

Subversive Humanism in Manto's *Partition Fiction*

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Abstract

Ironizing the violence to convey the political message about minority, Saadat Hasan Manto uses humanistic radical irony as a vehicle for political commentary by demystifying the politics of the representation of violence in official texts of both modern India and Pakistan. Partition affected every sector of human affairs badly. So, partition stories depict the irreplaceable loss displacement, dispossession, abduction, rape, painful death and other forms of violence that common people suffered from all three communities: Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. Manto counts the prime position who dealt with reality of the existing violence by showing it at various levels as familial, social, economic, political, religious others. In that course Manto also subverts the limited and biased notion of partition, which took partition of India as only the partition of territory and people. In the light of Hutcheon's notion of 'radical use of irony', I argue that Manto's use of irony in "Cold Meat" and "Open it" shows the utter cruelty of the people in power and authority at the time of partition violence and humanity shown by the marginalized section of society. His writing encapsulates his empathy for the victims and his belief in the essential goodness of humanity. The humanity that shines through in his writings about the down-trodden people living in the fringes of society, and the victims of partition violence of 1947 are an integral part of his stories.

Keywords: irony, trauma, partition, violence, representation, humanism

As revisionist historians subvert the official representation of partition issues by revisiting the history, the partition story writer, Saadat Hasan Manto uses irony as his mode of writing to undercut the official representation by unearthing the violence perpetrated along the lines of bourgeois patriarchy's interests and values. Manto's 'radical use of irony', to borrow Linda Hutcheon's theoretical concept, helps to capture the specificity of the violence and delineate the pain and the trauma of the recipients of violence with a remarkable degree of analytical stance in course of their representation of violence that remains fresh and vivid in the readers' imagination even after more than half a century after the bloody partition of India. In this regard, Hutcheon argues that 'radical use of irony' helps author to give voice to the voiceless: "[I]rony can be provocative when its politics are conservative or authoritarian as easily as when its politics are oppositional and subversive: it depends on who is using/attribution it and at whose expense it is seen to be" (15). It is through this ironic perspective that Manto observes the brutality and irrationality of patriarchy's violence over women and other subalterns such as the working class people, villagers, and children.

To write trauma, or to give voice to a wound that seems to defy representation. Dominick LaCarpa suggests that literature, because of its supple and intricate relation to reference, has been the privileged domain, or "safe haven" (185) for trauma's

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rehearsal and performative transmission. He uses irony to foreground the violence in his writings by unmasking the pain and trauma that haunts people's consciousness and especially those who were physically and psychologically defiled during the hostility between Hindus-Sikhs and Muslims. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCarpa recapitulates these points to mediate more broadly. On the critical methodology, most appropriate for the traumatic inheritance of contemporary culture, a reflection that potentially encompasses other traumas such as slavery, nuclear destruction, apartheid or partition. LaCarpa proposes a theoretically minded, yet historical approach to trauma that would commemorate the particularity of historical wounds, while recognizing the ways in which this unmasterable past continues to shape our current experiential and conceptual landscape. However, this past and its losses would also be subject to a collective process of mourning, "working through," and moving on, a trajectory that would ultimately release us from a cycle of perpetual re-traumatization and allow us to turn to future-oriented ethical and political projects.

Though Manto has propounded no coherent philosophy of life through his fictional and discursive writings, a close reading of them reveals that he gives a higher status to certain values and concepts. These values and concepts include: frankness, honesty, the discrepancy between appearance and reality, the validity of sex in life and most importantly his great love for humanity. The humanity that shines through in his writing about down trodden people living in the fringes of society, and the victims of partition violence of 1947 are an integral part of his stories. About his view on humanity, Mumtaz Shirin, says:

Manto is not interested in hallowed angles. Manto the writer does not have much to do with pure and innocent angles who can never passably commit sin. Manto likes men who dare commit sin. Manto's human being is neither an angel nor a devil. He is an earthling, a creature of the earth who has potentiality of original sin, mischief, murder and martyrdom. But God had ordered angels to pay obeisance to him. (qtd. in Asaduddin 105)

