

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Tracing the Violated Identities of Women: A Comparative Study of Saadat Hasan Manto's 'Khol Do' and Dr. Sherri Szeman's 'The Kommandant's Mistress'

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to explore the concept of the female body being used as a site of violence in Manto's *Khol Do* and Szeman's *The Kommandant's Mistress*. The texts refer to the two canonical genocides of human history – the Partition (1947) and the Holocaust. This comparative study delves into the psyche of two different communities from two different parts of the world tied with the same string of trauma and loss. The fragmented memory caused by the recurring nature of trauma in women due to sexual atrocities committed upon them and the subsequent silence and repression of emotions will be nuanced within this paper, deriving from Freud's work on Hysteria, stating that traumatic experiences can cause psychological disturbances. Based on Caruth's theory of Belatedness, this paper will examine and highlight the recurring nature of trauma and the altered identities of the two rape victims.

Keywords: Partition, Holocaust, women, memory, trauma, identity

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The 19th century marked a change in the way of human thinking. The social, the natural and the psychological human being evolved overnight. On 21st February 1848, the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* marked the beginning of that evolution. The publication of *On the Origin of Species* on 24th November 1859 proved that evolution. On 1st January 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams* chalked out the changes experienced in the various stages of that evolution. The whole of the next century saw the unfolding of a series of catastrophic events that marked the end of humanity altogether. The two of the most disastrous events that had an everlasting impact on humankind were the holocaust and the partition of India. The never-seen-before circumstances and traumatic events had a cataclysmic effect on the human psyche. Families got separated, and memories became fragmented – the smoke from the chimneys of the concentration camps carried the stench of the burnt Jew flesh and blood and the bloodstream carried by rivers in India contained the silent screams of millions. Historically during conflicts, women's bodies become the target of attack. Women in such circumstances become doubly subjugated and marginalised because of their gendered identity. Force, physical violence, verbal abuse and other forms of aggression have always been used to control women's bodies and gain their obedience. It is always 'the female body' which is both the object of desire and the subject of control (Kahane).

Sadat Hasan Manto and Sherri Szeman depict two very honorific accounts of sexual

violence committed upon women during the Shoah (Holocaust) and the partition of India. Manto has been both praised and wildly criticized for his provocative and unsettling depictions of partition and post-partition era violence. He particularly focuses on the sexual violence and subsequent trauma committed by the system on the female body. His short story *Khol Do* is a devastating account of the physical and psychological violence faced by women during the 1947 partition of India. The prominent Indian historian and literary critic Ayesha Jalal notes that *Khol Do* exposes the horrific sexual violence inflicted on women during partition. She interprets the ending of the story where Sakina responds mechanically to the command “Khol do” (open it) symbolizing how violence and trauma had stripped her of her agency and identity. Jalal praises Manto’s use of irony to deepen the impact of the narrative. She says that the story is a critique of both the communal violence and sexual violence committed by the patriarchal structures of society (Jalal). Renowned Holocaust literary scholar Lawrence Langer comments on the power dynamics between Rachel and Max which leads to the collapse of moral framework. She argues that Max and Rachel embody the greater power conflict between the Germans and the Jews. Langer’s concept of “choiceless choices” – decisions made in impossible circumstances highlights the complexities of Rachel’s survival strategies. Langer borrows from Primo Levi as she examines the “gray zone” of moral compromise for survival during a catastrophic event like the holocaust. She compliments Szeman on breaking the conventional German-Jew – perpetrator-victim relationship between Max and Rachel.

Eminent German psychiatrist, critic and author Sigmund Freud in his work ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ says that trauma recurs in fragmented memories. The narrative structure of the novel *The Kommandant’s Mistress* follows the Freudian structure of narration of a nonlinear trauma narrative. Both the memories of Max and Rachel become fragmented as they trace back to the event that brings them together. From “She pushed The Dead Bodies back at me.” (Szeman 18) to “I said nothing...The weapon lay there, beside The Dead Bodies, which

had fallen with him” (255) the narration follows a Marquezesque pattern of tracing back. On the other hand, *Khol Do* follows a linear structure – “The special train left Amritsar...to reach Mughalpura” to arrive at the news of “She’s alive! My daughter is alive” (Manto). The difference between the narrative structures of the two texts stems from the fact that in Rachel’s case, the rapist is known so the tracing back to the reason and repercussions is viable. But for Sakina, it is not mentioned who her perpetrator is. Cathy Caruth in her seminal work “Unclaimed Experience” argues that trauma manifests as the incomprehensible recurring presence, of a past that cannot be fully known or represented. Manto’s Sakina on the doctor’s command to “Open It!”, to her father Sirajuddin and the doctor’s surprise - “With lifeless hands she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar” (Manto) like a mechanical response. This shows how the traumatized psyche of a woman responds to losing agency of her own body and her own mind. For Rachel, her memory fails her. She is caught in a repetitive, fragmented narrative that refuses to give her closure.

