

VIOLENCE, GENDER AND RELIGION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SAADAT
HASAN MANTO'S *SIYAH HASHYE*

Barnali Saha

Research Scholar

University School of Humanities and Social Sciences,

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University,

New Delhi.

Abstract

The Partition of India was a cataclysmic event that altered the socio-cultural topography of the Indian subcontinent. Coming at the heels of the grand narrative of India's glorious independence, the Partition of India became the problematic occasion the echo of which still reverberates in contemporary conflicts. As such, Partition needs to be acknowledged more forcefully as an indelible part of India's national history. With an intention to develop a composite understanding of the complexities of the Partition experience, the paper reads Saadat Hasan Manto's literary vignettes in *Black Marginalia (Siyah Hashye)* to examine how these minimalist cultural texts document the sectarian violence of the time. Through an intensive study of Manto's vignettes on Partition, the paper attempts to understand how religion as the quintessential factor that incited communal and gender violence during the Partition is forcefully critiqued by Manto in *Siyah Hashye*. By problematizing the politics and poetics of Manto's vignettes on Partition as cultural representations that documented the phenomenon, the paper aims to assert the significance of these cultural texts as supplementary historiography of the Partition as well as underline the importance of religion as the essential element that stimulated communal violence.

Keywords: Partition, Violence, Gender, Religion, Culture, Manto, Siyah Hasye

The Partition of India in 1947 grafted a new history of the Indian subcontinent wherein the noun *freedom* transmogrified to assume the aspects of violence that shook the foundations of the new nation states of India and Pakistan respectively. Remembered as a catastrophe, that Tan Tai Yong and Gyanesh Kudaisya calls "dramatic" with its "refugee movements, whose scale even at that time was described as unprecedented in human history" (Tan and Kudaisya 8), Partition questions the very idea of cartographic negotiation of national borders. The problem that manifests before us, therefore, is how this tectonic shift in the cultural history of the Indian subcontinent happen in the first place? How and why, most importantly, twelve million people were forced to vacate their natal homes and cross borders in an unprecedented

reshuffling of population that resulted in the loss of lives of a million and the abduction of nearly 75,000 women (Butalia 1994; Menon and Bhasin 1998)? With such startling data at hand, apart from survivor narratives and testimonies, literary representations and many more documenting the magnitude of violence and its psychosomatic effects on Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, the Partition of India involves an alternative cultural history laden with personal experiences of trauma and tragedy that deserve to be read alongside the official documentation of the event to guarantee a multidimensional understanding of the catastrophe and to ensure that “the history of atrocities is not forgotten...” (Alok Bhalla 1994: xxx). With an intention to develop a composite understanding of the complexities of the Partition experience, the paper reads Saadat Hasan Manto’s literary vignettes in *Black Marginalia* (*Siyah Hashiye*) to examine how these minimalist cultural texts document the sectarian violence and the microcosmic impact of macrocosmic political negotiations. Through an extensive study of Manto’s vignettes on Partition, the paper attempts to understand how these cultural texts reconstruct the alternative history of the Partition to facilitate a substantiation of the popular memories of the time juxtaposed for good in the collective consciousness of the people whose lives the Partition destabilized. Further, the paper seeks to read how through exaggeration and creative refraction, Manto’s minimalist snippets attempt to make an “important intervention in elite representation of the Partition” (Roy and Bhatia 2008: xii).

Published in 1948, Manto’s *Black Marginalia* written after a hiatus of several months after Manto’s move to Pakistan documents the post-Partition socio-cultural kakotopia in a narrative level. These short disconnected vignettes of extradiegetic narration that Manto’s literary associates found impossible to integrate into the corpus of progressive literature written at the time led them to “denounce” Manto and call him “a jokestar, a nuisance, a cynic and a reactionary,” (qtd. in Hasan xii). Ismat Chughtai, the noted feminist writer in Urdu, too was dubious as to the literary significance of *Siyah Hashiye*. To her “*Siyah Haashye* is neither a masterpiece nor a timeless marvel, but it’s not garbage either” (Ismat Chughtai qtd. in Misri 27). In *Black Marginalia* we see Manto situate himself in the midst of collapsing communal violence and observing the proceedings with wry humor. The subjects of his vignettes like neatness, hospitality, humility, honor, etc., may at a glance seem to defy transcription in the context of communal violence, but Manto knew how to document the catastrophic collapse of society using banal words of moral effect toward horrifying ironical conclusions.

