

The Body and Its Scars: The Stigma Texts of Saadat Hasan Manto

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Abstract

The ambit of South-East Asian Literature has been fraught with several incidents of displacement and forced migration, and in the process of this movement the transmission and the redundancy of violence forms a major part of the social campus. Affected greatest of all is the woman population as men try to balance their socio-political virility with crude and forced sexual overtures. Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories echo these very social realities. In this paper I intend to highlight some choice texts written by Manto and show that all the communal conflict of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent did was to validate a free reign of terror. Using the theories of Slavoy Zizek and Michel Foucault among others, I endeavour to present how the violence and the torture got documented on the bodies of its victims, especially the women. How mechanisms of power become fully operative only after its inscription on the bodies.

Keywords: partition, migration, communal conflict, violence, phallogentrism.

Experiences, past and the present, while dealing with and giving rise to psychological excesses, manifest itself on the body of the subject. The flesh becomes the signifier on which is etched the inscription of events as they are subjected upon the subject itself. Michel Foucault undoubtedly and quite rightfully claims that the documentation of cultural hierarchies is reinforced on the body. It becomes that space where all elements pertaining to social and cultural history of the subject—the desires, failings, errors, violences—combine and express themselves. The Body becomes the domain that validates the evidence of violence inflicted

upon the subject. Moreover, as Foucault further argues that the mechanisms of power, in its entirety, become successfully operative only after its inscription on the body of the individual.

In this paper, I would like to stress on violence and the oppressive function that violence plays in establishing power-knowledge hierarchies. In the context of Indian regional writing, the short stories of the Urdu-lingual writer Saadat Hasan Manto, especially those pertaining to the partition; violence plays a major and unbridled part. Manto's stories from "The Return" and "The Woman in Red Raincoat" to the immensely psychological "Colder than Ice" (1950), documents life in the rawest and the most turbulent of states. Violence especially that which was projected on the women population during the Partition exodus, beneath the surface layer of pain and suffering, entails a greater and a much more devastating story. Writing during an era and time that was well fraught with a communal-religious blood thirsty jingoistic fervour, Manto illustrates the plight of women as they become the symbol of suffering and domination bearing the brunt of communal violence. A humanistic interpretation of literature above all entails a space where, "...the inner life of man finds it's complete, exhaustive and objectively intelligible expression." Manto treated literature as the beating heart of a community-- "Literature gives news about the nation, the community to which it belongs, its health, its illness" (Bhalla 72). In the dismal socio-cultural context of the Partition, exploring controversial subjects like love, sex, prostitution, murder and patriarchy, Manto laces his satirical and realistic observations of a violence laden society unflinchingly. The unleashing of the aggressive jingoistic fervour, Manto documents, served as that weapon regulated by patriarchal dominant ideology giving free reign to power ascribed to the phallic subject. In his essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" (1970) Louis Althusser states that ideology insinuates itself into the lives of the people and against their will makes them a subject. Bulgarian critic Slavoj Zizek takes this view of Althusser further in his work *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997) where opining that just the mere revelations

of oppressive social operations do not significantly or always usher the freedom of an individual from an ideology, neither does it offer any resistance to it. This, according to Žižek, is the paradox of ideology. The misrecognizing power of ideology is fixated upon the subject by exposing its own operations to the subject itself. Thus it can be said that the crucial mystifying agent of an ideology is its demystification itself— Žižek’s fetishist logic of disavowal (137) entails that even after the subject’s recognition of the knowledge that the action is meaningless, they still persist in indulging in the same. At the heart of his partition narratives Manto places the violence directed at women. It is in these deliberate and conscious acts of brutality that the Partition itself becomes etched and visible on the bodies of these women. The flesh of these mute victims becomes the signifier of various forms of violence inflicted and projected on them. In his short stories which can also be seen as lively documents of communal riots and violence, Saadat Hasan Manto, unflinching in his depiction of the violence wreaked by religious or nationalistic fervour, makes it quite clear that this assertion of cruelty is based predominantly on the will of the individual to indulge in meaningless violence in the garb of the former.

