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HUMAN VIOLENCE AGAINST HUMANS: MANTO'S "OPEN IT!" IN THE CONTEXT OF PARTITION

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ABSTRACT

It is a fact that pain and suffering come along with the genesis of every new life in this world. Similarly, the birth of an independent Indian subcontinent has also its own painful consequences. In fact, its history is a history of violence and bloodshed. The course of millions of lives changed on that fateful summer of 1947 when the two-nation theory came into its full effect. The division was based on the premise that two separate nations were needed for two essentially separate communal identities—"Hindus" and "Muslims." The myopic strategies of some politically-inspired bigots led to the unprecedented severe civil war in the subcontinent. In the palpable commotion of communal hatred and killing frenzy, the collateral damage to human values and diverse religious identities went unnoticed. According to the authorities, nearly a million people lost their lives and about ten million lost their long-nourished homelands, families and the sense of belonging. Manto's Urdu short-story "Khol Do!" (translated in English as "Open It!") recounts one poignant event out of hundreds of thousands of events related to that traumatic experience. Like all other Partition stories of Manto, it also depicts the unbearable anguish, savagery and trauma of the Partition. It is one of the most powerful narratives which deal with the division of the country and its aftermath. It provides a unique perspective about the atrocities of that holocaust. Manto presents violence as violence i.e. it cannot be termed as "Hindu violence against Muslims" or vice versa. He strongly articulates his opinion that it was human violence against human beings. People who suffered because of the Partition were first human beings, not the communal or religious beings. We cannot approve killings just because the killings are targeted against some "other" community or race or religion. "Open It!" is about animalistic nature of human beings who not only sadistically enjoy others' suffering but also partake and aggravate it.

Keywords: Holocaust, killings, violence, trauma, Partition, anguish, poignant, literature, religion, love, unique.

By the summer of 1947, when the creation of the new state of Pakistan was formally announced, ten million people—Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs—were in flight. By the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern Indian was in arms, in terror or in hiding. (*Train to Pakistan*)

Generally, every major event in human history historically significant moment. The Partition inspires the contemporary literature in many ways. literature that came into existence after the The cultural practices bear the effect of that Partition of India in 1947 exemplifies the fact that

literature bears imprints of significant contemporary events. Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* (1950), Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (1991), Bheeshm Sahni's *Tamas* (1972), Intizar Hossain's *Basti* (1995) are only some from the sea of Partition stories.

Sa'dat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is a significant and unforgettable name in the realm of Partition literature. A writer in the realist tradition, he seeks to represent and relate the mores and anxieties of his time. His realism encompasses psychological aspects of his characters along with external circumstances affecting them. Manto explores human relationships with psychological precision and with intense poetic feeling. He combines realism with poetic symbolism in a way which makes us believe in his characters at the same as we understood the most deeply buried aspects of their selves. Although technically more innovative and experimental, he rarely deviates from his central task as a short-story writer who depicts the formation and development of individual characters. In the context of Partition literature and the oeuvre of Manto, Ajit Cour opines that his Urdu stories are "poignant" tales about "that black era of Indian history" (Cour 1022).

Tension in feelings of love is a recurring theme in Manto's fiction. He sees love as a driving force in human relationships which can be both creative and destructive. Love can be destructive if it is too mechanical or based on rationality or reasons. On the instinctive level, it would be positive and can help individuals to achieve a wholeness of personality through love.

Above all, Manto is strongly concerned to find ways to describe the deepest experiences of his characters. His fiction makes us realize that human personality is like an iceberg, with the major part of it under the surface. His art attempts to develop forms and techniques in the genre of short-story which are capable enough to express intense human experiences. In other words, Manto expresses more interests in his characters' mental process than in their visible actions. He searches for a truth which

lies beneath the surface facts. Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint rightly remark that, "Manto is the most important of the first generation of [partition] writers. His ability to empathize with the marginalized, the downtrodden and the outcast, and to evoke moral courage at the atrocities committed is unique" (Ravikant xvi).

