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## Manto's *Khol Do*: A Site of Sexualized Violence in post-Partition Indian Subcontinent

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### ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to study the horrors of Partition violence in the Indian subcontinent with particular reference to Manto's short-story, *Khol Do*. In the aftermath of Partition, a strange sort of emotion had gripped the psyche of the people on either side of the newly demarcated line which divested them of their basic human traits and tendencies and unleashed their savage self out in the open ready to devour anyone who came their way. The paper, thus, explores issues related to sexualized violence which targeted women, girls and children alike irrespective of their social or religious creed; the concept of the social death with relation to mass rape and abduction of women as a form of ethnic cleansing and what survival means in such troubled times. In addition, the paper also addresses some theoretical questions regarding the ethics of the writer and the potential of short-story as a genre to carry multiple meanings and significations.

**Keywords:** Partition, Sexualized violence, Social death, Ethnic Cleansing, Survival, Aesthetics

### Introduction

In the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Partition of Indian subcontinent was a catastrophic and life-upsetting event. It was catastrophic as it brought about destruction of life and matter on a massive scale on either side of the demarcated line (Hindustan and Pakistan) with charred and slain bodies strewn across the land which included brutalized women, abandoned and maimed children clueless to the widespread violence and an atmosphere of utter chaos and men wielding sharp weapons or whatever they could lay their hands on, thirsty for each-other's blood bereft of all possible signs of humanity. It was life-upsetting because the two communities who had shared a long relationship of goodwill and harmony abruptly snapped that bond that was never to have been

restored to a peaceful and tolerant co-existence which was a common sight in pre-Partition days.

What eventually followed was the unprecedented bloodbath as both Hindus and Muslims shed blood for their newly demarcated territories with communal riots a common sight on either side of the border-line which led to the irrevocable disintegration of the whole social and moral fabric of the subcontinent. A country that had the legacy of inhabiting different cultures, beliefs, faiths and identities suddenly fell apart. The demarcation of boundaries on religious lines led to an unprecedented demographic shift from one line of the border to the other leaving everyone in a state of panic and utter confusion. Overnight friends turned foes; cultural and religious identities became crystallized as the tag of Hindu and Muslim became a nomenclature as per the official order which

brought about the birth of two nations on religious lines. Saadat Hasan Manto's Bishen Singh in his short-story *Toba Tek Singh* is a case in point here which sheds light on the mental state of those affected by this sudden turn of events. Bishen Singh, in a form of protest against the official order that demands separation of prisoners/madmen on their religious background, sits on a tree after listening to the news of Partition and refuses to come down. His protest is symbolic of the crystallization of identities into Hindu and Muslim as a result of Partition which would not even spare an asylum which shelters madmen.

During Partition, an unprecedented kind of confusion and bewilderment had filled the air. The home was nowhere to be found. The newly demarcated boundary had destroyed it all. The only solace one could find rested in the imaginary homeland...a pre-Partition India, a home to both Hindus and Muslims. Saadat Hasan Manto's personal life and his short-stories about the trauma of Partition foreground this fact very poignantly and tells the reader about his "internally exiled" state; his nostalgia for a homeland of the past where both Hindus and Muslims had co-existed peacefully and fraternally without frowning upon each other's religious or cultural leanings. Stories like *Khol Do*, *Colder Than Ice (Thanda Gosht)*, *The Dog Of Tithwal*, *Toba Tek Singh* etc. by Manto highlight the same human tragedy in great details and makes the reader aware of the massive damage that left millions in a state of mental dilemma and loss of brotherhood. But the pertinent question which arises here is whether it is imperative to read his stories in socio-polio-historical terms only. Can they not be read as mere stories, keeping the socio-historical aspects aside? In other words, is it not possible to give his stories a 'practical reading' of sorts and ask questions like: What does a short-story do? What is its potential? What does it expect from the reader? It is primarily these practical questions that this paper attempts to explore and deal with through a close analysis of the short-story, *Khol Do* by Manto. Also, the reference to other stories by Manto is a deliberate attempt to bring about clarity in the argument and illustrate the point

### Manto's Aesthetics

Saadat Hasan Manto, hailed as the greatest story-writer in Urdu, is often regarded as a maverick and fiercely independent minded writer who never bothered if his writings landed him in the pool of controversy and criticism. He was many a time charged with obscenity and other abnormalities present in his stories. *Khol Do* is an archetypal example of such denunciations where the ending of the story leaves the reader shocked and stunned as the daughter unfastens her *salwar* in front of her father. Not just *Khol Do* but *Boo* and *Colder Than Ice* too can be seen with such an unpalatable ending where the reader is left in an uncompromising state, chiefly scandalized. The reader may ask, 'Was it a deliberate attempt by the writer?' And if so, 'What was he trying to do by creating such a scandal?'