In “Colder than Ice” (1950) we see a scenario where the protagonist, the bandit Ishwar Singh is gleefully lapping up on the communal tensions, treating this as the golden opportunity to satiate his hot-blooded manly libido, indulging in the rampant kidnapping and rape of girls. Urvashi Butalia pinpoints this narrative in her essay “Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India”:

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed . . . in the name of national integrity and unity... (128-129)

Ishwar Singh in the story during his regular looting spree enters a house where he murders six men and then grabs for the beautiful girl and abducts her. In her essay “The Extraordinary and

the Everyday: Locating Violence in Women's Narratives of the Partition," Shumona Dasgupta highlights this action of men as a bid to reclaim their masculinity,

Partition was coded as a failure of the male nationalist to protect the political integrity of the nation, as well as the inability of Hindu and Sikh men to protect their women. This led to a very violent compensatory performance of...masculinity. Women were accommodated within the disciplinary parameters of a neo-nationalist discourse, only if they consented to be objects of violence. (46)

Looking to satisfy his sexual fantasies and perversions, as Ishwar penetrates the body of the girl, he comes to the realisation that the girl has already died. He comes to the realisation of the fact that he has committed rape on a dead girl. This body in Zizekian terms acts as the "real", the self-obfuscating screen acting as an obstacle that prevents in the direct and violent accessing of the subject (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 77). Moreover this lifeless body of the girl acts as the symbol of resistance against the extremity of violence projected by the phallogentric male. As Ishwar Singh is trying to wrestle with the jouissance that the stark confrontation with the Zizekian "real" embeds into his subjectivity, he goes back to his mistress Kalwant Kaur indulging in flirtatious banter through sexual foreplay. Admonished by Kalwant Kaur for physically hurting her, Ishwar tell tells her that "a lot of brutality" is to be expected that night (Manto 26). Patriarchy in the garb of Ishwar Singh can never dissociate violence from its actions; it survives on the torture of the other being. Meanwhile Kalwant allowing her own subjugation to his brutal ministrations of lascivious ogling, rough kisses, black and blue pinching and attempts of forcible penetration becomes the second object of the night that the bestial treatment of patriarchy turns into an object. But the already shaken Ishwar is unable to consummate the affair, as the apparition of the dead girl floats in front of his eyes. This is explained by Zizek in *The Parallax View* (2006) where he mentions that the fundamental mode

of an object's passive presence is that it annoys, disturbs and traumatizes the subject (17). Mortified by this ultimate and radical form of resistance by the corpse of the girl, Ishwar tries to get over it by indulging in fake sexual ardour with his mistress—a “false activity” (*The Plague* 115). At the climactic conclusion of the story, the already broken Ishwar confesses everything to his mistress, who then in a fit of rage plunges his Kirpan (a phallic symbol of power) into his neck.

For Ishwar Singh the bodies of the women become the agency through which he supplements his subjectivity. But the nature of the phallus as an “artificial prosthetic element” (*The Plague* 36), is revealed by the resistance offered by the body of the decentred other, the corpse. This is when the entire fetish falls through.

In “The Return” Sirajuddin a father divided from his daughter during their flight to Lahore in his desperation approaches a group of young men whom he saw armed with guns and who said that they were bringing back the women and children who were left on the other side. It was only after a number of days that Sirajuddin notices a commotion at the refugee camp where a young girl is hurriedly carried off to the hospital. At the hospital when the doctor motions at the windows in the room say “Open it” (*Manto* 53), Sakina, the girl, feverishly with great and painful effort reaches for the chords of her shalwar which she unties and pulls down to reveal her thighs. Sirajuddin is elated at the sign of life in his daughter but like the doctor, we the readers break a “cold sweat” (53). Between and beneath the lines can be seen the evidence of the female body as the sight of violence, torture and subjugation. The young men had in fact found Sakina a while back, but instead of honouring their commitment to Sirajuddin, they had, as long as they could, used the girl as a medium of expressing their sexual and phallic excesses. Quite apt is Manto's christening of the story “Khol Do” in its original Urdu version. So brutalised has been Sakina that she has confused the connotations of language. She associates the syllables “Khol Do” with the agony she has gone through. These words to the

