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Remembering the Trauma of Partition in Sadaat Hasan Manto's Fictional Works: A Poststructural Critique

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Abstract

There have been several ways to uphold and disseminate information around the 1947 partition in India, such as writings through fiction, or non-fiction, media, casebooks, or collecting the real experiences of those who witnessed it; all are heading towards providing a better understanding of the partition trauma and violence. The trauma of partition has equally been a matter of articulation through language and the lacuna it leaves, as unraveled by many partition writers be it fictional or historical writings. Among these writers, Sadaat Hasan Manto is one of the most prominent voices who has captured the partition violence and the subsequent trauma of the survivors in great detail. This study is interested in the short stories of Manto which include “The Return,” “Ten Rupees,” and “Toba Tek Singh”. These short stories are deeply ingrained in the experiences of the partition victims and how the everyday ‘normal’ has been challenged through the sufferers’ physical and psychological abnormality. But as long as the problems of articulation through language are there, there will always remain a question of reliability. This language of fiction further gives birth to the very fictionality of language which always suffers from the ‘slippage’ of meaning. The problem of this research takes place in the distinctive presence or absence of language by Manto to signify the trauma of partition and how that linguistic presence (absence) offers a negotiation between fiction and testimony. Standing on the edge of linguistic flexibility and linguistic inarticulation, this study aims to analyze how Manto’s select short stories subverts the very definition of testimonial and historical truth. Keeping the aforementioned issue, the three short stories by Manto become the primary texts where the intention is to read between the lines and look for the linguistic nuances Manto enacted to testify the ‘truth’ of partition before his readers. Influenced by terms like testimony, witness, and silence, this paper questions how these short stories unravel the psychological experience of the trauma more than the historical or chronological reality.

Keywords: Partition, trauma, postcoloniality, linguistic nuances

Introduction

“Memory is both more and less than history, and vice versa.” - Cathy Caruth

History of the 1947 partition speaks of utter atrocities, trauma, extreme violence, and displacement happening on the eve of freedom, i.e., the independence of India on the 15th of August, 1947. The partition of India, outlined in the Indian Independence Act 1947, resulted in the division of the political, geographical space and led to the formation of two separate dominions in South Asia – India and Pakistan. The prolonged era of British colonialism came to an end at the expense of the immediate division of the region into two countries based on religious affiliation. This division not only led to the partition between countries but also the partition between individuals. Considering the history of partition as an elongated and longstanding event that has retained its residue long after its occurrence, what gives an initial thought to this article is the ways histories of partition are graphed or written to sustain a “cultural memory” (Rigney 14). The ‘truth’ of Partition is disseminated and transmitted from generation to generation through various presentative and representative forms for its continuous “mediation, textualization and acts of communication” (Rigney 14). But the difference between history and its remembrance is as complicated as the layers of the trauma, unrest, and, displacement of the partition. What has happened in the past (history) and an individual’s rendition of it as a subjective experience (memory) inform the difference between literal and literary testimony. Oozing out from a concept of literary testimony is the horror, and violence embedded in one’s memory of Partition which the very medium of language fails to hold. Forms of oral testimony, casebooks, fiction, and memoirs uncover political upheaval which led to the psychological split and a sense of exile on both sides of the border. This failure of language to testify is evident not only in the literary testimonies of partition stories but also in testimonies captured for historical, legal, and political documentation. To witness the partition beyond language and beyond the realm of historical knowledge, this article looks at the select short stories by partition writer, Sadaat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). The short stories by Manto are the locale of partition sufferings and trauma where, in place of language, inarticulation and silence dwell. The existing literature around Manto deals with how he as an observer and social realist, attempts to bear witness to the partition victims. But what has not adequately been discussed so far is how Manto is incapable of bearing witness to the readers and how he ‘submits’ to the failure to testify the experience of the Partition victims. This perspective will largely discuss the function of language in the text, as employed by the narrator or the author, Manto. To carry out this purpose, this article is interested in the translated short stories of Manto, titled “The Return,” “Ten Rupees,” and “Toba Tek Singh.” Taking a slight departure from the mere textual analysis of Partition, this paper arises from the juncture of questions like how fiction deals with truth in the contexts of the select short stories; how the very rhetoric of language fails to bear the trauma embedded and further testify to the failure of doing so; how do the very terms like testimony, witness, and silence are problematized in the stories from which the psychological experience of the trauma is more decipherable than the historical or chronological reality.

