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# Madness and Partition:

## The Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto

Stephen Alter

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No writer has been able to convey the violent ambiguities of communal conflict with as much force and conviction as Saadat Hasan Manto. Many of his short stories focus on the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947. Manto vividly recreates the anger and horrors of this period and the trauma of refugees uprooted and victimized by the delineation of arbitrary borders. As the characters in Manto's stories confront the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence—murder, rape and mutilation—their only conceivable response is madness.

In one of his stories, "I Swear By God" (*Khuda ki qasm*), a Muslim woman searches for her daughter, who was abducted by Hindu rioters. Refusing to believe that her daughter has been murdered, the mother wanders from city to city in north India, mumbling incoherently, half-naked, her hair matted. The narrator of the story reflects on the woman's plight:

Her futile search, I realised, was now the only basis of her life which had kept her going till now. I did not want to pull it away from under her feet. I did not want to take her out of a vast asylum where she could make long excursions in all directions to satisfy the thirst of her untiring feet and clap her within the narrow walls of an asylum made of bricks. (Manto 106)

Manto clearly saw the violence which accompanied Partition as an act of collective madness. He himself was a victim. Born in the Punjab, of a Kashmiri Muslim family, Manto spent most of his early life in Aligarh and Bombay, where he worked for a number of years

as a film writer and editor of literary journals such as *Musawwir* and *Samaj*. While living in Bombay he witnessed communal rioting in the city, which he condemned in essays and editorials. For a brief period of his life between 1941 and 1942 he worked in Delhi at All India Radio, writing a large number of plays and stories. Despite his prolific output, Manto became restless and bored with Delhi, which was a relatively small and provincial city. He missed Bombay and quarreled with his colleagues, finally quitting his job at All India Radio over the unauthorized editing of one of his plays. Returning to Bombay, he discovered that Hindu-Muslim tensions had increased. Alienated from his friends in the Progressive Writers Movement, he became depressed and disillusioned with the literary and political life of Bombay. Though he eventually found work at Filmistan studios and *Musawwir*, Manto faced financial difficulties and began to drink more heavily. When Partition occurred in the summer of 1947, Manto's wife, Safiyah, and her family moved to Pakistan. Manto remained in Bombay for several months but followed soon afterwards. He settled in Lahore and faced an uncertain and disorienting future. Though he continued writing and produced some of his most powerful stories during this period, his alcoholism had become more severe. Exiled from Bombay and living in poverty, Manto was unable to reconcile himself to his new life in Lahore. He died in 1955, of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of forty-three (Flemming, 1 - 21).

Though he is now acknowledged to be one of the masters of Urdu fiction, Manto received only moderate recognition during his lifetime. Manto's writings were always controversial and he was attacked by his critics for being an alcoholic, a pornographer, and politically indecisive. In fact, as his stories testify, Manto was a writer of acute moral vision, who focused on the injustices and contradictions of his society and the fraudulence of power.

In response to the question posed in the title of his essay, "Is Manto Necessary Today?", the Urdu critic Salim Akhtar has stated :

My answer is an unconditional yes, not because Manto was a very great short story writer or artist, nor because he wrote very enjoyable stories. These features can be found in other short story writers. What is, in fact necessary today is that kind of moral courage, free from the taint of hypocrisy, that Manto embodied. Manto had the courage to face bitter truth, to analyze it and to

express it openly. He fought all his life for the right to speak the truth. He endured not only the censure of religion and the courts but also, eventually, the rejection of his fellow progressives. Still, he remained on his path. (Akhtar 1)

Leslie Flemming, Manto's American biographer, refers to him as a "Kind-Hearted Terrorist." It is an appropriate epithet, for much of his best writing is subversive. He sought to expose the inherent deceptions in the political system as well as the hypocrisy of religious, social and sexual norms. When he was alive, Manto was often discredited as an immoral and degenerate writer, which is ironic, because few writers have had such an incisive eye for ethical questions. He saw through the falsity of religious and political rhetoric, particularly in the context of Partition. What is remarkable about his stories, is that he can describe acts of communal violence and revenge, without taking sides. Even though he himself was a Muslim, forced to leave India as an exile, he does not ascribe blame to one community or the other. His descriptions of violence may be graphic and disturbing, but Manto does not perpetuate the cycle of revenge and recrimination through general accusations. To him, an act of rape or murder is committed by an individual man, who cannot cloak or disguise his actions behind an ethnic or religious identity. Probably his most bitter and terrifying work is called "Black Marginalia" (*Siyah Hashiye*), a montage of incidents from Hindu-Muslim riots. Manto begins with a dedication, "...to the man who, while narrating his blood-curdling exploits, said, 'When I killed an old woman I felt horrified as if I had committed a murder'" (Manto 39). The sordid irony of those words underlies much of Manto's fiction.

