

# An Exploration of the Partition and Its Literary voices

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This article is an exploration of the different literary narratives about the Partition of India and Pakistan. It reflects on the literary landscape of the Partition, covering key literary moments that depicted the events and the consequences of Britain's desertion of India. Land is frequently used as a symbol of human identity. The disruption of identity caused directly by the Partition is presented as apocalyptic, and more importantly, unnatural. Saadat Hasan Manto's iconic short stories are a staple in the Urdu literary world, giving us a stark view into psychological and social ramifications for both men and women. His literature was not only used to educate those who were not aware of the Partition, but to also document the brutal and sadistic events that happened after. Ultimately, the vicious separation of land led to both an identity and cultural gap, which still has ramifications in the modern day.

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Land makes up our identity. It's where we were born, it impacts the language we speak in, the cultural practices we partake in. It all has a crucial part in forming our individuality. But what happens when the

land you call home breaks out into chaos? Or in this case, splits apart and morphs into something borderline apocalyptic? The Partition was once of the largest migration events in history. By 1951, 14.5

million people migrated to India, Pakistan and what is now known as Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> This is known as a ‘forced migration’. After WWII, Britain was under enormous economic strain, and in June 1947, they declared India would be independent in August 1947. However, the British did not leave India unchanged: they split it up into sections, known as Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, India was finally free from British control. That being said, India and Pakistan still experienced mass violence between the religious groups. All were affected.<sup>2</sup> As one of the biggest migration cases in the world, it has its fair share of literature surrounding it. Tiwari states ‘The literary reaction that Partition received [...] makes it not merely a political upheaval, but a social and psychological one too’.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that land isn’t just political: it also

can have a psychological impact. This article will be exploring Saadat Hasan Manto’s short stories and their significance in understanding how the Partition affected so many lives, referencing a volume of his stories called *Manto: Selected Short Stories*, translated by Aatish Taseer. As Manto’s work was in Urdu, some of the vocabulary may change slightly, depending on the translator. However, this copy is the one that is most widely available. ‘Khol Ho’, one of his most shocking stories, focuses on a father-daughter relationship and how the Partition has so heavily impacted a young girl’s life. ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is also interesting: it is set in an insane asylum, and it shows how the Partition so detrimentally effected the mentally ill. Ultimately, Manto uses land as a microcosm to explore the human psyche.

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<sup>1</sup> Prashant Bharadwaj, Assim Khwaja, Atif Mian, ‘The Big March: Migratory Flows after Partition of British India’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.43, No. 35 (2008), 1-29 (2).

<sup>2</sup> Ian Talbot, Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India*, (Cambridge University Press: July 2009), p.71.

<sup>3</sup> Sudha Tiwari, ‘Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 48, No. 25 (JUNE 22, 2013), 50-58 (50).

Manto's short stories are driven by one thing: madness. His own life was plagued with alcoholism and regret and his stories deeply reflect the chaos caused by the Partition. To Manto, the dividing of land seems inexplicable, and it leads people to do the unthinkable. The violence that he frequently highlights in his stories show the darkest human behaviours: rape, sexuality and murder. Everything in Manto's stories are filled with an air of uncertainty- will peace ever be restored?

The theme of madness is shown in Manto's story 'Toba Tek Singh', published in 1955. It is a satirical story about how the Partition destroyed community and identity. It focuses on the government's decision to exchange patients from asylums in India and Pakistan to relocate them. Muslim patients would go to Pakistan and Hindus would go to India. The separation that the

government is forcing among the population was unnatural. Before the Partition, India was made up of many sovereign states that lived in harmony. Discrimination amongst the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh populations was less known of. Citizens of the sovereign states could pass freely and there was less control and more 'freedom'.

Stephen Alter writes 'Manto clearly saw the violence which accompanied Partition as an act of collective madness'.<sup>4</sup> His decision to set the story in an asylum, occupied by people branded as 'mad', is significant. The asylum itself is in Lahore (Pakistan), however it could also be said that it is set in Punjab. Manto writes 'lunatics who were not entirely deranged were forced to wonder whether they were presently in India or in Pakistan.'<sup>5</sup> The simple pleasure of knowing where you are, where your homeland is, where you grew,

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Alter, *Madness and Partition: The Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto*, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 14, *Madness and Civilization*, (1994), 91-100 (91).

<sup>5</sup> Manto, *Manto: Selected Short Stories*, trans. by Aatish Taseer (India: Penguin Random House, 2012), p.2. Further references appear in parentheses.

was stripped from the people of India. This pushes the already ‘mad’ into a state of crisis. It shows that the natural order of India has changed. Land has the capacity to make people question their identity. This is the case with the protagonist, Bishan Singh. Throughout the story, he would ‘regularly ask the other inmates if they knew where Toba Tek Singh – his native land – was’ (p.5). The confusion of the location was the core of his madness. Furthermore, the fact that ‘nobody knew whether it was in India or Pakistan’ (p.5) adds to his crisis: he cannot get one straight answer. Ultimately, Manto presents Singh as a symbol of all the dislocated people.

