Historian' in *American Quarterly* Vol. 26, No. 2, 1974, pp. 141-159). Ipso facto, the scrutiny of the appropriateness of literary works as historical archives is a serious matter. In this regard, Manto stands out for he was anything but admired by the elite, conservative elements of the time who found him 'obscene', 'vulgar' and 'shocking' for his uninhibited engagement with social reality. This is especially true for his post Partition writings. No wonder Manto was tried for obscenity five times after his migration.

[12] *Manto selected Stories,* translated by Aatish Taseer (2012), pp.4.

anguish and helplessness emanating from his displacement. The beauty of Manto, and his other contemporary literary figures such as Ismat Chughtai and Faiz Ahmed Faiz for instance, is that at the height of nationalist discourse bifurcated by religious difference, these writers formed a creed of secularists who appealed to a wide audience, albeit through Urdu, a language mired in controversy and divisive discourse over identity and national culture. The All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) was one of the most influential literary movements preceding the Partition. It was inaugurated in the 1930s and from its inception, was associated with Marxist and Socialist philosophies. during the 1940s, the AIPWA came to focus aggressively on writings with clear and strong ideological underpinnings, shunting out creative activity which they deemed 'perverted' and pornographic, reliant overtly on the disconcerting, the sexual and the morbid. Manto was identified as such and castigated fiercely. His work was dismissed as unprogressive for not exploring social and political themes. Manto's disenchantment and falling out with the AIPWA was inevitable but he continued to write empathetically about human lived experience, maintaining that morality was contingent upon circumstances shaped by social and political forces.

This article argues that by drawing vivid sketches of the unsettling, the troubling and the violent; of national fragmentation and trauma in his Partition writings (resulting in a banned journal and obscenity charges being brought against him), Manto helps salvage history of Partition from being reduced to hollow and sanitised narratives of autonomous nationalism and the formation of two new modern nation states. By bringing forth the lived reality of Partition with the help of interviews with survivors, the article will corroborate and supplement Manto's sketches of suffering and his challenge to, as well as interrogation of Indian nationalism.

'Tithwal Ka Kutta'

The desolation and vulnerability of the uprooted is depicted in *Tithwal Ka Kutta* ("The Dog of Tithwal"). The story is set in the immediate aftermath of Partition, showing India and Pakistan at war with one another. Soldiers of both countries, entrenched along either side of the new border, harass a poor dog. The story is an ode to the suffering of the refugees forced to run helter-skelter, diving for cover, groping for safety, while men of power mindlessly toyed with their fate, in pursuit of their own political goals and contending nationalist agenda. Both camps peremptorily claim the dog as a national and then unceremoniously disown him repeatedly. When the helpless animal fails to furnish any evidential signs of his allegiance to either India or Pakistan, both sides begin to shoot at him driving him back and forth across the border in fear and confusion. In the ensuing conflict, the dog is shot dead. The men deciding the dog's nationality and his fate simply go back to their life, while the scared and perplexed dog's carcass lies in the middle, reminiscent of Bishan Singh's corpse that has no home. Manto's ability to be objective and lay blame equally on both sides is remarkable. The soldiers on both sides mirror each other as they symbolise the senselessness of Partition violence along with the callousness and immorality of the foot soldiers of divisive propaganda deployed by a few great men of history.

The story echoes the plight of the displaced thousands (and of Manto himself) who were caught in the crossfire of violently asserted national and religious identities. Somewhat similar might have been the confounding condition of those abducted women who were forcibly converted by their Hindu, Sikh or Muslim aggressors. And just when they had created quiet, new lives for themselves, they were reclaimed by the "civilised", "responsible" and "parent protector" state, often against their will, on the pretext of upholding national

honour, with utter disregard for the "humanitarian aspects of recovery" of the abducted women and their children[13].

'Anjaam Bakhair '

Anjaam Bakhair ("The Girl From Delhi") offers a critique of nationalist discourse on Partition. A young prostitute named Nasim welcomes Partition and the creation of a new homeland for Muslims ("It is going to be Hindu Raj, and they don't want any Muslims around. *Quaid-i-Azam*, Jinnah Sahib, has worked hard and got us our own country Pakistan. Where we should go and live")[14]. The story evokes pity at the naivety of the young girl who is desperate to change her circumstances. She marries a pimp who promises to ensure her safe passage and assures her of a comfortable life in Pakistan. The poignancy lies in her failure to achieve the new life she hoped for and which she believed to be a natural corollary of a new nation premised on religious identity. She had counted on the new land to bring her happiness and dignity. All her dreams came to naught as she reached Pakistan only to be sold again, like a commodity, by her own husband.