The preoccupation with communal violence and rioting in the stories of Manto and other Muslim writers has been criticized as a narrow and cynical view of what might have been a positive and inspiring moment in history. An eminent Urdu scholar, Muhammad Umar Memon has written that Partition held out the possibility of a creative renewal for Urdu literature and that the experience of migration should have produced works of greater vision and optimism. In the fiction of Intizar Hussein, a contemporary of Manto's, Memon finds the recurring theme of *hijrat* (migration) which both the author and critic believe is central to the experience of Partition and the creation of Pakistan. Intizar Hussein expressed his

disappointment that other Muslim writers of his generation did not fully realize the potential of this opportunity to reaffirm their spiritual and historical roots after 1947 (Memon 377). Part of the blame for this failure, according to Memon, lies with the Progressive Writer's Movement, which did not foster a distinctly Muslim identity because of their marxist/socialist world view (Memon 381-390).

Saadat Hasan Manto was only involved in the Progressive Writer's Movement for a short period of time but he did share many of their sensibilities. Memon's criticism is partially valid; it is true that Manto saw Partition as a negative and regressive event. However, to describe his obsession with the violence and horrors of this period as a failure of moral and literary vision, is to deny the fundamental truth and strength of his work. There were certainly other writers who used rioting and rape to gratuitous effect, but for Manto these images were essential to his portrayal of Partition as a brutal, inhuman act of madness.

Partition seems to be one of the most enduring legacies of the British empire. Former colonies were divided along religious and ethnic lines, as if the colonial administrators took the wisdom of Soloman at face value, cutting the disputed infant in half before its mother had a chance to intervene. The problem is that the cartographer's pencil became a two-edged sword and there is no line on a map that can cleanly demarcate a population, particularly when that population is already riven with hatred and distrust.

As a student in Aligarh, Manto styled himself as a revolutionary, even though he was never directly involved in the Indian freedom movement (Flemming 7). In his story, "It Happened in 1919" (*1919 ki ek bat*), the narrator recounts events leading up to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, a crucial turning point in the struggle for independence.

...Sir Michael was not a man but a beast... People say that whatever had been happening in the sacred city for the last five years was also the result of the British ruler's machinations. It may be so, Bhaijaan, for all I know. Nevertheless, I have a strong inkling that we ourselves are not above blame for the blood of the innocents that flowed over the streets at that time. (Manto 94)

Even though the Deputy Commissioner and other British

officers responsible for the massacre are depicted as cruel and unjust, Manto is not content to blame the violence on the colonial administration alone. In another story, “The New Order” (*Naya qanun*), one of the characters claims that the Hindu-Muslim riots are the result of a curse. He tells his friends, “Otherwise why would there be constant stabbings between Hindus and Muslims? I had heard it from my family elders that once Akbar Badshah had annoyed a Muslim dervish and the holy man in his divine wrath cursed the emperor that henceforth his Hindu and Muslim subjects would always remain at loggerheads....” The curse also dictated that “...we shall always be ruled by foreigners” (Manto 109).

