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A Bitter Harvest: The Latency of Violence in Manto

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Abstract

Manto's stories unfold within the highly charged atmosphere of Partition. In Manto, the climactic event of Partition figures as the "irrationality" or "madness" that normalizes acts of violence. The proximity of violence ranges from the domestic or the intimate, to the frontline.Rather than the outright depictions of violence, it is the latency of the all-pervasive nature of lethal violence that shocks the reader. The millions of private tragedies constitute, for Manto, the larger event of Partition. In this paper, I inquire into what constitutes the "irrationality" of the Partition, and why Manto introduces the 'latency of violence' as a literary trope in his sketches.

It is not easy to miss the clinical reticence with which Manto narrates stories of the violence of Partition. Manto employs a narrative style that is neither too prosaic nor poetic. His stories are neither sentimental nor overtly expressive. His sketches thus present themselves as detached records of the experiences of the characters that at once shock the reader by its content and intent. He achieves this effect of detachment at the cost of the interiority of characters and by dwelling on the immediate. DaniyalMueenuddin observes that the most striking of Manto's techniques is the "artlessness and immediacy that maybe found in his endings—they manage simultaneously to be almost weightless, mere throwaways—and yet devastating" (xiii).However, this devastating experience is exactly what Manto desires to elicit from his reader.Manto eschews long meditations on the feelings of his characters. His prime focus lies in their actions and the brunt of the chain of events that they are forced to bear. The larger event of Partition itself, and the violence that it perpetrated, constitutes for Manto, the primary material for his work.Even when he assumes first person narrative voice, his characters become mere observers who serve as surrogate pairs of eyes for the reader.The characters are reduced to their actions, so much so, that most of his characters remain unnamed. I believe that, for Manto, each nameless character is representative of every individual who bore the trauma of violence during the Partition. The immediacy of imminent death is the force that drives his characters into action. The alarming proximity of violence is

the factor that simultaneously redeems his characters and jolts his readers into a ready engagement that isself-conscious and empathetic.

The stolid portrayal of pervasive, lethal violence, the sudden turn of the events, and the brevity of the sketch itself, divests the character of the essential space for her development. But it is this very space that Manto allocates to the reader for her engagement with the event. His stories are an invitation to witness the absurdity of the violence that marks the event of Partition. He is not vindictive. Neither is he complacent about the violence that his sketches portray. His stories do not attempt to generate a broad political discourse of the event of Partition. Rather, they present themselves as personal histories of the individuals affected by the Partition. Being the self-conscious writer that he is, Manto demands neither justice nor vindication, but a silent appraisal of the decisions and actions of the individual—an evaluation of 'what is' and 'what was' in terms of the immediate, personal and the domestic.The millions of private tragedies constitute, for Manto, the larger tragedy of Partition.

The conflicts over nationalism and religion constitute the coreof the violence that was perpetrated in the wake of Partition. As an individualwriting in the conflict-ridden, newly born country of Pakistan, Manto inevitablyportrayed characters that are enmeshed in the violence based on nationalism and religion. However, Manto desists from subscribing to ruddy jingoism or blinkered, feral bigotry. Rather, he strives to undermine the very basis of these notions by revealing their explicit constructed nature. For instance, the confusion that ensues in a lunatic asylum in Lahore when news of Partition reaches them is ironic to the point of comical.

> As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come until only the other day it was India? (Manto 2)

Manto questions the validity of the assertion of a nationality that was naught and was forged by portraying this episode of confusion. Stephen Alter points out that "through their frenzied shouting of slogans, erratic behaviour and stripping off of clothesManto mirrors the irrationality of society outside the walls of the asylum"(98).Alter consecrates this irrationality as'madness'. He adds that Manto uses madness as a methaphor for the "anger, bitterness, paranoia and secret fears of each individual that caught up in the turmoil and violence of this period"(98).By portraying this furore against the backdrop of a lunatic asylum, Manto seeks to subvert the idea of nationality, and projects the absurdity of swearing allegiance to a fabricated whim of the bureaucracy.

Ayesha Jalal, in her book*The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide*, argues that "neither an end nor a beginning, Partition—with its multifaceted ruptures, political and psychological—was for Manto not an aberration to be dismissed as a fleeting collective madness" (26). She observes that Manto's stories give us

glimpses of the best and the worst in humankind. She adds that "through his close-range and personal picture of characters like Jugal, Sahai, Ram Khalawan, and unnamed murderers, Manto turns short story writing into a testament of his belief that human depravity, though real and pervasive, can never succeed in killing all sense of humanity. His faith lay in that kind of humanity" (Jalal 24).Mantoaimed at "exposing societal ills and the hypocrisies of life without losing faith in the inherent beauty within human beings" (Jalal 26).