Manto's humanism, which is actually in-between the angelic and the devilish gives rise to the ironic vision which is bifocal as Manto shows great love and care to the whole human race. He is aware of the fact that love is the vital spring of life. Without it, life loses its meaning and charm. It is because of this sort of love for human life, Manto accepts sex as one of the most basic, instinctual and elemental urges of human being since it is the only means of human production. Hunger for sex is as primal as the hunger for food. Man takes recourse to all kinds of subterfuge for the satisfaction of this hunger and dresses it up in acceptable nomenclatures and relationships. Suppression of this hunger and the puritanical morality associated with it lead to grave imbalance in mind and personality of human beings. In his stories, Manto examines of this hunger without butting an eyelid and without resorting moralistic preaching.

Saadat Hasan Manto shows unprecedented objectivity in the redetection of the Indian partition violence of 1947. Besides objectivity, the dominant rhetorical aspect of Manto's partition stories in meta-irony formshock the audience through a transmission

of the trauma of the victims. Objectivity in Manto's writing is achieved through different means. One is the adoption of the victims' point of view that completely erases the authorial voice. While "Toba Tek Singh" for an instance, presents the trauma of the dislocated millions on both sides of the border through lunatic Bishan Singh's point of view, "Open it" textualizes the trauma of a raped woman from the perspective of Sakina, a repeatedly raped seventeen years old Muslim girl. The other means employed for neutrality in the sparing use of characterization devoid of any religions, ideological or cultural markers. Manto never makes any effort to describe characters in detail nor does he try to identify them in the name of religion, culture or any communal group. Manto's "Open it" wounds the readers' mind through the transmission of the trauma of Sirajuddin, the protagonist of the story from the very beginning of the story. "When Sirajuddin opens his eyes in the camp and sees the tumultuous crowds of men and boys around him" (34), he comes to realize that his daughter is missing amidst the turmoil and violence of partition in which Sirajuddin had already lost his wife. The traumatic feeling of Sirajuddin touches and wounds the heart of the readers. It has been transmitted to the readers' mind through the main characters of the story.

Manto generally paid attention to the ending of his story. That is why, they startle the readers with their pay-off lines which round off the basic fabric of the story. Many of Manto's masterpieces such as "Open it" and "Toba Tek Singh" bear the testimony to this fact. The stories "Cold Meat" and "Open it" by Manto exploit the ironic mode of storytelling to foreground the brutality of violence and to underline the bourgeois and patriarchal underpinnings, thereby excavating the painful memory of trauma that victims have undergone. He, while ironizing the violence to convey the political messages about minority, uses humanistic irony as a vehicle for political commentary demystifying the politics of the representation of violence in official texts of both modern India and Pakistan. Manto's irony which makes readers see from the perspective of critical humanism also explains why the partition took place. His use of irony in the context of violence of massive inclusion and exclusion in the stories gives its political edge. So, the politics of irony has been made a favored tool of minority groups, feminists and other subalterns as means of critiquing the establishment by re-evaluating the bourgeois and sexual politics during and aftermaths of partition of India in 1947.

Partition parted every sector of human affairs. So, partition stories depict the irreplaceable loss displacement, dispossession, abduction, rape, trauma, pain death and other forms of violence that common people suffered from all three communities: Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. Partition of India is really one of a violent events ever happened in the human civilization having lasting impressions of monstrosity and horrific emotional duress. But these ugly aspects of partition were ignored and kept aside by highlighting partition event only as independence and bravery in the official history of modern India. This based documentary never justifies the real trauma for these innocent victims. In this regard, Gyanendra Pandey for this injustice comments:

The history of violence has been treated in the historiography of modern India as aberration and as absence: aberration in the sense that violence is as

something removed from the general run of Indian history: a distorted from, an exceptional moment, not the real history of India at all. Violence also appears as an absence because historical discourse has not been able to capture and represent the moment almost and always about context about everything that happens around violence. (27)

All these official documents of history are single sided and of elite's. No commoners are provided justice. Several voices are silenced and their repressed psyches, once, sooner or later, outburst for what Manto reveals through his stories as partition become the event of victory and independence only to some handful of people whereas majority of people were accompanied with feeling of pain, sorrow, anguish and sadness, where people were separated overnight, friends became enemies, homes became strange places and those very strange places were to be called as homes. So people's mentality parted with the partition of the nation.

