

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Irreversibility of Loss without Recompense: A Study of Sadat

Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khol Do"

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Abstract

Manto's two short stories "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khol Do", written in a period of time when the country was going through the post partition depression, dealt with a kind of realism which straightaway talks about a kind of reality that causes an irreplaceable trauma in the mind of the reader as well as in the people who witnessed it. The sense of loss, violence, barbarity as a byproduct of the 1947 Partition gave birth to such an irreversibility that is never going to be mended. For a number of years after the event, no writer of any renown on either side of the new border rescued an adequate sense of lucidity to approach the issue. Something had been permanently lost, and the inadequacy of mere words was discerned throughout the north of the country in an understood code of silent mourning. As Manto has had a first-hand experience of Partition and violence, therefore his stories make an analytical argument from the perspective of irreversibility. This irreversibility led to a kind of situation that can never be compensated in terms of loss of belongings, violence, trauma and also the physical loss. During the process of Partition, many Muslims were killed by Hindus and many Hindus were killed by Muslims. In this context we can consider religion as the dividing factor between the two Nations. Manto's protagonists are majorly the women, children, lunatic, cattle and unusual things like bottle, burkha, meat and so on. He does so because former are the real

victim and later are the actual proof to imitate the pain and the suffering. The experience of the people, undergoing the partition trauma is irreversible because nothing can recompense the emotional and physical torture they faced which gave birth to insanity, molestation and many other brutalities. Therefore the aim of this paper is to probe into the psychological depths of Manto's protagonists to evaluate the loss, caused by the Partition that is irreversible, irreplaceable and irremediable.

Keywords: Irreversibility, loss, trauma, Partition, violence, Manto, Khol Do, Toba Tek Singh, women, insanity.

“The fact that it is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present”

—Walter Benjamin

The partition of India in 1947 was the result of a complicated succession of historical forces, circumstances, desires and machinations that played out in the loss of homes for millions, while countless others lost their lives in the months leading to the independence and even after it. The division was the result of decisions by the political class to accept Partition as the only solution to internecine fratricide and bloodshed. With the onslaught of World War II, the communal riots in Noakhali, the clamor for independence through the massive anti-colonial and Left-led peasant movements, mass refugee influx and the migration of the country's religious minorities, the years leading up to 1947 were eventful, to say the least.

According to the Cambridge dictionary, the term irreversibility refers to a situation which is not possible to change and in an irreversible situation it is impossible to return to a previous condition. Sadat Hasan Manto is considered to be one of the most significant Indian-Pakistani writer, playwright and critic who immensely contributed to Urdu Literature. Manto utilizes his instruments for the unveiling of the social evils that were pertinent to the society he was living in. Manto's stories on Partition echoes the trauma of the marginalized sections of the community who suffered the most during Partition.

Manto's two short stories “Toba Tek Singh” and “Khol Do”, written in a period of time when the country was going through the post partition depression, dealt with a kind of realism which straightaway talks about a kind of reality that causes an irreplaceable trauma in the mind of the reader as well as in the people who witnessed it. The sense of loss, violence, barbarity as a byproduct of the 1947 Partition gave birth to such an irreversibility that is never going to be mended. “Khol Do” voices the story of a father's search for his daughter, who goes missing when the train, they were travelling was attacked by the rioters. At the concluding part of the story Sakina, the daughter is seen to be untying the knot of her salwar,

expecting to be raped again, when the doctor commands the officials to open the windows uttering “Khol do!”. The scene poignantly evokes the trauma of the victim, the erasure of which is beyond human reach. On the other hand “Toba Tek Singh”, another short story by Manto brilliantly treats the identity crisis of an individual caused due to the trauma of partition. The portrayal of the Lahore asylum never fails to capture the madness of the “lunatics” symbolically indicating the hollowness of the event of Partition. The central character Bishan Singh is a representative of all those who suffer from the agony and pain of displacement which can neither be repaired nor be replaced. Therefore the aim of this paper is to probe into the psychological depths of Manto’s protagonists to evaluate the loss, caused by the Partition that is irreversible, irreplaceable and irremediable.

In the summer of 1947, the Partition of India and of Punjab in particular, was effected with catastrophic results. Ten Million people mostly Hindus, Shikhs and Muslims had to leave their homes and ancestral holdings and a tenth of them were slaughtered in the most singular civil war in recent history: there were no leaders, no armed forces, and no plans, only a spontaneous visceral ferocity whose possibility was unanticipated and whose legacy is more than evident even today.