Brotherhood is a key theme in ‘Toba Tek Singh’. Learning of the transfer, one of the lunatics ‘fell weeping into the arms of his Hindu and Sikh brethren, his heart filled with sadness at the thought of them leaving him and going to India’ (p.3). The

asylum itself was a community and due to the Partition, it is now being torn apart. Manto uses the asylum as a small-scale version of society to emphasise how the Partition highlighted religious differences, demonized them and how this ruined communities. Kaur states ‘the province most affected by Partition was Punjab which was caught in unprecedented collective violence’.<sup>6</sup> The irony that humanity is still an aspect in the madhouse, whereas in the outside world, there is war. In truth, the asylum inmates are far more rational than the politicians who determine their fate. The only act of violence in the asylum is when inmates imitate politicians. For example, one inmate calls himself ‘Muhammad Ali Jinnah’ (p.3), a prominent Pakistani governor-general from 1947. Another inmate states he is ‘Master Tara Singh’ (p.3), who is an Indian politician. There was ‘nearly bloodshed’ until both were

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<sup>6</sup> Navdip Kaur, ‘Violence and Migration: A study of killing in the trains during the partition of Punjab

1947’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, PART-I (2011), 947-954 (1)

separated and branded ‘dangerous lunatics’ (p.3).

This story does not have a happy ending.

Manto characterises the transfer of the lunatics as cargo: it is described as an ‘exchange’ (p.8). The dehumanisation of the lunatics showcases how the government saw them as: insignificant.

The second-class treatment of the mentally ill is another form of discrimination that came with the Partition. During the transfer, Bishan Singh ‘dug his swollen heels in at a point in the middle of the border, in such a way that it seemed no force was powerful enough to unroot him’ (p.10). The refusal to comply leads to his death, ‘lying face down on the ground’ (p.10). It shows the strength of human spirit, but the tragic death of Singh could have been prevented. Manto implies the Partition took innocent lives that could have been saved.

Another of his short stories, ‘Khol Ho’, translated to ‘Open It’, is a story about brutal sexual violence. Interestingly,

Manto does not explicitly show the reader the rape. It is instead shown through the characterisation as well as the actions of the victim. Sirajuddin and his daughter, Sakina, are separated whilst migrating to Pakistan. A group of seemingly innocent men offer to look for Sakina, to which the father replies ‘Please find her. Your God will reward you’ (p.52). An interesting detail is the word ‘Your’ used when referring to God: due to Hindu, Sikh and Muslim relations, religious communities were hostile to each other. Sirajuddin’s use of ‘Your’ shows the reader that he will accept help from anyone, no matter their religious background. His main concern is getting his daughter back.

Manto doesn’t differentiate any of the character’s religious backgrounds in this story and this is significant. We see the characters not as their religion, but as individual human beings. The group of men locate Sakina, and all seems well: the men offer her food and ease her anxieties. The language Manto uses is simplistic ‘the

eight young volunteers comforted her, sat her in their truck and gave her food and milk' (p.53). There is a sense of hopefulness that Sirajuddin will be reunited, and ultimately, order will be restored. This is further perpetuated by Sirajuddin's praise for the men '[He] prayed for their success' (p.52). The father and daughter are eventually reunited, but worryingly, it is because Sakina has been found 'unconscious' (p.54) near train tracks. The doctor (who is treating the sleeping Sakina) tells Sirajuddin to 'open it' (p.54), referring to the window. Disturbingly, Sakina's 'corpse' (p.52) moves and her 'dead hands' (p.52) undo her clothing. The removal of her clothing is shocking: it heavily implies the 'young volunteers' repeatedly raped Sakina to unconsciousness. Even when she is sleeping, the order 'open it' causes her to become animated. However, the story is ambiguous: we do not know the full story

of her rape. It suggests that the details of the rape do not matter. Instead, the focus is on the victim. Manto uses the ambiguity of the rape to make us feel a sense of loss. We are confronted by the horrific truth: there is no happy ending and order is not restored. The Partition will forever have on-going consequences and the innocence that Sakina once had is gone.

Sakina's characterisation as a corpse shows that the rape kills her human spirit and turns her into a submissive body, whose only purpose is to serve men. Sakina does not fight back: she instead listens and obeys. This was the stark reality for many of the raped women during the Partition. Over 100,000 women were raped or sexually assaulted.<sup>7</sup> Manto ultimately gives that population a voice: he leaves the reader with a new perspective of the Partition. One that is focused on the loss of oneself, just as Sakina loses herself due to the sexual violence she experienced.

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<sup>7</sup> Ian Talbot, Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India*, (Cambridge University Press: July 2009), pp. 2-3.

Ultimately, the Partition caused women a great loss of identity, forming them into hollow versions of themselves.

Manto illustrates how the partition of land, the native land where many grew up and raised their children, may eventually lead to a divide in the people, resulting in anarchy. Significantly, he does not offer a political perspective. He instead gives the people of the land a voice. Manto's stories seem to explore the worst of human behaviour as well as the psychological impact of the Partition. This heavily suggests that the Partition was a social loss, more so than a political one.

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