Stories of deception at the hands of kin abound. An octogenarian interviewed in Lucknow recounted the escape of her family from Lahore on August 11th, 1947, facilitated by one of her father's several Muslim friends. They set off for Moradabad where her paternal aunt lived with her husband, a d*aroga* (Inspector), and his two brothers. It seemed like a safe enough place to seek shelter until the chaos had passed. 'One night we awoke to my aunt screaming frantically... "chor, chor!" ("thief, thief!") We have been robbed"…'. The only chest the uprooted family had brought with them from Lahore, was lying wide open, contents scattered, all valuables gone. A few days later, the aunt's brothers-in-law confessed to having stolen the valuables and unabashedly refused to return them. The *daroga* simply looked the other way[15].

'Khuda ki Qasam'

In *Khuda ki Qasam* ("The Dutiful Daughter"), a Muslim woman who has been separated from her daughter in the violent frenzy, roams the streets like a vagabond, raving, hoping to find her lost daughter. The woman is told repeatedly by state officials that her daughter is most likely dead, but she believes that her child is a thing of such immense beauty that no one would have the heart to harm her. The woman's condition and her belief both invoke irony as bodies cease to be identified with attributes such as beauty, innocence and childhood, in an atmosphere impregnated with violence, hate and revenge. Through the mayhem of Partition, bodies ceased to exist in a spiritual realm where they could be identified as mothers, daughters and sisters, fathers, brothers and children. Bodies were reduced to 'theirs' and 'ours'. The corporeality of the body was supreme. One day the distressed woman sees her

[13] See *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (pp. 98). Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin (1998) have explored the state led campaign for the recovery of abducted women which commenced in the aftermath of Partition. Using a rich collection of interviews with "reclaimed" and "recovered" women, as well as social workers involved with the recovery operation, they highlight the material, political and symbolic significance of these women. The campaign for their reclamation, often against their will, for many abducted women were leading quiet and peaceful lives after the dust of chaotic Partition had settled. After "recovery" many women were condemned to a life of shame and loneliness and their children considered illegitimate. The need to highlight the "moral depravity" of the 'other' and the status of state as 'protector' were crucial aspects of the undertaking.

[14] Khalid Hasan (1997), pp. 123-24.

[15] Khalid Hasan (1997), pp. 123-24.

daughter walking hand in hand with a Sikh man who seems to recognise the older woman, for he looks to his companion and says, "your mother". The daughter glances at the old lady but walks away briskly. Implicit in the story, is Manto's derision of the state led programme of recovery which uprooted, yet again, some who had made peace with their lives as they unfolded post Partition. The nationalist rhetoric on recovery of snatched women and their children emerges as an entangled mess of bigotry and high politics, scraping the wounds of the already dislocated, in the garb of paternalism.

'Ramkhilavan'

Ramkhilavan is the story of a Hindu *dhobi* (washerman) who worked for a Muslim family. An honest and loyal worker, he was also magnanimous and affectionate, never demanding money in the narrator's days of penury and bachelorhood. Crazed by the Partition and the accompanying blood bath, the *dhobi* and members of his community launch into a killing spree, attacking and lynching Muslims. Manto makes an oblique reference to the manner in which common people were bolstered to wreak violence by influential men of power and money. In the end, the loyal *dhobi* not only averts the harm about to befall his employer at the hands of his brethren, but also emerges from the hypnosis of collective madness. He weeps and apologises, beseeching the narrator to never make his *'begum'* privy to the events of that day, not even once he reaches his "new country"[16]. The narrator's wife had looked after him in his state of abject sickness, making sure he got appropriate and timely medical attention. He was ashamed at the prospect of seeming ungrateful to his compassionate employers. At the same time, one is forced to question whether networks and bonds of kinship were stronger than those outside the realm of religion, woven with threads of love, affection and loyalty. Manto's stories, and the story of Partition in general, are equally stories of bereavement, of loss and longing; of lost inheritances and unanswered questions, of the numerous love stories and friendships which were deprived of a fair chance. Just as the washerman bewails the migration of his kind employers, thousands had to forfeit the comforting embrace of community life which had flourished over a long time. "Even today, I think of Sayeeda. I wonder where she is, how she is… I still want to find Sayeeda", said a woman remembering her best friend. The two girls attended Delhi's Lady Irwin school together until one day in 1947, when Sayeeda and her kin just disappeared, never to be seen again[17].