To understand the paradoxes of the partition where on the one hand people were exposed to the feeling of long-awaited *azaadi* (a zeal to free life from all bonds), and on the other hand, experienced the physical and psychological displacement and alienation from one’s lived space and identity, the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz penned down in 1947: “*Yeh daghdar ujala yeh shab gazida sahr, woh intizar tha jiska woh yeh sahr to nahin*”, translated as “the stain-covered day-break, this night-bitten dawn. This dawn is

not that dawn we craved for" (Subh-e-Azadi, 1947). The trauma and the turmoil around Partition shattered human lives, their identity, and their relation to the lived spaces, accelerated by displacement and psychological disbalance. This fragmentation and angst are captured in the short stories of the Partition writer and playwright. Manto's short stories on Partition are deeply ingrained in the 'abnormality' and absurdity of sense and consciousness where the 'normal' acceptance of the world is deferred and, repressed. The short stories suffer from inarticulation and fall short of expressing the traumatic experience and none of their articulations seem to 'justify' or express the on-ground brutalities. Keeping in mind the (in)capability of language to negotiate with the complicated layers of trauma-ridden consciousness, the select literary texts suffer from linguistic inarticulation as the very medium of expression. But, as long as the language of fiction or fictionality of language is there, there will remain a question of unreliability and the 'slippage' of meaning, giving birth to testimonial fiction. This discussion of language, witness, and testimony from a poststructural lens is relevant in the context of this paper to analyze Manto's distinctive uses of language or the distinctive absence of language in the select texts that signify the trauma of partition and how that linguistic presence or absence leads to a negotiation between fiction and testimony.

Poststructural Trauma Theory

The language of history is a language of information, testimony, evidence, and witness, where the 'language' functions as the key medium. With the poststructural theoretical intervention, the apparently linear structure of language—an assemblage of words in synchronization of thoughts—began to be doubted, and questioned. The multidimensionality and unreliability of language, resulting from this line of thought is likely to be the point this research would take its cue from.

While surveying through the oral memories to confront the experiences and embedded sufferings of the partition period, the Indian writer and feminist, Urbashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998), traces through the traumatic memory lane of 1947 partition. In the book, she questions what it takes to testify the trauma, "to dredge up the many uncomfortable and unpleasant memories that they may prefer to put away." (356). It brings out the dilemma, of whether to speak up or keep on living with the 'secret' truth without stirring its coiled trauma. Damayanti Sahgal's testimony in Butalia's book implies that testimony can never claim or belong to the realm of precise knowledge, it always comes from a constant negotiation, where the language runs short of testifying: "I did not know what to do...look what is happening to me now, O god, help me...I'm dirty, I'm filthy...I could hardly speak...I kept crying, I'm stiff, I'm fixed in this position, my limbs are locked" (123). This constant negotiation between the event and its traumatic representation through language implies the complexity of testifying an experienced truth and the lacuna it holds as truth or past reality. Therefore, the history born out of these testimonies remain as fractured and as fragmented as the memory of it.

This difficulty of inarticulation or negotiation is further explicated by one of the leading theorists of trauma studies, Cathy Caruth. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth states that trauma and its linguistically coded expression exist in the utter negotiation between death and survival in the sense that it produces a double paradox – a quest to understand the past and the inability to comprehend it. The repression of the trauma resists narrative representation and comes at the expense of erasing the actual event. As Caruth says, "the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (92). And thus, "history fails to

adequately represent traumatic events such as war or genocide since any representation is a type of fiction" (76). The memory, in this sense, resides at the expanse of forgetfulness, and resides as something other than the actual event itself. It is a territory of both absence and presence, of both knowledge and the unknowable where language and its expression serve as metaphor of an unreliable and further, fictional medium.