dehumanized Sakina are but a familiarisation to the violence which she goes through and which gets expressed through her body. The reality here is so real that it is almost absurd as language transcends its accepted popular plain and proliferates into a more scathing metaphorical plain which to the unfamiliar common reader comes as an absolute shock. Sakina's traumatised body acts the unvoiced pathos of this reality. Jisha Menon in her *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* elucidates this point when she says that "The female body served as the terrain through which to exchange dramatic acts of violence" (121). In times of violence, religion is never the issue; it is always the phallic projection of power that reigns supreme.

In these above two cases, both Ishwar Singh and this band of young men can be underlined as the Zizekian perverts craving for excesses in every aspect of life. Zizek argues that a pervert is a man obsessed with sexuality more than that is natural, following his drives with an excess far beyond the natural. But unlike in the second case, in the first case, Ishwar's confrontation with the Real eludes his grasp and symbolically castrates him—the perverse patriarchal subject. As the circle comes to a completion, the violence here, in an act of closure, gets documented on Ishwar's own body.

In "The Woman in the Red Raincoat" we explore this theme of violence further. Manto's protagonist "S" is an average innocuous young man. He is fond of games but hates sports; not cruel by nature, he cannot resist being the first person to get into an argument or fight; an honest fighter who never plays fair; interested in arts but willingly opens a bicycle shop. Manto's delineation of the character reveals to us the paradoxes of "S"—the idea of reality never coming into grasp entirely. After his shop is burnt down "S" to fill up his time joins those very arsonists who had snatched his livelihood not driven by the thought of communal violence but as a medium of escape from this very miasma of violence itself. Numbed by the meaningless violence around him, "S", in an attempt of escape decides to pick

up a girl. And wandering aimlessly for some time he pick up a girl emerging from a car that had just met with an accident. Bringing her into his darkened house he does not attempt to force her into submission or exercise his authority over her. On the contrary, he is mild and kind towards her. Instead of force he endeavours to seduce her by words. The machinations of control are not just transmitted through brute force. The patriarchal ideology also uses discourse as a vector of manipulation and eventual victimisation. “S” is revealed to be a cunning enough patriarchal subject who is willing to adopt any tactic to lure the other and satisfy his excesses. The undertone of this normalcy exhibited by “S” is actually sustenance of violence. This ruse is carried out by the phallogentric subject for the suppression of the other, and through this ruse “S” manages to triumph over the hysteria of the distraught woman. But Manto takes this paradigm further beyond the known and accepted boundaries of Partition stories. The woman known simply as “M” is, in fact, a famous art teacher and a self-proclaimed man-hater. But her passionate and almost suppliant stance towards “S” reveals the falsity of her misandric attitude. Miss “M” here readily submits to “S” but only after he concedes to her request of making lover to her in the dark. Miss “M” is an old woman. Lacan in his *Ecrits* comments that “it is for what she [woman] is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved” (221). A reflection of this can be found here. “M” inspite of all her shortcomings is at last presented with the opportunity of acceptance. But “S” after setting eyes on her by chance and witnessing her wrinkled and white haired visage is no longer interested and he asks her to leave. Judith Butler elucidates this further in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* stating that “[the] degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality” (243) is designated in fact by the notion of abjection.