In stories such as *Ram Khilavan,* Manto strikes at religious rhetoric by humanizing even the aggressors, by depicting people as people; complex and volatile; drawing a distinction between man and the mob and writing moments of individual human weakness into his narratives recounting man's bestiality. The numbing of morality and loss of rectitude are to be considered as important discursive elements in narratives of genocide, for they mark the processes through which communities dissociate from each other and constitute a language of disavowal. A survivor sharing his moment of apathy and moral death recounted, "On my way back from the *pakorewallah* (a vendor selling fritters) in Jalandhar cantonment, I saw a young boy surrounded by a mob. Some wielded knives and spears and were attacking and stabbing the boy. Some people caught a whiff of the youth's identity, that he was a refugee staying at one of the camps set up for Muslims… they beat him senseless and then poured kerosene over him…they burned him alive. As a twenty-year old, I watched the killing unmoved and unsympathetic. This is the effect a mob can have on you. I was one with the mob in that moment". The overwhelming deluge of refugees has been immortalised by

[16] Taseer, pp. 100.
[17] Satinder Dua, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in New Delhi, India, dated 19-06-2019.

photographs of trains crammed with people like sardines in a can, and hundreds mounted on the roofs. With thousands of Muslims migrating to the west and Hindus and Sikhs migrating east, pandemonium was inevitable. People not only turned on the 'others' but also their own. An interviewee who migrated to India from Lahore in 1947 remembered, "While awaiting a train to take us to Moradabad, we lived at the railway station at Dhuri (west Punjab) for a few days. One day there stood a train on the platform, bound for east Punjab, packed with Muslims going to the other side. A poor Muslim woman with an infant in her arms tried desperately to board. The train started moving, there was some commotion and she, infant still in her arms, was pushed out of the running train by another passenger. Man can be so cruel, so merciless"[18].

The testimony of a gentleman whose family migrated from Kanjrur in Shakargarh (west Punjab), to Gurdaspur (east Punjab) in March of 1947 when he was aged 15 years, further illustrates that aggression was atypical. During the family's flight from west Punjab, they were met with some Muslim officers on horseback who rebuked them for having waited too long and even threatened to shoot the entire family. Upon realising that the interviewees father was an ophthalmologist of repute and had in fact treated his own parents, the police officer offered his apologies and escorted the family up to a certain distance in order to ensure their safe passage into Dera Baba Nanak[19].

'Khol Do'

Khol Do is a story set in east Punjab. Sirajuddin, who has already lost his wife at the hands of rioters, searches frantically for his young daughter. Upon arriving at a refugee camp, Sirajuddin requests a group of volunteers to help find Sakina. The men manage to trace a frightened and confused Sakina and promise to unite her with her father. The remainder of the story unfolds in a hospital as the lifeless body of a young woman is brought in on a stretcher. The doctor asks someone to open a window to let in some light and fresh air. Upon hearing the words *"khol do",* her lifeless limbs reach for the drawstrings of her *shalwar* (pants). One simple motion tells the shocking tale of Sakina's brutalisation and rape, not only by her abductors but also by those masquerading as saviours. In his Partition writings, Manto helps break the myth of uniform hostilities. Malice was not typical. He depicts the miscarriage of human morality without declaring any allegiances or picking sides. No one can be trusted, not even members of your own religious community. The credibility of virtue and faith are jeopardised.