Urvashi Butalia questions the historians for their negligence to explore what she had seen as the underside of this history, feelings, emotions, pain and anguish trauma, sense of class, silence in which it lay shrouded. Stressing on the fact that historians could not bring objectivity of partition violence because of their families were involved in it. Death, displacement, dislocation, loss of home, and family- these were close "to the lives of many historians" (275). Butalia strongly opines that there should be re-examination of history of partition because the re-examination is deeply rooted in the concern of the present" (276). In her view, the entire traumas and tragedies of partition violence were not visited and examined properly.

These revisionist historians subverted the deep pangs of sufferings and exhibited the while lies. While making revision of official history, creative writers and those revisionist historians depicted the situation before and after the event and presented the cause and effect of the happening. Among these several creative writers, Manto counts the prime position who dealt with reality of the existing violence by showing it at various levels as familial, social, economic, political, religious and mainly others. In that course Manto also subverted the limited and biased notion of partition, which took partition of India as only the partition of territory and people. Two critical concepts emerge in response to the tension between traumatic and historical modes of addressing the past: the notion of "the middle voice" (19) and that of "empathic unsettlement" (41). With many precautions and qualifications, LaCarpa proposes the discursive analogue of a "middle voice. The middle voice would thus be the 'in between' voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions" (20). This "middle-voice would thus fully identify with the trauma that it represents.

Manto's use of irony in "Cold Meat" shows the utter cruelty of humanity at the time of the partition violence of 1947. He does exhibit his subaltern politics by making the humanity of the poor and the dispossessed shine over others. Leslie Fleming quotes Aksari who says, "Man even in his real shape, is acceptable to Manto. He has already seen that man's humanity is tenacious enough so that even his becoming a wild animal

cannot extinguish his humanity. Manto has confidence in humanity” (101). Manto’s faith in humanity can be located in the story “Cold Meat” where Ishar Singh, the protagonist, copulates with cold meat of a girl. The story seemingly revolves around one aspect of sexual psychology, but in fact, in it an extremely subtle message is given to man, that even at the last limits of cruelty and violence, of barbarity and bestiality, he still does not lose his humanity. If Ishar Singh had completely lost his humanity, the touch of the dead woman would not have affected him, so violently as to strip him of his manhood (Fleming 102). The choice of his character Ishar Singh and Bishan Singh is deliberate. They are represented as morally superior people, in which humanity shines rather better than many belonging to the higher class.

LaCarpa proposes the “middle voice,” whose “modulations of proximity and distance, empathy and irony with respect to different objects of identification” would communicate trauma’s troubling affective charge while maintaining the distinction” would communicate trauma’s troubling affective charge while maintaining the distinction between victims and proxy-witnesses (30). LaCarpa further proffers the concept of “empathic unsettlement,” an affective response he considers most appropriate to the reception of another’s traumatic past. A notion akin to Kaja Silverman’s “heteropathic identification” (40), “empathic unsettlement” recognizes the affective impact of another’s traumatic history, yet respects its irreducible specificity, and thus avoids conflating empathy with identification.