Originally in Urdu as *Siyah Hashiyeh*, *Black Margins* (2001) contains Manto's selected stories related to the theme of Partition. In these stories, Manto depicts, with clarity and realism, the lives of some ordinary people. The stories are carefully organized so that meanings arise not only from the individual sketches but also from the relations between these individuals. The best one of the stories—"Open It!"—has the essence of all stories related to the Partition. It is a story of human barbarity and thirst for violence where religion and community are mere means of quenching the human hunger for the macabre.

The theme of most of the stories in *Black Margins* is the attempt of many characters to free themselves from lives in which they feel paralyzed by relationships, by social, cultural and religious traditions, or especially by their own natures. Manto's art shows mastery in the short-story form in which he attempts to remain exceptionally detached and neutral.

The short-story "Open It!" relates the separation and reunion of a father and his daughter—Sirajuddin and Sakina. The story opens when Sirajuddin comes to his senses after remaining unconscious for a day. He finds himself in Mughalpura refugee camp. He does not remember how he survived the slaughter back in Amritsar when he, along with his family, was trying to get the train to Mughalpura. He only recollects that his wife was killed and disemboweled by rioters. He also recalls that how he and his daughter, Sakina, fled towards the railway station in order to save themselves. There are chances that either she lost her way to the station or got killed in the riots on the train or in the least probability she is alive and safe somewhere between Amritsar and Mughalpura.

After six days of desperate search for Sakina, Sirajuddin finally seeks help of eight young men "ready to help" (Manto 201). These young men,

equipped with a lorry and guns, 'risk' their lives and travel to Amritsar at regular intervals in order to 'rescue' people from rioters. After a couple of weeks they eventually find Sakina and take her in confidence. She calms down when they call her with her name (that her father told them). Soon after this, Sirajuddin approaches them and asks if they found his daughter. Surprisingly, their response implies that they have not found her yet. That same day, in the evening, Sirajuddin follows some men carrying an unconscious girl to a nearby hospital. The apparently dead girl turns out to be his daughter. The story ends with a heart-rending note where much is expressed without explicitly stating anything:

The doctor looked at the body lying on the stretcher and felt its pulse. Then he pointed to the window and said to him [Sirajuddin], "Open it."

The body stirred slightly on the stretcher.

The lifeless hands untied the waistband.

And lowered the shalwar. (Manto 203)

M. Asaduddin in his prefatory introduction to *Black Margins: Sa'dat Hasan Manto Stories* comments on Sakina's lowering her shalwar involuntarily when the words "open it" are uttered directing Sirajuddin to open the window of the room:

She [Sakina] has been so brutalized and her relationship with language has become so tenuous that henceforth the phrase "khol do" (open it) will carry just one meaning for her to the exclusion of all others. (Asaduddin 31)

Manto skillfully uses the device of dramatic irony. In dramatic irony, storytellers create situations where readers know more than the characters involved in those particular situations. At the end of "Open It!" the reader knows that the armed young men actually raped Sakina, while Sirajuddin remains unaware of this fact. Ironically, he prays for their success and safety. The reader, on the other hand, is aware that those wily criminals deceived him masquerading themselves as helpers and philanthropists. This fact intensifies the feelings of sympathy in readers for the father and the daughter. This ironical situation of Partition emphasizes the fatal and agonizing consequences of

misunderstanding or incomplete understanding on the part of innocent and credulous people.

For women, the phenomenon of Partition meant suffering at two levels at least. They not only suffered as the subjects of the nation in troubled waters but also as females in gender-biased society. To cite Asaduddin again, further he remarks in the context of Manto's same story, "Open It!" also highlight[s] the fact that in time of fratricidal war and violence, the female body becomes a contested site subject to assault and conquest. It serves as a trophy of victory or a blot on the collective honour" (Asaduddin 31).

Historical data and authorized statistics corroborate this theory very lucidly. In mid-1950s, both Governments—of India and of Pakistan—claimed that 9,032 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan and 20,728 Muslim women from India had been *recovered* till the date (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partition_of_India). It is just an official statistics, the unofficial data of kidnapped women—who later wither converted their religion or became lifelong sexual slaves in some obscure dark corners or committed suicide—are now immeasurable.

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