The innumerable and multifarious incidents of indiscriminate violation of women, point to their reduction to their reproductive function. In *Sharifan* ("Bitter Harvest") Manto builds the scenes of blind revenge which played out on the bodies of women. Qasim's daughter Sharifan is raped and murdered by a Hindu in the insanity of communal conflict. A hysterical Qasim sets out to replicate the bestiality on a woman of the rival community. He rapes and murders a young girl in a neighbouring home. Shocked and ashamed by his own savagery, he covers the dead girl's body. As Qasim concludes his dreadful deed, the victim's father arrives. He lifts the cover from the dead body and screams "Bimla!", just as Qasim had howled "Sharifan" when he discovered the mutilated body of his own child. It is widely known that not only women but also children were frequently mutilated in a model of revenge which rested upon snatching each other's progeny; almost as if attempting to write

[18] Manohar Lal Kapoor, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in Lucknow, dated 12-01-2019.
[19] S.S. Virdi, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in Chandigarh, India, dated 05-09-2019.

each other out of the future. Manto does not fail to record the human element of Qasim's rage. He seeks revenge, but his morality evokes shock and guilt at his own actions, inducing him to cover the consequence of his savagery.

The violation of each other's women was at the heart of attempts to emasculate the men of the 'other' community; a testament of their failure to live up to their traditionally ascribed roles as protectors and providers. In August of 1947, a group of Pakistani Baluchi soldiers butchered roughly 10,000 non-Muslim civilians in Sheikhupura. Women and young girls were raped *en masse* to emphasize the collapse of the community, to indicate and underline the failure of men to extend protection to their women and children[20]. The testimony of a survivor who migrated from Kasur, now in Pakistan, recounted the horrific fate of her friends; two sisters who were abducted by Muslim rioters and raped and mutilated. "A few weeks after Partition my mother went to visit the two sisters at one of the refugee camps in Jalandhar… they had been brought there after being rescued." One of the sisters described the fiendish way in which they were ravaged first by several men and then their privates mangled by inserting pieces of wood, amongst other objects. "Only one sister survived the ordeal. The other succumbed to her wounds in the camp… my mother came back thoroughly disturbed…"[21]. The rape and defilement of women as a mechanism of dishonouring communities, rests upon traditional patriarchal notions of women's bodies as repositories of purity and honour. This deeply entrenched mentality, which shapes women's notion of the self in the subcontinent, is visible in the widely known episodes of women hurling themselves into wells to evade attackers/rioters during Partition. A woman who migrated from Peshawar in 1948 remembered being summoned by her father one day, while she played busily in the street outside. Episodes of murder and arson had acquired fever pitch. "He called me into the house …and placed a small *kirpan* (sword) in my hands…." She was instructed to end her life rather than fall into the hands of rioters. Breaking down, she recalled the spectacle of hate presented by way of women's severed breasts, strung together and hung in the abandoned marketplace like streamers. Breasts symbolise the nurturing of future generations. The assault on each other's women and children was an assault on each other's destinies.

Children and infants were not spared the inhumanity either. A survivor who was born in Rawalpindi in the year 1930, recalled the scenes from 1947 when extensive violence first erupted in the city. Not only were women abducted and raped, but children were butchered and dismembered. While they hid in the home of their largely Hindu-Sikh neighbourhood, outside they could hear blood curdling screams now and then. A pamphlet titled 'The Rape of Rawalpindi' published in March that year, carried terrible details of the malevolent proclivities of humans which guided hands of men to toss infants of the 'others' up in the air, and spike them with their swords[22]. The children of Partition suffered not only at the hands of rioters' swords but also on account of social stigma. While the blood bath orphaned thousands of children, those who were born to the snatched women, were stigmatised as signifiers of humiliation and dishonour, not only for the women who bore them, but for entire communities.

[20] Hansen (2002), pp.15.
[21] Shashi Sehgal, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India, dated 19-01-2019.
[22] Shyam Sundar Rudra. Interviewed by Sameera Chauhan in New Delhi, dated 22-03-2019.