An Urdu scholar of preeminence, Mohammed Umar Memon, in his article onIntizar Husain, a contemporary of Manto's, records the latter complaining that the writings about the Partition have not been optimistic or enriching. Husain's own take of the mass dislocation of Muslimsin the sub-continent is drawn from the religio-cultural image of the "hijrat"(Memon 376). Memon observes that, for Husain, the creation of Pakistan "not only gave the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent a sense of direction and purpose, a present and the hope for a future, but also a past, or, at least, the desire to know their past. The unchallenged ascendancy of such ideas as nationalism, love of humanity, reform of the society in Urdu literature in time yielded to a wholly new theme focused on the experience of 'migration,' which became the dominant experience of the time im- mediately following Partition" (Memon378).Manto holds violence in the name of religious identityin the same spiteful contempt with which he holds excessive nationalism. Manto does not dare to discount the violence that affected every individual in the sub-continent to generate a romantic portrayal of Partition. His works were influenced by the Russian, French, and American Realism and strongly resisted Romanticisation. Furthermore, his affinity towards these writers encouraged him to pursue themes which were hitherto untouched.[1] On his style and his identity as a Muslim, Khaled Ahmed says, "Manto was liked by neither the strait-laced Muslim nor the secularised left-wing revolutionary (…).He also related oddly to his contemporaries, especially intolerant of the mediocrity his trade was crawling with. His writing style (…) is distilled from the "no frills" writings of Maupassant, Zola, Hugo, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Somerset Maugham, O. Henry and D.H. Lawrence." (Khaled, "The literary renegade")That one's religious identity may be held as a weapon against the other was the inconceivable terror that persuaded him to flee Bombay during the years of Partition. As a natural consequence, Manto's stories unleash a scathing attack on the ideas and ideals that drive individuals to take up violence as a "religious duty" (Hasan xxiv). In a highly impassioned memoir entry, Manto laments thus:

> I could not decide which of the two countries was now my homeland—India or Pakistan. Who was responsible for the blood that was being mercilessly shed everyday? Where were they going to inter the bones which had been stripped off the flesh of religion by vultures and other birds of prey? Now that we are free, had subjection ceased to exist? When we were colonial subjects, we could dream of freedom. But now that we are free, what would we dream of? (…)Thousands of Hindus and Muslims are dying all around us. Why are they dying? (...) All these questions have different answers: the Indian answer, the Pakistani answer, the British

> answer. Every question has an answer, but when you try to look for the truth, these answers are of no help. (qtd. in Hasan xix)

The futility of violence and the complacence that precedes and succeeds it confounds him. One of his memoirs recounts a conversation he had with his friend Shyam during the initial phase of Partition wherein the latter's Uncle was killed in communal riots in Pakistan. When asked if Shyam felt like killing Manto, owing to their respective religious identities, Shyam replies that he would have—only that the moment has passed. Manto says:

> His answer shocked me greatly. Perhaps I too could have killed at the time. When I thought about it later, I suddenly understood the psychological background of India's communal bloodbath. Shyam had said that he could have killed me 'then' but not 'now.' Therein lay the key to the communal holocaust of Partition. (qtd. in Hasan xvii)

Hannah Arendt's conception of the "rule by Nobody" maybe considered to understand the horrific violence that was associated with the event of Partition. Although her project is to understand how violence and power are related, I believe that a discussion of her view on how the rule of bureaucracy, especially a defunct bureaucracy, would indeed facilitate the escalation of violence, and result in chaos. Bureaucracy, as evidenced from historical records, was unaccountable for the events that culminated in the violence and brutality that ensued during the Partition.

> 'Nobody' is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done. It is in this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causesof the current word-wide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and run amuck. (Arendt 38)

The meltdown of the bureaucracy in the sub-continent facilitated the violence based on the religio-politico affiliations of the individual. It is in this state of chaos, where the individual is forced to take up arms to protect herself, that Manto'sstories of Partition are narrated. The psychological condition that Manto describes in his sketches is that of the front line--wherein one has to defend one's physical and psychological self against the onslaught of lethal violence. What qualifies or distinguishes the other from the self, or the same are the markers of the enemy. During Partition, religion or nationality served as markers for one to identify the enemy. Mantorecognisesthe instinctual quality of violence associated with the frontline stance and addresses it in his sketches.

Mohammad Asim Siddiqui comments on the observation that violence related to Parttion was a war between Muslims and Hindu-Sikhs on each other's women. "Almost all the stories of Manto about Partition violence, there is a reference to violence CM — against women. Stories like 'Sharifan' and 'ThandaGosht' immediately — come to mind. In many cases, the women were not spared even by their co-religionists, a subject taken up by Manto in 'Khol Do'" (Siddiqui 24). He observes that "Manto treats the religious differences of his

characters with irony and humour; the humour in such cases is dark and bitter" (Siddiqui 26).Manto neither attempts to acquit nor balance the violence that was perpetrated by both sides in his narration.

The question of violence in Manto is relevant on multiple levels. He records the event of Partition through personal histories. Sordid violence is a pervasive feature of the setting of his stories. But, he does not delve into the act itself with a morbid obsession. Adorno says that "it is barbaric to write poetry after Aushwitz" (2003, 251). A tragic communal holocaust of such magnitude as the Partition, in which two sides took up arms against each other, deserves a silence similar to that called for by Adorno. Yet Manto does not desist from narrating stories of the violence of Partition. I believe that by writing them, he resists the silencing and/or misrepresentation of the historical event of Partition. Manto creates a world of events that is rampaged by the pervasive grip of lethal violence. Further, he reveals the absurdity of violencetriggered by such markers as one's religious identity and nascent nationality by subverting them. One finds that violenceis not illustrated as a definitive, chaotic or graphic event. Rather, the reader is constantly reminded of the latent wave of tangible violence that constantly shakes the underpinnings of perceived normalcy. That Manto's sketches of Partition generate echoes of outrage in the reader's consciousness justifies the necessity of a narrative of violence. Itoperates within the stories as an active emotive subtext. Violence, for Manto, is not an external infliction but an integral, systemic operative that is undeniably characteristic of human nature and experience. Some critics have lashed against his reductive approach towards Partition. I believe thatthe perceived reductionism was, for Manto, his silence for treading the traumatic field of the historical event of Partition.

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