This question can be answered by citing Priyamvada Gopal, a noted scholar on Partition literature, who argues that Manto had a totally different idea of aesthetics. Aesthetics to him did not mean just the representation of all that was beautiful and sublime rather an authentic and holistic view of both the individual and the society with all its vices and virtues (Gopal, 260). It was this attitude of Manto that enabled him to envision a "transformation (that) would realign the relationship between individual and society toward a more organic, democratic and humanist moral order", torn apart due to Partition and its aftermath corruption and self-degradation (246). Besides, by being obscene, one can argue, he was trying to shame the society and the individual into a kind of re-thinking process, a re-examination of the self about one's atrocious actions which one inflicted upon women, girls and children in frenzy and mass-hysteria. Isher Singh in the story, *Colder Than Ice* can be seen inching towards the same re-thinking and re-examining process once he realizes that the girl he was raping was dead, a body without life in it. His re-awakening is written in the act of love-making to Kulwant Kaur, his wife, when he seems not to be enjoying the act of love as his partner complains. He is as cold as the dead girl's body was.

"Ishr Sian, you are not the man you were eight days ago. Something has happened to you." (20)

Building upon this premise, one can argue that despite having witnessed the carnage and depravity of men in the wake of Partition, Manto did not lose hope and faith in “the residual goodness in human beings” (Jalal, 7-8). He did not portray Man as if he could never repair what was undone or he could never come back transformed. Manto tried to highlight the inner turmoil, the ever-nagging conscience trying hard to rid itself from the guilt which is read as a sign of residual humanness in his characters. Isher Singh trying to rid himself from the inner guilt, the restlessness inside him which has turned him cold, is indicative of his reparable state—a transformation in his being, a sort of cleansing albeit thwarted by Kulwant Kaur.

#### **Sexualized Violence, Social Death and Survival**

*Khol Do* by Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the most controversial short stories, set in post-Partition Lahore, a site of blood, charred bodies, dust and unfathomable noise where Sirajuddin, the protagonist, wakes up to the screams and shrieks of hundreds of men and women and children, recaptures the pre-unconscious state when he wasn't alone but with a family—a wife, he recalls, mercilessly butchered and a dear daughter, now lost and disappeared in the chaos around. He begins to search for his lost daughter, assisted by the *razakars*, the volunteers who came forward to help people in such adverse situations, and finally meets his beloved daughter in a relief camp hospital in a semi-conscious state, uttering the words, “She is alive. My daughter is alive.” (Manto, 14)

Though the story appears quite simple and uncomplicated at the first glance (a father looking for his lost daughter and finally finding her), it is not so simple in its implications. It is a story that gestures towards multiple interpretations and meanings. The more condensed and concise the story appears the more suggestive and ‘polyphonous’ in nature it is.

The very title of the story, *Khol Do*, defies translation. The word “Khol Do” in the story appears towards the end when the father of the lost daughter comes to identify her in a relief-camp hospital and is asked by the doctor to open the window, but ironically, it is the cord of *salwar* that is ‘opened’ or unfastened at the utterance of the word

*‘khol do’*. The reader is left stunned and stupefied, unable to trace the right and intended meaning of the term, however so simple to interpret. In the story, we find that the word *‘khol do’* works more with the unspecified, the unspeakable, and the intangible. It is this quality of the word *‘khol do’* that keeps the reader pondering and looking for other possible interpretations that the word could mean. It is only through sense perceptions and due to the subtext of Partition that one gets to lay hands on the intended meaning the title refers to.

It is also arguable that the meaning of the word *‘Khol Do’* is more psychologically grounded. The word had a psychological impact upon the mutilated daughter and hence her passive and mechanical response to it. Sakina’s (daughter’s name) mechanical reaction to the word *‘khol do’* can also be interpreted as a dissociative disorder in which the person under trauma feels detached from physical and emotional experiences, a detachment from reality itself.

Referring to the sexualized violence and brutalization meted out to women and girls during Partition and its aftermath, the story in discussion seeks to address issues related to sexual or reproductive violence as a form of ethnic cleansing or genocidal practices and the concept of social death resulting out of such violence. According to Veena Das, a US-based anthropologist and scholar, the figure of the abducted woman becomes quite visible in times of disorder with particular reference to sexualized violence. The woman abducted or missing becomes the site of sexual violence and her survival, if lucky, as a kind of social death (Das, 2008). Social death can be interpreted as “a woman who has been abducted and raped becomes dishonoured and either chooses death herself or is rejected by the family once found” (Das, 2008). Amrita Pritam’s critically acclaimed novel, *Pinjar* (1950), illustrates the above point where a Hindu girl, Puro abducted by a Muslim man, Rashid, is rejected by parents once found as she is now defiled and dishonoured.

However, as Das argues, the narratives of honour and shame largely hide from public view the efforts families might make to find ways of offering care or reclaiming the daughters and wives lost or

disappeared during such critical times (290). Manto's *Khol Do* offers us one such deviation from the established norms of honour and shame where the father not only searches for the lost/abducted daughter but also rejoices at her being found. This also leads us to the question why it is women who are always targeted in such times of crisis and disorder. The fundamental reason why they become the target of sexualized or reproductive violence is because "women are seen as the cultural and biological repositories of ethnic or religious groups" (Das, 2008). Violating a woman's honour, be it actual or fantasized, serves as a means by which the men of other community are humiliated. For instance, Pakistani soldiers raping women during the war for liberation in Bangladesh in 1971 was a clear example of this kind of reproductive violence where women were forcibly made to carry pregnancies to term to highlight birth of an "effeminate Islam" in comparison to a "more muscular and purer Islam as practiced by the Pakistanis. What transpires from this argument is that acts of violence such as mass rape of women, reproductive violence in terms of forcible pregnancies and abduction are yet another ways by which one seeks the complete annihilation of the other community as a whole but also a popular practice in projects of ethnic cleansing and genocide which has developed after the Partition violence (Das, 2008).