'Thanda Gosht'

Narratives rendering the victimisation of women are innumerable, but there are equally noteworthy instances where women, either through acts of courage and empathy or through acts of aggression, exercised their agency. In Manto's *Thanda Gosht* (literally, 'Cold Flesh'), Ishar Singh visits his lover, Kulwant Kaur, amidst Partition atrocities. Kaur observes with uneasiness that he is out of his usual amorous element. Enraged by Singh's indifference to her ardour, Kulwant Kaur unsheathes her *kirpan* and slashes his neck. She suspects her lover of adultery, oblivious to the maladjustment of the man who stood before her, reeling from psychological trauma. With life slowly draining from him, Ishar Singh recounts to Kulwant, his attempted intercourse with a young Muslim girl he carried away from one of the homes he was looting. As he foisted himself onto her, he realised that she was already dead; her cold flesh made him realise there was nothing left to be violated. The shock value of such narratives is immensely potent in symbolising the preposterousness of exerting power upon the weak and insensible who are incapable of their own defence. The sadism of rape, abduction and murder which characterised Partition violence, is not without psychological consequences for the violator. Manto's stories help visualise divergent narratives of violence. In *Thanda Gosht,* the usual stories of the victimised feminine and deviant heinous masculine are turned on their head. Kulwant Kaur's act of rage and vengeance turns Ishar Singh's body into the same lifeless mass of cold flesh which had been haunting his being. It is noteworthy that women were equally capable of inflicting pain and played their own part in the violence by being complicit[23].

'Mozel'

In riot torn Bombay of 1947, a valiant Jewish woman named Mozel saves her lover Trilochan's fiancée by giving the latter the clothes on her back in order to facilitate the young woman's escape from a strife torn neighbourhood. As Mozel stands in the street naked, Trilochan tries to cover her with his turban. The bold woman who rejects and ridicules the hollowness of religious rituals and symbols says exasperatedly, "Take away this rag of your religion. I don't need it". Women's agency becomes visible in other roles performed by them, such as that of empath and protector and not simply victims. Several survivors recounted stories of women who assisted the sick and wounded in squalid refugee camps. Some told stories of women who stood watch in the camps at night, shoulder to shoulder with the men, to make sure rioters did not spring any surprise attacks on the weary sleeping people[24].

Manto's work repeatedly prioritises and upholds the humanity of common people, of both the attacked as well as the attackers. Religion of the attacker does not concern him except sometimes to show the atypical and unreliable ways in which co-religionists treated each other, as in *Khol do.* Staying true to Manto's project of conveying reality brazenly and to the project of highlighting the human dimension of Partition "without the bitter clouds of communitarian animosities that have made remembering Partition a contentious and divisive subject"[25], the need for identifying the religion of the violators and the violated, is obviated in the use of personally collected oral testimonies.

---

[23] "In another instance we heard that while men broke down houses after an orgy of killing, women carried away the bricks, assisted them, washed away the blood". See Butalia (1993), "Community, State and Gender: On Women's agency During Partition", pp. WS-13.

[24] Usha Kiran, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in New Delhi, dated 25-04-2019.

[25] Ayesha Jalal (2013), pp.99

Conclusion

A reduction of Manto's work to his obsessive imaginings of the amoral, of violence and of the sexual, is a great disservice to his brilliance. Through his characters, he elucidates his views on questions of control and power, and of resistance to them. The socio-cultural milieu depicted by him, the social and political drama represented in his work are distinctive and serve as the singular context for his Partition writings. The artistry in deployment of sensory perception, be it touch, smell or sounds, is a testament to his genius. Sensory perception is altered when humans find themselves in the throes of violence and trauma. Taran Gujral, a prominent poet of the Punjabi language, recalled screaming "…aa gaye!..aa gaye!…" (…they have come!.. they have come!) mistaking the sound of fireworks on the night of India's independence, for the commotion of rioters, which had petrified her so often during those terrible times. She was 16 years old in 1947; a young woman horrified at the imaginings of the fate that awaited her if she were to be captured. Mediated by fear, sounds deliver a distorted message[26]. In *khol Do,* Manto brings forth a similar distortion wrought by pain, on the relationship between language and body as well as sounds and sensation. When the doctor instructs someone to open the window, her insensible body moves its limbs to undo her drawstrings. Sakina has been so virulently brutalised by repeated gang rape that "khol do" ("open it") has lost all other context[27].