A reading of Manto’s *Black Marginalia* suggests a deliberate deconstruction of the concept of violence in general, and Partition violence in particular. The texts, therefore, are not simple metaphors, but projections of the profundity of the affective experience of violence on the individual and, by extension, the community the individual belongs to. Most importantly, what they underline is that violence is latent in Man. Also, as Manto reconstructs the peripheral incidents of Partition violence what he points out without equivocation is the

power of violence to alter the contract between Man and Society with violence issuing a disjunction in the collective synthesis and convoluting social identity, law and order. As an illustration of this point, one may refer to the vignette “Daawat e amal” (Invitation to Action). This two-line monograph reads as follows:

“When the neighborhood was set on fire, everything burnt down with the exception of one shop and its sign.

It said. ‘All building and construction material sold here.’” (*Mottled Dawn* 158)

This sketch, which is one of many, published in *Black Marginalia* recognizes the conflict that arises between society and its inhabitants when a mass of humanity become a paranoiac machinery of violence destroying everything. As the modular pieces of society disintegrate from the arson and looting that marked the violence of 1947, the displayed sign of construction materials underlines the nonproductive inertia of the new nation state. The coupling of destruction with the invitation to reconstruction drags us into a pit of mirthless humor wherein we realize the true meaning of the inherent illogicality of the situation. In the absence of consumers, the promise of reconstruction becomes a mockery of itself. Manto objectively records this contradiction and in the process draws “from the reader the cheerless laugh that resounds throughout the collection, as sketch after sketch dramatize the cosmic irony of bloody Partition...” (Misri 25)

The absurdity of the social context is brought out in vignettes like “Safaipasandi” (Cleanliness) where we see a deliberate misapplication of the virtue of cleanliness to signify an act of communal murder as a rioter stops his companion from slitting the throat of a victim inside the train as it would “mess-up the compartment” and suggests he take him out. (*Black Borders* 41). Power relation is established by the use of a single word “chicken” to suggest the dehumanized intermediate living thing at the mercy of the perpetrator. Each and every vignette we assess compel us to consider how Partition violence has corrupted humanity at large such that the conceptions of decency and human values have undergone a demoniacal reversal. Another example of the reversal of conventional moral codes could be “Qasr-e-nafsi” (Modesty) where we see a reversal of the host-guest relation. The subject is important because in Indian cultural context a host is seen in deified proportions and is offered, therefore, hospitality befitting the ultimate spiritual being. In the vignette, we observe a group of rioters mechanically separating members of the other religion for murder and serving the rest the rest of the passengers with milk and fruits with the mob leader expressing genuine regret that having been informed of the arrival of their train at “eleventh hour,” they had not been able to care for them as they would have wanted (*Black Borders* 10). Other vignettes where the figurative disruption of social codes by violence is documented are “Jaiz Istimaal” (Legitimate Use), “Ghate ka Sauda” (Losing Bargain), “Khaad” (Fertilizer), etc. Manto’s

construction of the delirious world of insurmountable suffering suggests an objective, even apathetic understanding of the nature of a changed world. The jesting malaise of dark humor evident in all the sketches throws out of gear conventional narrative telling techniques with tight plots and evident storylines. The de-territorialization of narrative strategy is Manto's revolutionary effort to document the tremolos of violence, the stirs and whirrs of unresolved communal tension subject to silence in national history.

In "Mistake Removed" (*Mottled Dawn* 148) we see a male body contributing to the critical examination of religiosity as it features as a symbolized religious marker, a loaded signifier. The vignette shows a rioting mob investigating the religiosity of Dharamchand's body, which has been previously *pruned* to escape enemy attack. The unequivocal aesthetics of Dharamchand's body contradicts his expressed theoretical knowledge of the religious texts of the rioting community to whom he feigns belonging. This dichotomy between embodied appropriateness of religion and theoretical knowledge of religious treatise, however, seals Dharamchand's fate as the rioters constant demand for "proof" is manifestly dependent on exemplified evidence that only Dharamchand's body could provide. At the insistence of the mob when Dharamchand finally bares his doctored body and points at the trivial "mistake" he had made to escape the enemies, the custodians of religion took this embodied disequilibrium as the ultimate proof they sought and rectified the error by eliminating Dharamchand for good. Since they had no other way to instill masculinity in an emasculated (read circumcised) Dharamchand, the action deemed appropriate was to eliminate both him and his ritually doctored body.

Vignettes like "Fertilizer", "Mishtake" and "Determination" complicate the notion of ethnic masculinity and present somatic identity as labile, subject to change upon requirement and nothing that the rioters do can help them to unequivocally divine the correct identity of their victim and blunders are common as we see in the vignette "Mishtake" (*Mottled Dawn* 164) where a rioter dismembering a victim encounters the ultimate phallic signifier and tut tuts himself for murdering one of his own. The dark irony is embedded in the final words "Tut tut tut! ... Mishtake" where the narrative show how instead of eliminating a member of the other community and foreclosing their reproductive prospects by killing a sexually potent man, the rioter humiliates his own community and ultimately ends up emasculating his kin and by extension himself.. The joke, ultimately, is on the essentialist communal rioters who may never truly know if they have eradicated a kin or an enemy despite such impressive practice of phallic signification they used as a decisive criterion of victim religiosity.