Talking about the survival in such accursed times, Sakina, Sirajuddin's only daughter, is reported missing. Her *dupatta* lying on ground, covered in dust signifies her honour being in danger. But it is survival that matters the most in such riotous situations! The father stooping down to pick the *dupatta* from the ground can be read as him protecting the daughter and saving her honour. But the daughter's refusal to this protective and shielding act is discouraged keeping in view the survival. This is what the reader gets to see in the end of the story—the girl, though, mutilated and violated yet surviving as the father rejoices with the words, "She is alive. My daughter is alive."

Can one argue here that Manto, through a story like this, was celebrating survival over honour? To a certain extent, this interpretation works, but this is not exactly what Manto is trying to point out

through the story. Rather, he is raising significant questions about the act of violence, the perpetrator and the intentions hidden. Is it the Hindus who violated her honour while she found herself on the other side of the boundary, the baffling dilemma of Hindustan and Pakistan, or is it the men from her own newly-formed nation and from her own religion who committed such a horrible act upon her? The *razakars*, the so-called charity workers and volunteers who came forward to help and aid such displaced and bewildered people during Partition hold the key to this argument. It comes to light that *razakars* were the ones who first found the girl, trucked her back into Lahore from Amritsar, fed her, and even clothed her. What happened before that the reader has no clue, and the last time the reader is informed about her whereabouts is when she is found in "unconscious state", a clear indication of her being assaulted before landing in the camp hospital. What follows from this is that the *razakars* who claimed to be the protectors or benefactors of those in need and help were the ones who inflicted atrocities upon them and were, in the real sense of the term, the predators, people without conscience or any human feeling. Tarun K. Saint in his book, *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction* calls it "the debasement of social work like voluntary activism [which] was integral to nationalist mobilization." He further argues that "the *razakars* betray the cause they represent and rather than acting according to humanitarian motives to help locate the missing girl, themselves violate her and leave her to be discovered by her distraught father" which is nothing but the "perversion of altruism" which is "more horrifying than the absence of altruism" (Saint, 256).

In addition to this, Saint remarks that the story also questions the over-hyped equation of the enemy with the 'other' community (257). It is popularly argued that in the aftermath of Partition violence Hindus fought against Muslims and vice-versa, and did not harm the people from their own community. The very essence of Islam, that is brotherhood, is also being questioned here by Manto and is presented before the reader as 'phony or superficial brotherhood' since the violators, as it

comes to light, were not from the 'other' community but from the same community.

The question regarding the ethicality of the writer is also something that can be pointed out here in the light of the above argument. Manto's stripping of both the individual and the society, his representation of humans as humans not as types and the scope of self-criticism in his writings, all point towards his ethicality as a writer where he spares no one. He examines everyone with a pair of unforgiving critical lens and lays bare the gaps and fissures unabashedly. Besides, his writings in a way also challenge the sociological and historical writings on Partition, the loss of both life and matter, an argument already put forth by Tarun K. Saint who argues in his book that the loss of life and matter on either side of the border line had been reduced to just numbers, the statistics, and was many a time misrepresented and distorted (Saint, 244-46). If the researchers were from Hindu community, they derived a sadistic pleasure from the counting of number of people killed among Muslims, and vice-versa if the researchers were from the Muslim community. A telling example could be the several wars that India and Pakistan have fought against each other. What Manto had witnessed then was something that we witness today. A war that had started more than 50 years ago continues even today—if not on the frontier, then surely in the streets, in the form of communal violence and riots which have become a common sight in India today.

#### Conclusion

To sum up the argument, one can say that Manto's *Khol Do* not only highlights the issue of post-Partition violence, but also deals with many other aspects revolving around violence that is sexualized violence, reproductive violence and violence as a form of ethnic cleansing. He also questions if the perpetrator who commits violence upon others is directed only against the other community or it could target people from his own community too. The story, though, appears very simple and uncomplicated turns out to be very complicated and complex which asks for reader's active role to search for the meaning(s) beyond the text. The story can also be read as a subtext to the savage violence which has become a common sight

in acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The meaning of the story is to be searched and explored in the unspecified and the intangible. Borrowing the term from Ronald Barthes, one can argue that the text in question is a *writerly text*, a text that expects the reader to dig out the meaning from the textual process as it gestures toward multiple interpretations. Since Manto had never accepted the political reality that being a Muslim he belonged to Pakistan and not Hindustan, his "internally-exiled" state is very much evident in the stories he has written in the post-Partition trauma and depression. Besides, it is this state that allows him a space to remain critical and evaluative towards people politically colored as Hindustani and Pakistani. He pays no allegiance to any community and portrays people as they ethically ought to be.

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