We learn later that Miss M dies that very day after being cast out by “S” in an accident. Her untimely death can be attributed purely to the whims of the phallogentric subject. Manto insinuates himself into the fiction where at the end he tells his friend “S” that he bears the sole

responsibility of murdering “M”—the dual murder of both the famous artist Miss M and the vulnerable woman hidden beneath that rough veneer which found expression only during the abduction. Manto here projects the inverse relationship between the patriarchal subject and the object. Miss M’s submissive attitude towards “S” gives him the complete phallic power over her, and his acceptance of that power is directed primarily towards reducing her to an object. The phallogocentric subject reduces the object to an “item” of mere desire. An “item” that is studied, analysed and measured by the caustic patriarchal gaze; and which just as quickly gets negated into the realm of abjection by it.

In the final story that we are going to analyse, Manto takes the paradigm of the phallogocentric operations wielding control over life and the body further. In telling about his childhood friend Ghulam Ali in the story “The Price of Freedom,” Manto exhibits the power of patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric and ideologies which coerces the subject into victimization. Ghulam Ali a fiery orator falls in love Nigar, herself a fellow revolutionary, and aspires to marry her. But marriage should not fall in the way of patriotic activities and so he delivers yet another rousing speech at Jallianwallah Bagh and gets himself arrested and thrown into jail by the colonial authorities as a sign of bravery. But before going to jail he wants to tie the knot with Nigar with the blessings a religious figure known popularly to his disciples as simply Babaji. Interesting here is the figure of Babaji. With legions of followers from different religions, Babaji’s proclivities towards religious beliefs do not stop him from discussing or instructing political strategies. Though he lives in an ashram, his life is one of relative comfort with his disciples arranging for all his wishes, whims and commands. Manto even though metaphorically, but quite clearly implies the fact that his followers are in fact slaves whose lives and decisions are made and manipulated by him.

The figure of Babaji here is a representative of the panopticismic power of patriarchy with his ashram as the prison. Studied and theorized by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and*

Punish: The Birth of the Prison (2012), the panopticon is a disciplinary technique that is propagated through constant surveillance or the notion of constant surveillance. It disciplines not only the body but also gradually takes a hold of the mind inducing a constant state of consciousness and visibility. Babaji sanctifies Ghulam Ali's marriage to Nigar but in front of a sea of disciples declares that spending ones energy in procreating and not revolution is a waste of one's resources and so coerces Ghulam to promise him in witness of all those other disciples that he would abstain from having any children with Nigar and that they would spend the rest of their lives as friends. It is only when the revolutionary stupor melts down from Ghulam's head that he realises the extent to which he had let Babaji control and dictate his life. The obvious and the mute victim in this fiasco is obviously Nigar. Manto describes her as an educated, compassionate and self-assured woman but she gets stuck between the ideologies of both Babaji and Ghulam Ali, getting tossed up to and fro. As Ghulam Ali starts yearning for his legacy he endeavours to transcend this barrier of forced celibacy. Years later when Manto, again insinuating himself into the story, meets Ghulam Ali, he notices a strange alienation in his friend for all things rubber. For Ghulam Ali the element rubber alludes to a condom—a reminder of his stunted marriage life. Reducing Nigar to a sexual object and a mere womb, Ghulam Ali's medium of transcendence from his barren existence is through natural contact with her. Both Ghulam ali and Babaji here are the primordial phallic subjects who find their own subjectivity through the repression of the other. Nigar's existence is contingent to the philosophies, ideas and thoughts of Ghulam Ali. There is no brute force here, but a fine and cunning undercurrent of psychological coercion that validates the phallic powerplay.

The French critic Helene Cixous opines that literature is scarred as it maintains, documents and recreates wounds and traces both its roots and its seeds. She calls such literature "Stimatexts" (*Stigmata: Escaping Texts* xvi) -- texts which bring out, highlight and through the games and conspiracies of language produce that tragic response which pinpoints the repetition

of evil. Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories are Stigmatexts; texts which bear the stigmatic of patriarchy. Violence in all its multifarious forms is projected on the female body and stories like "Colder than Ice" (1950), "The Return," "The Woman in the Red Raincoat" and "The Price of Freedom" depict the scars. Manto's narratives act as the invocation of the ravages that are inflicted upon the female body, the scars of which transcend the borders of time, space and memory.

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