Such memory of an individual's traumatic experience suffers from the excess and inadequacy of language at the same time and is thus "irreproducible" (18), as Tarun K. Saint, the author of *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction* (2010) terms. This is because the very memory, when articulated through language, is haunted by a possibility of fiction, perjury, or lie when expressed through language as memory or recollection. It occurs as the replication of the forgetfulness, it is 'produced' when the history is no longer there. The difficulty of the witness to bear witness is caught in a fall for perjury where the testimony of the victims fails to convey the 'truth' of experience. This implication of "perjury" (22) is also explicated by Derrida in his essay "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony" (2000) where he talks about an individual's incapability to testify one's decaying experience as it is caught between the domain of the experienced and the unexperienced. In the larger dimension of fiction and testimony, Derrida talks about the fragility of describing an insider's "secret" experience as testimony for an outsider, who is historically situated outside the event, away from the time and space of the actual event (30). In the very process, the witness, who owns the 'secret' cannot testify to his own experience, and is not able to retain any 'authenticity' of what took place and therefore, cannot further be 'authenticated' by an outsider. Hence, the insider and the outsider can never be bridged, the gap always remains. Testimony dwells in the utter binary to testify and the failure to testify, as Derrida observes: "For to testify is always, on the other hand, to do it at present... the witness must be present at the stand himself... one cannot send a cassette to testify in one's place. One must oneself be present, raise one's hand, speak in the first person" (32). In this context of witness and truth, the distance between primary and secondary narrator is the distance between the experience and its representation where the representation, in any form, contaminates the truth. The individual's confrontation with the truth can never be further authenticated by a narrating persona, and as a result, the truth always suffers from slippage and deference.

The movement from the "experiencing I" to the "narrating I" bears the distancing from and a disrupted continuum with the traumatic memories of partition violence (Amir 2). This impossibility of bearing witness for a victim is better explained by Giorgio Agamben in the context of Holocaust survivors. Agamben in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999) talks about the "impossibility of the witness to the impossibility of bearing witness" in relation to the memory and testimony of the Holocaust (39). Agamben deconstructs the presuppositions that the metaphysics of presence holds, saying that the potentiality of anything (language, in this respect) is what allows for its negation. If language is something human beings adapt to over time, then it is also something they can survive without adapting to. From this perspective, Agamben subverts and questions the potentiality of language to testify to one's own life experiences. So, an individual who is psychologically stripped of the voice and linguistic articulation cannot testify to an experience and requires a witness who is somehow nearer to the victim's experienced experience to speak on behalf of the subject. The latter, whom Agamben terms the "pseudo-witness" (34), cannot faithfully word the testimony due to the inaccessibility of the memory and lack of subjective involvement that the victim, therefore the "complete witness" has suffered (33). Hence, the "pseudo-witness" (34) in their testimony implies an impossibility of bearing witness and, at the same time the impossibility of faithfully adhering to one's lived experience: "Testimony

takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking...enter into a zone of indistinction" (130). This is indicative of the assertion that when the experience of the victim is unattainable, and the "pseudo-witness" attains it on behalf, an impossibility of bearing that witness is always implied.

In light of these theoretical underpinnings mentioned above, the following sections will discuss Manto's stories to confront the objectives of this study. The select short stories are caught in this utter impossibility to testify the trauma and the impossibility of bearing witness of the testimony, owing to the poststructural critique of language.

Testimony, Knowledge, and "The Return"