What fascinates a reader of Manto's *Black Marginalia* more than its content is the writer's narrative technique. Most vignettes begin in *medias res* and are correspondingly focalized on victims and on perpetrators. In his examination of the shades of Partition violence, victims and perpetrators are equally culpable as violence, Manto insists, is a great equalizer. Here

violence is not an anomaly but a visible social reality that spares no one. In the vignette “Fertilizer” for example, the narrative is focused on a non-existent protagonist. The extradiegetic narrator recounts the words uttered by the dead man’s friend following his suicide which illustrate Manto’s dark irony. The insouciance of the friend’s words and the cavalier act of narration emphasize the wretched position of the dead protagonist who, we gather, preferred death after the loss of his ethnic identity following an attack by a group of rioters who chopped off his hair and beard. Despite the friend’s advice of anointing the affected areas with curd to ensure a regrowth of the lost crop of hair, he is at a loss to understand why the protagonist committed suicide for such a paltry reason. Manto directs our attention to the jeopardy of cultural honor of the Sikh religion, which the friend fails to see, wherein the theological importance of Kesh or uncut hair is immense. The Sikh religion eloquently declares that the Kesh be “kept intact, as given by the Creator. To keep it is a sign of the Sikh’s acceptance of the Will of God, and a symbol of recognition of God’s Wisdom in creating the human in the form in which s/he was created.” Therefore, to an indoctrinated Sikh the uncut hair is an affective symbol of spirituality that connects the somatic to the supramundane and a mutilation of his embodied religious marker is akin to a loss of communal honor and is an act of symbolic castration. Since the Sikh community eulogizes valor and detests cowardice, the act of violence the protagonist encountered humiliated and emasculated him and his community equally. The loss of honor he experienced at the loss of his hair could not be retrieved by anointing the bald patches with curd; therefore, the only option that suggested itself to him to escape the disgrace and to preserve his community’s honor was death. “Determination” is another vignette that continues the debate on the theological importance of embodied religious markers the defiling of which was a sport preferred by communal rioters during Partition. “Forced circumcision, shaving facial and head hair (for Sikh men), and shaving off the Hindu Brahmin’s traditional short, plaited hair” (Daiya 69-70) were routine acts of conversion performed by rioters. In Manto’s short sketch we see one such rioter hitherto armed with a razor, evidently bent on converting others, unequivocally disinclining to convert himself (into a Sikh) upon the loss of his shaver. The irony, therefore, is entrenched in the sudden powerlessness of the perpetrator following a loss of his weapon to convert others.

From psychosomatic gendered violence on the male and female body, to arson, looting, religious intolerance, Manto’s *Black Marginalia* recount the trauma of the Partition in all its complexity as each vignette acts as a tessellating piece connecting with the other and together creating a composite picture of the tragedy of 1947 as it affected the populace dwelling in the margins of society. Perpetrators and victims alike, Manto’s narration bears no mark of discrepancy except in the subversion of classical narrative technique, an act he deliberately performs. With ease Manto shifts from narrating a sketch from the point of view of the victim to that of a perpetrator. “Losing Proposition” for example, is a third-person narrative that