If nations could suffer trauma, the Partition certainly ignited one in both India and Pakistan. And as in some traumata, the victims dissolved into catatonic shock that displayed itself as silence. For a number of years after the event, no writer of any renown on either side of the new border rescued an adequate sense of lucidity to approach the issue. Something had been permanently lost, and the inadequacy of mere words was discerned throughout the north of the country in an understood code of silent mourning. The brutality of the trauma was compounded by the detail that there was no adequate way to transmit these collapse to those who had not undergone the ordeal: very few photographs survived and fewer journalistic first person accounts were possible. Unlike the rigorously and officially documented holocaust of

European Jewry a few years earlier, there was nothing to chronicle the severity of human torment. The partition of India was accompanied by horrific violence, arguably making it one of the most violent yet significant events in South Asian history in the 20th Century. In today's context, this is a much discussed area of study with its inclusion in history textbooks, and a plethora of articles and books on the genocidal nature of Partition. However, this was not always so. In the decades following Partition, right until the anti-Sikh riots in parts of North India in 1984, it was not widely discussed, and its expression was marginalised in national historiography and other popular modes of documentation.

Primary modes of understanding the event shifted from merely the political to the experiences of the masses, through oral testimonies – which were collected and disseminated through texts such as Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*(1998) based on the experiences of women across Punjab. Amidst this historical silence, there were very few writers who were able to render the pain of the Partition into powerful narratives. One of the most celebrated of these is Saadat Hasan Manto, whose short stories represented the overarching societal breakdown in the Partition that resulted in widespread massacres and rapes across Punjab, Bengal, and other parts of North India.

Sadat Hasan Manto's short-story "Toba Tek Singh" was published in the year 1955. From the very beginning the story has been given a subtle touch of satire. Manto severely condemns the idea of Partition and the aftermath of it. The nakedness of the post Partition severity has been projected by Manto with an ease previously. "Toba Tek Singh" is no wonder on that ground. Originally written in Urdu language, the narrative depicts the chaos in Lahore asylum, which in a microcosmic representation reflects the exact scenario through which India and Pakistan was going. With a tinge of autobiographical memory, Manto produces a setting which serves as a miniature to the contemporary topsy-turvy condition of the world where inmates of different class, caste, religion encounter the trauma of

displacement and imbalance. The central character of the story is Bishan Singh who himself is the symbol of this traumatic displacement. At the onset the readers are made aware of the government's decision to shift the Hindu and Sikh patients to India and the Muslims to Pakistan. Despite having the fictional quality, the story is modeled on the light of the 1950's real exchange of the same nature. Although the government's decision was made to fix the issue but politics that lies under the surface has steered it to another direction. The hollowness, depression, trauma, displacements, sexual violence and all the other forms of atrocities has led to an irreversible loss that can never be mended. The agony of partition is so absurd that it has a profound psychological impact on the other inmates.

However if we shift our attention to that which takes up the most of text's space- an analysis of the behaviors of the inmates in terms of body and the language they use – we will see other equally intriguing interests, “If they asked him something, he remained quiet or mumbled his incomprehensible ‘upar de gurgur de aiynks de be-dhyaana de mung de daal aaf de laaltain’ now and then” (Manto 138-141).

This rapture of language in separating word from meaning is a classic instance of the nonsense verse which pointedly indicates the irreversible loss that has been caused by the Partition. The silencing of the other forms of language and social expression as much as of a language that describes the cost (of the body in pain, lost in the instance of the rhetoric of independence) to which 1947 Partition was witness is surely specified by the nonsense language and nonsense forms of affect that are the twin concerns of “Toba Tek Singh”. The dumbness of language therefore contributes to the formation of the terror, not only does it prompt to the loss of sociality but also corroborates that violence, animalistic aggression, physical torture and its many forms were deliberately kept aside of the purview of narrative and therefore of history.

Manto's emphasis on his readers allows his works to be interpreted in a myriad of ways, depending upon the viewpoints of the readers. His writing chronicles the forms of violence that victimized women. "Khol Do" (Open It) is one of such fictional documentation that details the depths of human depravity. Narrated from the perspective of Sirajuddin, a refugee and a desperate father, whose daughter Sakina goes missing when the train they were travelling in, was attacked by the rioters. The restless father seeks help from some of the "social workers" in Pakistan to form a search party for his missing daughter. The climax leaves the reader in utter shock. The fag-end of the story inscribes another traumatic experience on the mind of the readers. When the doctor asks to open the window for a fresh air with the words "Khol do," Sakina starts untying the knot of her salwar. The scene is particularly evocative of the trauma that left a permanent wound in the history of partition. Although Manto does not make it explicit exactly what happens to Sakina, but we can conjecture that upon finding her, her rescuers vis-à-vis her abductors go on raping her themselves and leaving her to die near the refugee camp Sirajuddin was staying in.