In “Cold Meat,” irony begins with the central character’s raping of a dead girl. The raping implies a sharp irony that exposes the cruelty of the communal violence particularly directed towards the female. “Cold Meat” is a story about an all-too-brief rendezvous between two Sikh Lovers, Ishar Singh, and Kalwant Kaur. In the world outside, looting and arisen are rife, and Ishar has participated in them fully, periodically bringing the spoils home to Kalwant. The air between the two lovers in the hotel room is tense. For some time now, Kalwant has sensed that not all is well between the two of them. He manages to evade the questions and pacifies her by initiating love making. However, where the foreplay reaches fever-pitch and Kalwant is like ‘pot ready to boil over’ Ishar is unable to play ‘the trump card’ and bring their sexual play to climax. Finally, Ishar confesses the existence of other woman, as he tell her:

In the house that I . . . looted . . . there were seven . . . seven men these. Six . . . I . . . I murdered . . . with this very dragger, which you . . . never mind . . . listen . . . There was a girl very beautiful, who I picked up and took with me . . . but . . . but . . . His voice become faint. Kulwant asked again. Then what happened? Ishar Singh opened his closed eyes and looked at Kulwant Karu’s body, every part of which was heaving, ‘She . . . she was a dead body, a corpse . . . absolutely could meat . . . my love, give me. (Manto 97)

This is the climactic scene of irony in “Cold Meat” where readers are aware of Ishar Singh’s rape of a dead body of a Muslim girl. Manto has captured ironically the very tragic face of mankind caught fever in the dilemma of hope and fear, failure and success morality and immorality.

Manto's sympathy lies with the subaltern characters. However, since Manto is neither a delicate nor a sentimental writer, he never writes with the goal of appealing to the emotion of the readers. He rather depicts the essential human condition and aims the pinch the intellect "though a sustained engaging readers' minds" (Beerendra Pandey 97). He resorts to what Beerendra Pandey calls the meta-ironic method of transmission of trauma as evidenced in his stories "Open It" and "Cold Meat" Beerendra Pandey remarks:

Irony is Manto's stories such as . . . "Khol Do" ("Open it") . . . should be understood as meta irony which consistently reveals the shocks of acting out. The story writer makes the survivors and witnesses and the readers became re-traumatized and re-live the past . . ., Manto's early partition stories, on one of which Pandey has based his subaltern intervention into the nationalist historiography of partition, turn out to be an attempt at addressing the problem of narrating the south Asian memory: transmission of violent emotion through a sustained engaging of reader's mind forcing them to recreate the violent violence vicariously in order to be possessed by the past, overwhelming them with shock. (21-22)

The story that shocks Manto's readers much more than any other of his stories is "Khol Do" ("Open it"). "Open It" depicts most powerfully how Manto comes to give with the human pain of partition, exploring with remarkable combination of anger, sarcasm and tenderness as the effects of the violence and dislocation on its victims. It is the story of an old man's attempt to find his only daughter Sakina from whom he has become separated while escaping the looters. When he wakes up in a crowded refugee camp, old Sirajuddin is at first, completely numb and unable to recollect anything about the night in which Sakina disappeared. When he regains his sense, the afflicted father engages the services of eight Muslim volunteers, who cross the border in search of the lost and abandoned. The young volunteers promise to find his daughter. After ten days of the prayer and waiting, Sirajuddin is present when a near-dead body of a girl is found on the roadside and brought inside a makeshift hospital. When the doctor runs on the light, the girl is recognized as his daughter by Sirajuddin. Fresh from this discovery by the old man comes, however yet another discovery, which dominates at once. "Macabre in humanity": "The predatoriness of the traumatized victim, traumatized father and the traumatized doctor" (Beerendra Pandey 34).

The doctor looks at the body lying on the stretcher and feels her pulse. Then he points towards the window and talks him: 'open it'.

The body stressed slightly on the stretcher.

The lifeless hands untied the waistband and lowered the salwar.

She's alive! My daughters alive, old Sajuddin shouted with joy. The doctors broke into a cold sweat. (Manto 134)

Trauma affected Sakina, at the end of the story, is in such a state of mind that she cannot "distinguish between a predatory male command and a sympathetic male voice" (Beerendra Pandey 34). The father seems happy to find his daughter alive but the doctor knows better about the dark future of a girl raped in the conservative South

Asian society. So he gets the cold sweat-pathology of his trauma. The doctor's trauma parallels the trauma of the readers of Manto's time.