focuses externally on two perpetrators of sexual violence who buy a young woman for 42 rupees from a group shown to them. After spending a night with her one of them discovers that she belongs to his own ethnic community and not to the other religious as was mentioned when she was purchased. “‘The bastards cheated us!’ he screamed as he ran to his friend, ‘selling us a girl from our own faith. Let’s go and return her,’” (*Mottled Dawn* 155). The vignette is a powerful critique of sexual violence against women during Partition. It problematizes the unique position of women as sexual commodities during moments of intercommunal strife. Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov in the introduction to *From Gender to Nation* state that “Women’s bodies serve as symbols of the fecundity of the nation and vessels for its reproduction, as well as territorial markers. Mothers, wives and daughters designate the space of the nation, and are, at the same time, the property of the nation” (Ivekovic and Mostov 10). The unique position of women as an isotope of vulnerability and fecundity in equal parts has resulted in her being a target of male sexual aggression during moments of communal upheaval and war, like the Partition, when women’s bodies became the “instruments of communication between two groups of men” (Ivekovic and Mostov 11) and their defilement symbolically signified the defilement of the other community’s masculinity that failed to protect its women. The man’s irk is caused by the fact that despite his paying a princely sum for the commodity he purchased, the proposition was a failed one because it did not grant him the satisfaction of emasculating and symbolically castrating the men of the other community by defiling a woman belonging to them. Instead, he has ended up diluting the sexual potential of his own community by besmirching a woman who is an insider. The rape of the woman thus symbolically signifies a violation of the predator’s own community’s patriarchal ideology pertaining to women and communal honor. Another vignette which seems a corollary to the aforementioned one is “Double Cross” where Manto’s excoriating irony surrounds the principle of equitable trading between buyer and seller. Here we see a disgruntled buyer of adulterated petrol complain the lack of transparency in his trading partner who had sold him adulterated petrol in black market price that couldn’t even burn a single shop. The irony is embedded in the ultimate lack of customer gratification when the product he buys fails to produce the desired effect, which is arson in this case. Another short narrative heavily laden with irony deserves to be critically read for its illustration of senseless violence under the garb of religion. “Halal ya Jhatka” (Ritualistic Difference) is a powerful sketch that documents Manto’s obsessive creative concern with religious bigotry, something that in Manto’s creative corpus is a refrain. We see Manto’s critique of embodied religious practices in “Mozail,” “Khad” (Fertilizer), “Determination” and “Mistake Removed”. In the sketch “Halal ya Jhatka” (Ritualistic Difference) too we see Manto’s wry humor targeting the differential ritualistic sacrificial tactics of kosher or *jhatka* prescribed by the Muslim and the Hindu religion respectively. Here we see the illustration of mindless violence which seem to defy communal motivation as the random act of murder the fragment dramatizes displays a society steeped in mindless brutality. The absurdity of the

narrative context as well as the dialogue between two rioters define the cacophonous stretch of violence in a moribund society as well as fragile moorings of linguistic signification which has lost its putative communicative role in the dystopic post-Partition society. In the fragment we see two rioters debating the correct ritualistic manner of eliminating the communal other. While one prefers the *halal* or the kosher way because it gives him pleasure, the other suggests he should use the more effective *jhatka* method and as demonstration of the effectiveness of his method kills his friend in one blow. The matter-of-fact act of intra-communal murder defies the logic of communal rioting and portrays a society addicted to violence.

Saadat Hasan Manto's short literary vignettes transport us into a hermetically sealed world of communal violence and sensitize us to the dichotomy between the glorified notion of Indian independence and the ground reality of Partition violence. These dark sketches laden with irony are grotesque creative representations of an alternative history of Partition that marginal memory and popular survival accounts necessarily documented. In many ways, these disjunctive sketches act as "non-disciplinary accounts of 1947" (Pandey 204) recording the destructive potential of marginal people whose lives the Partition mutilated for good. In Manto's creative point of view violence is the leitmotif of Partition and his fragmented narrative pieces act as alternative strands of historiography graphically constructing the differential history of the *vox populi*. The incidents of systematic isolation of victim for murder, the debate on the efficacy of kosher or *jhatka*, the symbolic significance of defilement of embodied religious markers and instances of arson and murder illustrated in the sketches document a counter-narrative to the eulogizing nationalist histories of 1947. These ambiguous and conflictive pieces document the anguish of the marginal multitude and act as ode to the effective prowess of destructive communal violence that shaped the postcolonial identity of India and Pakistan as powerfully as their history of independence from the British Raj.

Works Cited:

Bhalla, Alok. *Stories About the Partition of India*, 3 Vols. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1994.
Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India*. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998.

Daiya, Kavita. *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*. Temple University Press. 2008.

Hasan, Khalid. "Introduction" in *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, edited by Khalid Hasan. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1989.

Iveković, Rada, and Julie Mostov. *From Gender to Nation*. Ravenna: Longo, 2002.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*. Trans. Khalid Hasan. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011.

———, *Black Borders: Collection of 32 Cameos*. Translated by Rakshanda Jalil. New Delhi: Rupa, 2003.

Menon, Ritu and Kamala Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. Delhi: Kali, 1998.

Misri, Deepti. *Beyond Partition: Gender, Violence, and Representation in Postcolonial India*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

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

Posted December 26, 2015 by Sikh Dharma International & filed under Bana, Dharmic Education, Marketplace, Publications, Sikh Dharma Technology. "Wearing the 5 K's (Kara, Kesh, Kirpan, Kacheras, Kanga) – Sikh Dharma International." Sikh Dharma International, 30 Mar. 2016, www.sikhdharma.org/the-5-ks-kara-kesh-kirpan-kacheras-kanga.

Roy, Anjali G, and Nandi Bhatia. *Partitioned Lives: Narratives of Home, Displacement, and Resettlement*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2008.

Tan, Tai Young and Gyanesh Kudaisya. *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.