The story also opens up another perspective that the South-Asian female body becomes easily accessible for the re-inscription of the metaphor of community and nation because it is always already inscribed with patriarchal makers of shame and honour. To speak honestly, we cannot embark on a feminist reading of partition because to the best of our knowledge there has been no feminist historiography of the partition of India, not even of the compensatory variety. Women historians have written on this cataclysmic event but from within the parameters of the discipline, and still well within the political frame. The story challenges the idea of linear narratives of inter-faith, violence along which Partition is mostly understood. By questioning the institution of social work, which was central to the project of nationalist mobilization, Manto depicts the rootlessness of the nationalist ideology on either sides of the border, the very basis of which lies in hyper-masculinity.

Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh", if discussed from the thematic point of view, throws light on another crucial aspect of the irreversible condition of Partition trauma that leads to mental illness. The character of Bishan Singh is symbolic of the displaced human identity, the resultant evil of partition. The constant quest for the search for homeland metaphorically indicates the fractured identity and the loss of sense of rootedness, an echo of Manto himself in the wake of his move to Lahore. "Toba Tek Singh" was not the only one of his stories to deal with themes like irreversibility of loss, trauma or mental illness. "Khol Do" holds portraiture of the central character Sakina's dissociative state following the trauma of rape. Irreversibility as a literary theme has been used by a number of writers working on partition long after Manto's death; in this sense his work cast a long shadow. Indeed madness became the only conceivable response to the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence. The after-effect of partition gets manifested upon the communities as the post-traumatic stress disorder.

As Manto has had a first-hand experience of Partition and violence, therefore his stories make an analytical argument from the perspective of irreversibility. This irreversibility led to a kind of situation that can never be compensated in terms of loss of belongings, violence, trauma and also the physical loss. During the process of Partition, many Muslims were killed by Hindus and many Hindus were killed by Muslims. In this context we can consider religion as the dividing factor between the two Nations. Manto's protagonists are majorly the women, children, lunatic, cattle and unusual things like bottle, burkha, meat and so on. He does so because former are the real victims and later are the actual proof to imitate the pain and the suffering. The experience of the people, undergoing the partition trauma is irreversible because nothing can recompense the emotional and physical torture they faced which gave birth to insanity, molestation and many other brutalities. Therefore because of this the characters in Manto's stories fail to fulfill the moral obligations towards their fellow

human beings. Both Sakina and Bishan Singh underwent a trauma that can never be rewarded back. And to our utter shock, both of them are completely unconscious about their state. We readers can only sympathise.

Manto, with his mastery of creation, leaves his readers spell bound through the ending of these two short stories. Manto terminated “Toba Tek Singh” in a pathetic way throwing light on the trauma of Partition. The narrative ends with Bishan Singh lying down on the no-man’s land between the two barbed wire fences: “There, behind the barbed wires was Hindustan, and here, behind the same barbed wires was Pakistan. In between, on the thin strip of no-man’s land, lay Toba Tek Singh” (Manto 260-262).

Perhaps the protagonist Bishan Singh’s unparalleled quest for his homeland gets culminated towards the end of the story. Perhaps Bishan Singh finds the sense of rootedness for which he was looking throughout the course of narrative, in this no-man’s land. On the other way round, the concluding note of the story “Khol Do” unsettles the conditions of the readers mind. After entering the room for examining Sakina, the doctor commands Sirajuddin, the father to open the window: “Khidki khol do”, the body starts untying the lower of her salwar. The storyteller draws a closure with the father’s exclamation that the daughter is still alive, as the body responds to the doctor’s command. The readers are left with the inference that the girl has so been forced to follow this order that on the verge of her death her reflex propelled her to comply with the command.

To conclude, Manto’s writing in general, “Toba Tek Singh” and “Khol Do” in particular were coloured by a sense of irreversibility, a much of which he himself has faced during his lifetime. These two short stories somehow gave a chance to the readers to experience a bit of the trauma although not physical but psychological. Importantly, Manto’s work headed a tradition of writing about partition trauma and the irreversible sense of loss. Certainly this has helped the audience to process the psychological trauma during their story-

ride. Although the paper focuses particularly on “Toba Tek Singh” and “Khol Do,” this idea of irreversibility and the psychosomatic distress are prevalent in most of Manto’s stories. The entire corpus of Manto’s work needs to be read through this lens in order to shed further light on the path of relationship between literature and the irreversible loss, violence, pain, trauma, mental agony that no one can recompense.

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