"Toba Tek Singh" is another very well-known partition story that highlights the poignancy of the human tragedy as also the political bankruptcy of the solution dividing not only land but also the people who had lived together for centuries, creating a unique blend of cultural life. It is so ironic that the division of a country into two also divides the insane inside the asylum. Two governments have decided to divide the lunatics too on the basis of religion, the reactions of inmates displayed a unique sense of solidarity with the place and the people, one Sikh Lunatic asked another Sikh: "Sardarji, why are we being sent to Hindustan? We don't even know their Language" (150). Another climbs a tree saying that he likes to live neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan but rather live on a tree.

The protagonist of the story who carries the burden of Manto's message is, however, a lunatic named Bishan Singh who was popularly known as Toba Tek Singh, because he belongs to a place with that name. He has been in the asylum for fifteen years or more and has refused to either sit or lie down all these years. His visitors have regularly brought him the news of his growing up daughter. Suddenly the visits have ceased in the wake of the news of the partition and worried Bishan Singh starts asking about location of Toba Tek Singh. Then his childhood friend Fazaluddin brought him the news that his people had gone away to Hindustan and hoped that Bishan Singh too might be sent there. Bishan Singh asked him the question-where was Toba Tek Singh. Fazaluddin first replied that it was in Hindustan but then corrected himself to finally state that it was in Pakistan. This upsets Bishan Singh very much.

It is because of this obsession that Bishan Singh frequently talks about his native place Toba Tek Singh "oper di gurgur di bay dhianna di mung di daal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan" (148). Though incomprehensible entirely, some of his words in the sentence are sensible words like mung, daal, government of Pakistan. Toba Tek Singh suggests that he remained attached to the soil of his native place. The end of story according to Beerendra Pandey, has a typical use of meta-irony that makes readers "laugh . . . then cry and again laugh" be-taking the boundary between a laughter and cry. It is called dark humor. The final shock at the end of "Toba Tek Singh" has the transforming effect that extends up to the readers.

Summing up, Manto shows the essential goodness of humanity conveying the sense of human love, warmth and the intimate sense of fellow-feelings with a powerful depiction of violence. He does not forget to awaken the slumbering humanity or the humanity gone mad at the time of crisis. Manto's irony takes on political overtones as it helps excavate the painful memory of trauma and agony that recipients have undergone. He, while ironizing the violence to convey the political message about minority, exploits irony as a means for political commentary that mystified the politics of the representation of the violence resurfaced in the name of an inevitable politico-religious movement. Manto's use of irony, in the stories, has been used as a powerful weapon of the minority groups and feminists as a means of critiquing and subverting

the dominant ideologies and establishments by reevaluating the capitalists and masculinist politics during and aftermaths of partition of India in 1947.

Manto's use of irony in "Cold Meat" and "Open it" shows the utter cruelty of humanity at the time of partition violence of 1947. Irony in "Cold Meat", which begins with the central characters raping of a dead girl, exposes the cruelty of the communal violence particularly directed towards the females. Ishar Singh's engagement with the dead body, that is cold flesh, has taken away his potency which is symbol of masculinity. Another story "Open it" depicts most powerfully how Manto comes to grip, with the human pain of partition, exploring with a remarkable combination of anger, sarcasm and tenderness, the effects of the violence and dislocation on its victims. The story ironically shows how woman are exploited both physically and psychologically not only by the people of different religious communities but by the people of their own religion. Manto's ironic vein continues in his other story "Toba Tek Singh". Bishen Singh's death in 'no-man's land' gives the readers a glimpse of the true history of the partition violence in which millions of Indians and Pakistanis had experienced the trauma of dislocation, madness, rape and loot.

Manto's writing encapsulates his sympathy for the victims and his belief in the essential goodness of humanity. The humanity that shines through in his writings about the down-trodden people living in the fringes of society, and the victims of partition violence of 1947 are integral parts of his stories. His insights are more refreshing, more poignant, more hard hitting, and, of course, more ironic. Manto's characters are always from the fringes of the society urban, poor, daily wage earners, drifters and victims of the trauma of partition-who come to occupy central space in his works.

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