Most of Manto’s characters are impoverished, dispossessed and disenfranchised members of society—prostitutes, beggars, coolies and tonga drivers. Though he was associated with the Progressive Writers Movement, Manto was too independent and temperamental a personality to remain within the fold of any political or literary clique. Nevertheless, he shared many of the values and ideals of Marxist writers such as Ali Sardar Jafri and Rajinder Singh Bedi (Flemming 11-12). For his time, Manto had a liberal view of women’s roles in society and a number of his stories reveal the hypocrisy behind men’s attitudes to women. Amidst the turmoil and violence of Partition, he describes the abduction and rape of women. “Loosen Up” (*Khol do*) is the story of an old man, Sirajuddin, whose daughter Sakeena disappears from a train carrying Muslim refugees from India to Pakistan. A group of young men promise to find the lost girl and bring her back to her father. After much searching and risking their lives, the young men find Sakeena, but instead of returning her safely to Sirajuddin, they rape her repeatedly until she is unconscious. In this story, Manto shows how men pretend to act out of a sense of honour and piety but are reduced to bestiality and violence (Manto 89 - 92). At the beginning of “I Swear By God,” (*Khuda ki qasam*) Manto writes:

I often wondered why these women were called abducted women. Under what circumstances were they abducted? To seduce or abduct a willing woman is a most romantic feat in which man and woman participate alike...But what kind of abduction is this where you clap a helpless and defenseless woman in a dark room? (Manto 103)

Even though Saadat Hasan Manto has often been compared to Guy Maupassant and his stories frequently end with an unexpected twist, there is seldom any sense of resolution in his narratives. Manto's stories are never fully brought to closure and this imbues his work with a disturbing sense of uncertainty. He makes us understand that within the violent and desperate events which he describes, there could never be a moment of truth or understanding and only death conveys finality. He writes that these "were the times when philosophy, argumentation or logic had lost their meaning; they were nothing but an exercise in futility" (Manto 103).

Manto himself was clearly disturbed by the events leading up to his arrival in the newly created country of Pakistan. Khalid Hasan describes this period in Manto's life:

His early days in Pakistan were bewildering. Everything was out of joint. There was a mad stampede for allotments of evacuee property and a sense of terrible insecurity. Some people were living as if there was going to be no tomorrow. Those who had once been rich were on the streets... The values which had once sustained society had been destroyed in the conflagration of independence... The country had gone through such a terrifying baptism of blood and fire that the dividing line between reality and nightmare was no longer discernible. (Hasan 89)

In the period following Partition, madness becomes the guiding metaphor in much of Manto's fiction and nowhere is it more clearly and effectively used than in his story, "Toba Tek Singh." Probably one of his best known stories, it describes the exchange of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh lunatics between asylums in Pakistan and India. The central character is Bishan Singh, a Sikh, who has been an inmate of an asylum in Pakistan for the past fifteen years. During this time he has never slept or lain down and continually mutters variations on the nonsensical Punjabi refrain, "O pardi girkir axe di bedhiana di moongdi dal di laltain."

Bishan Singh's home is a village called Toba Tek Singh, which is located in Pakistan. However, during the period leading up to Partition, there is confusion amongst the inmates of the asylum, as to which country they will be assigned. Whenever Bishan Singh inquires

where Toba Tek Singh is located, he is given ambiguous answers by the authorities. Sometimes he is told it is in Pakistan and other times in Hindustan, adding to his confusion. Bishan Singh's family, including his beloved daughter Roop Kaur, eventually migrate to India. A few years later, the governments of Pakistan and India, decide to transfer their lunatics from one country to the other. Along with all the other Sikhs and Hindus in the asylum, Bishan Singh climbs aboard one of the trucks which transport them to the border. As he is being processed at the Wagah checkpoint, Bishan Singh discovers at last that his village is in Pakistan. At this point, he runs back and refuses to leave, planting himself in the no man's land between the two countries. "Toba Tek Singh is here! Right here where I'm standing!" he cried. "O pardi gir gir di axe di bhediani di moong di dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan" (Manto 58). The guards try to force him across the border but Bishan Singh will not move. He stands there all day and night, while the other lunatics are transferred across the border, but just before dawn he lets out a scream and falls down dead. Manto ends the story with the typically enigmatic lines: "On one side behind him stood the lunatics of Hindustan and on the other side across the road, lunatics of Pakistan. Between them on the no-man's land Toba Tek Singh lay stretched" (Manto 58).

The confusion between the name of the village and the name of the main character is important to the story. At several points Manto refers to Bishan Singh as Toba Tek Singh and it becomes the name by which he is known in the asylum. (Singh is a surname carried by all Sikhs.) By mixing up the name of the character and place, the individual and the land, Manto emphasizes the relationship between a person's home and his identity. He also uses the main character's madness to exaggerate the sense of separation, the distorted loyalties, and the dislocated self.