Freudian concept of “Nachträglichkeit” or deferred action describes trauma as an experience that cannot be fully comprehended at the time it occurs, but it is re-experienced later repetitively in fragments of memory. Caruth extends this idea by emphasizing the fact that trauma disrupts the concept of linear time and creates a haunting repetition of unassimilated experiences. In Szeman’s novel, this concept is quite clear in Rachel’s and Max’s circular narrative pattern. Manto, on the other hand, takes the poetic liberty of cutting Sakina off her narrative agency. Sakina’s initial shock from the traumatic experience is much more important in the short story. By not giving her any voice, Manto highlights the difference between the events itself. The partition of India happened after 200 long years of colonization by the West. The white man’s burden in civilizing the uncivilized created an insufferable societal condition for the colonized Indians for two whole centuries. The joy of independence from that was taken away by the patriarch’s decision to divide Bharat Mata. The religious divide in the country led

to the displacement of almost 100 million people. The trauma was further deepened by the atrocities committed upon them by the patriarchs, foreign and indigenous alike during their rehabilitation.

Fiction borrows from reality the elastic nature of memory serves as the basis of Szeman's narrative technique. The characters' slippage from one-time frame to another – from one topic to another is often marked by keywords. These keywords carry multiple meanings. In a magazine interview, Szeman herself associates her artistic use of connecting memory fragments with “an imitation of the way memory works” (qtd. in Doerr). Szeman's Kommandant is humanized. He says, “I was no murderer. I didn't kill the girl. I protected her. She was a Jew” (Szeman 68) and “fed her, clothed her, kept her safe, warm” (72). Rachel's version contradicts and overwrites his record. She recalled being cold, hungry and being raped by him. Critic Karin Doerr notices that Szeman's simulated accounts deal mainly with the unusual story of two individuals that is why her novel follows “I” as a point of reference whereas the survivors of the holocaust use “We” to give their recollections a collective historical scope. She further argues that Szeman's novel is concerned with the pretty rare occurrence of Jews being raped by German SS officers. She says that even if the Jews were being raped by the German commandants, they would have kept it a secret (Doerr). On the other hand, Heinemann argues, “the absolute power of the Nazis over their [female] victims was often expressed through sadism and sexual violence” (Heinemann 284–85). While Alvin Rosenfelt states “The fictive elaboration of the horrors of the holocaust...one more glaring instance of the literary imagination's perverse attraction to the Nazi atrocities, and one more unfortunate exploitation of the female victims of mass crime” (qtd. in Doerr). The humanization perspective of the perpetrator by “climbing into the skin” (Doerr) of a Nazi officer by Szeman was not and still is not accepted by the survivors of the Jewish community. Szeman writes, “Every time I awoke, I was alone” (57) for humanizing Max. Manto on the

other hand creates a silent victim, a faceless rapist and portrays the realistic image of post-partition India. He is advocating not just against the sexual violence committed upon the women but against the partition of India itself. He faced many backlashes for advocating against partition. His Toba Tek Singh becomes his mouthpiece who fails to understand the meaning or purpose of the religious divide as he utters in gibberish– "*Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dyhana mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan*" (*Toba Tek Singh* by Sadat Hasan Manto).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that the female population of society have always been subjugated and oppressed throughout history. Their voices have been taken away. The lack of voice in Manto's *Khol Do* points to Sakina being silenced by her perpetrator with the help of the patriarchal institution of rape and to a greater extent by partition itself. As Antonio Gramsci argues patriarchal society uses different cultural institutions to inflict trauma on 'The Second Sex' of the society. John Locke argues that memory is the key component of personal identity. The ability to recall the past gives oneself the authority to establish self-identity. Sakina's silence and Rachel's constant grappling with the past while being caught in a circular notion of narrative points to the loss of memory, and identity in women while experiencing trauma.

The portrayal of sexual violence in varying regional fictional narratives during partition and the holocaust have suffered a huge backlash from the native communities. Although the academic sphere has given the space for a comparative study between the trauma due to partition and the holocaust, it has restrained itself from the depiction of controversial psychoanalytical fiction by writers such as Manto and Szeman. Both the aforementioned stories talk about a part of history that has been deliberately concealed by both the oppressor and the oppressed alike. The national pride that follows the traumatic experiences of the partition and the holocaust elude both Manto and Szeman. Szeman's portrayal of the Kommandant and

Manto's portrayal of the rapist Rescue Force has fictionalized the psychosexual perversion of the society that Caruth and Freud uncover in their theories.

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