Reading Manto juxtaposed with real oral testimonies of people who lived the horror and the dislocation, establishes emphatically, the historical and social function of his literary work. Literature can serve as a cognitive model to help unpack experiences and reveal processes through which new concepts are created. These include the making of concepts such as identity, the self, the 'other', community, nation and home, amongst several others. It can serve as an especially powerful tool when applied to communities with shared cultural knowledge and nations born from one sundered womb. The great accessibility of Manto on account of several translations in numerous languages, and his large readership, make his understanding of Partition even more precious. The shock value of his narratives elicits an emotional and intellectual response from the reader. He at once visibilizes the dark underbelly of humanity and redeems the frailty of man. His methods draw attention to the many ambivalences and contradictions of the bedlam that was Partition. In doing so he creates a useful context for understanding oral testimonies and recovering the human dimension of that vivisection; removed from narratives which focus overarchingly, on Partition as simply a transformative moment of creation.

[26] Taran Gujral, personal interview. Interview by Sameera Chauhan in Chandigarh, dated 30-06-2019.
[27] See Veena Das (1996), for a succinct analysis of the destruction of "normality of language" for survivors of violence, pp. 77.

References

Bhalla, A., (1997). *Life and Works of Saaddat Hasan Manto.* Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies.

Butalia, U., (1993). Community, State and Gender: On Women's Agency during Partition. *Economic and Political Weekly,* Volume 28(17), pp. WS12-WS24.

Butalia, U., (1998). *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India.* New Delhi: Penguin.

Daruwalla, K., (1996). The Craft of Manto, Warts and All.. *Annual of Urdu Studies ,* Volume 11, pp. 117-128.

Das, V., (1996). Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain. *Daedalus ,* Volume 125(1), pp. 67-91.

Flemming, L. A., (1977). Riots And Refugees: The Post-Partition Stories Of Saadat Hasan Manto. *Journal of South Asian Literature,* Volume 13(1/4), pp. 99-109.

Gilmartin, D., (2015). The Historiography of India's Partition: Between Civilization and Modernity. *The Journal of Asian Studies ,* Volume 74(1), pp. 23-41.

Hansen, A. B., (2002). *Partition and Genocide: Manifestation of Violence in Punjab, 1937-1947.* New Delhi: India Research Press.

Hasan, M., (2004). Partition Narratives. *Oriente Moderno,* Volume 23 (84)(1), pp. 103-130.

Hassan, K., (1997). *Mottled dawn : Fifty sketches and Stories of Partition.* New York: Penguin .

Jalal, Ayesha, (2013). *Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work Across the India-Pakistan Divide.* New Delhi: HarperCollins.

Kelly, G., (1974). Literature and the Historian. *American Quarterly,* Volume 26(2), pp. 141-159.

Mufti, Aamir, (2007). *Enlightenment in the Colony- The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture.* Princeton: Princeton UP.

Mukherjee, A., (2012). Reading Women's Journey through the Debris of Indian Partition in the "Charnel Ground of History". *Rocky Mountain Review,* Volume 66, pp. 93-105.

Onaiza Drabu, P. J., (2019). *Reading Partition poetry.* [Online] Available at: https://www.dawn.com/news/1499501[Accessed Wednesday, August 18th, 2021].

Pandey, G., (2001). *Remembering Partition : Violence, Nationalism and History in India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ritu Menon, K. B., (1993). *Recovery, Rupture, Resistance-Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition.* Economic and Political Weekly.

Ritu Menon, K. B., (1993). Recovery, Rupture, Resistance-Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition.. *Economic and Political Weekly.,* Volume 28, No. 17, pp. WS2-WS11.

Ritu Menon, K. B., (1998). *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition.* New Delhi: Kali For Women.

Rumi, R., (2012). Reclaiming Humanity: Women in Manto's Short Stories. *Social Scientist,* 40((11/12)), pp. 75-86.

Siddiqui, M. A., (2012). Saadat Hasan Manto's Poetics of Resistance. *Social Scientist,* Volume 40(11/12), pp. 17-29.

Taseer, A., (2012). *Manto: Selected Short Stories.* Gurugram: Penguin Random House India.

Tiwari, S., (2013). Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto. *Economic and Political Weekly,* 48, no. 25(June), pp. 50-58.

Virdee, P., (2013). Remembering Partition: Women, oral histories and the Partition of 1947. *Oral History,* Volume 41(2), pp. 49-62.

Contact email: sameera.chauhan@1947partitionarchive.org