Manto himself was admitted to a mental institution for a brief period in 1952, as a treatment for his alcoholism (Flemming 18). It is likely that he drew on this experience when he wrote 'Toba Tek Singh'. Manto takes an unusually pragmatic view of madness in this story. For him it is a fact of life, a symptom not only of the individual character's paranoia but of a kind of mass schizophrenia brought on by Partition. He does not question the way in which his society treats the mentally ill and in fact he compares them to criminals who are also exchanged at the time of Partition. Manto reserves his moral

indignation for other injustices. There is no attempt in this story to reveal Bishan Singh's personal past or explain his madness by unraveling his subconscious in Freudian terms. Sexuality is central to many of Manto's stories but again it is not so much an underlying motive or subliminal cause of madness, but instead an overt and active element in the narratives. In 'Toba Tek Singh', it is suggested, in the hesitant remarks of one of visitors to the asylum, that Bishan Singh's daughter has been raped, but that is part of the horror which is taking place outside the main character's consciousness and does not enter into the dilemma of his own identity.

The asylum and the inmates allow Manto an opportunity to indulge in the kind of black satire that is his trademark. He attacks the politics and religious dogmatism of the period, through the eccentricities of the lunatics. One of the inmates proclaims himself to be Mohamed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Others declare themselves to be Hindu and Sikh politicians and a tremendous row ensues. There are several Anglo-Indian inmates, who face an even greater struggle for identity, being of mixed parentage. One lunatic believes that he is God and when Bishan Singh inquires of him about the location of Toba Tek Singh, he replies, "It's neither in Hindustan nor Pakistan. In fact it is nowhere because I have not taken any decision about its location" (Manto 56). Through their frenzied shouting of slogans, erratic behaviour and stripping off of clothes, Manto mirrors the irrationality of society outside the walls of the asylum.

This inversion of reality, where the characters inside the asylum take on the roles of those outside, while the people outside behave in irrational and inhuman ways, underscores the irony which is so much a part of Manto's fiction. Madness becomes an entirely relative term, which defines the political and social upheaval of Partition, with all its inherent ambiguities. Walls and borders lose their meaning and a character like Bishan Singh embodies the contradictions and divided loyalties experienced by those people who were uprooted on either side.

As both a victim and analyst of his time, Saadat Hasan Manto was able to perceive the traumatic dislocation which took place in South Asian society during 1947. He understood only too well the anger, bitterness, paranoia and secret fears of each individual caught up in the turmoil and violence of this period. In many of his stories madness is conceived as a metaphor, representing not only the

upheaval surrounding Partition but also the tortured and split identities which emerged. Reading his work almost fifty years after it was written, one can see the fractured interface of symbolism and psychology in a strangely distorted world. As a writer of fiction, Manto is able to construct a text which is more immediate and incisive than most journalistic accounts of Partition. He blurs the lines between reality and imagination so that the reader must confront not only the factual horrors but also the subconscious violation, the innermost tragedies of his characters.

A number of South Asian writers have set their stories and novels during the period of Partition. These include some of Manto's contemporaries such as Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Intizar Hussein, Bhisham Sahni, and Kushwant Singh. Each of these author's draws on the same material that Manto uses in his stories—the violence, the sense of dislocation, loss of identity, and the explosive hatreds of religious intolerance. Bhisham Sahni, in particular, explores the theme of madness. The title of his novel, *Tamas*, implies the dark forces of human nature, the negative and irrational aspects of mankind which surface at the time of Partition.

The events of this period have now become an integral part of South Asian consciousness, not only through literature, but also film and television. Communal violence did not end with Partition; the rioting, the killing and rape which are so much a part of today's headlines in India and Pakistan, could easily have occurred in the pages of one of Manto's short stories. Despite the depressing familiarity of these images of violence, his narratives retain a disturbing sense of immediacy. It could be the raw, uncut quality of his prose or the unrestrained tone of outrage in his voice, but more than anything Saadat Hasan Manto's fiction remains as powerful as ever, because he was a writer who brought a rational and moral vision to bear on the madness of his time.

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