The short story *Khol Do*, (Urdu for 'open it'), translated by Khalid Hasan as "The Return", unfolds the complexities of bearing witness to the trauma of Sakina, who is brutally raped during the massacre. Set in the backdrop of Partition and its upheavals when people getting killed, raped, murdered, and disappeared are far from occasional, but rather everyday occurrences, the short story depicts a family separated from each other during a massacre. Sakina's father, Sirajuddin, has been looking for his daughter and finally, finds her "unconscious near the railway tracks" (Manto 41). When she is taken to the hospital, the doctor suspects that due to severe sexual assault and rape, she is bereft of the normalcy of life. This abnormality of Sakina's behaviour can be seen towards the end of the story when she unties the chord of her pajama when the doctor says "open it", telling Sirajuddin to open the window so that light can come in (41). This act of Sakina can be interpreted as an attempt on her part to be the witness of the trauma. The failed transmission/translation of her utterance is also suggestive of the metaphorical distance between the "experiencing I" and the "narrating I" (Amir 2). Sakina's father, being a witness, to her traumatic experience fails to recognize her trauma and speaks out: "My daughter is alive" (Manto 69). Here the 'narrating I' is not only the author but also the characters who fail to bear witness. Sakina's culminating act of speaking through her body eliminates her as a witness and also explicates the inability of the narrator to decipher the subjective trauma of an individual. It conveys an utter impossibility for the "complete witness" to testify her act, and it even falls heavier on the characters and, by extension, the readers who remain in awe of the act (Agamben 33). The entire story sums up Manto's inarticulation before the extremely heinous violence Sakina had gone through. The narrating I, most evidently, bears the impossibility of writing the witness by leaving a lacuna within the consciousness, a split in the consciousness, a "metaphoric sense of witnessing" (10), as the author of the book *Bearing Witness to the Witness* (2019), Dana Amir would term it. The lacuna lies in the non-linear comprehension of the narrative, of the narrator. The metaphoric gap between the author and the victim speaks not of their relationality as primary and secondary but implies the distance they hold. Sakina's act unravels the difficulty of regaining the status quo of everyday life from which a recollection of the memory as knowledge is "irreproducible" (Saint 18). The transmission of such testimony from the realm of knowledge is psychologically appealing and deals more with the absence of language, its "belatedness", and its indefinite possibility (Caruth 92). Ultimately, we are left with a difficult conversation between Sakina and other characters, and a surrendered resistance where testifying is an impossible possibility. As Amir commented, "The subject is imprisoned in a territory of negative possession, where the traumatic contents are neither digested nor worked through" (Amir 7). Thus, Sakina's testimony belongs to that territory where a settlement with the trauma is 'normal' and internalised.

"Ten Rupees" and the Testimonial Perjury

The short stories of Manto provide recourse to the very testimonies of Partition through paradox, irony, subversive denouement, and linguistic techniques. The stories travel across the temporal instant of a 'living present' to transvalue the historical catastrophe for post-partition generations. This transmission of trauma is exemplified through the character of 15-year-old Sarita in Manto's short story, "Ten Rupees", translated by Reeck and Ahmed, where the two worldviews contrast each other. The story does not deal much with explicit violence and psychological outbursts, but through a subtle layer of fantasy and escapism, it exposes the social reality of 1940s Bombay (now Mumbai, India) where violence has become the norm and, any deviation from it seems unlikely. In this story, Manto depicts this inherent normalization of violence through the character of Sarita who at the outset of the story goes out with men like Shahab, Anwar, and Kiyafat who victimize her. This willful ignorance of her victimization allows Sarita to enjoy the openness of the sky and the limitless view of the ocean. This indifference towards her subjection deepens the story's thematic intensity and makes the readers aware of the utterly degraded and inhumane context in which the story is rooted. Along with Sarita, the readers get awestruck by the surrounding atmosphere that normalizes the abnormality of life. The inherently suppressed and unconscious trauma of the victim unfolds through the ways Sarita responds to the whole event which eventually haunts the readers in a more nuanced and deeper fashion. Unlike "The Return", "Ten Rupees" is more decipherable through its excess of linguistic expression. Towards the end of the story, Sarita's apprehensive inquiry and further refusal to take money for her 'normal' act of existence explicates the unconscious trauma and defines the degradation of the society in which she lives. Sarita says: "This money-why should I take it?" (Manto 121). Sarita's return of the ten rupees as 'redundant' brings out the ingrained repression and the acceptance of it. "Ten Rupees" haunts the readers through the narrative fantasy, and this aspect of haunting is also referred to by Derrida when talking of testimony:

In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the possibility at least, of literature...it is a chance and a threat, a resource both of testimony and of literary fiction, law and non-law, truth and non-truth, veracity and lie, faithful and perjury. (30)

If not in the form of historical testimony, the short story certainly provides a literary window through which fiction or testimonial perjury peeps through.

In the story, Sarita, the "complete witness", through the 'normalcy' of her life is made to express the embedded suffering where the 'truth' takes recourse in the tropes of fiction, therefore, inviting a possibility of lie and perjury (Agamben 33). When Sarita speaks for herself, not through the eyes of the victim but through the gaze of the "flying birds", as she compares herself, it is her submission to the brutality of life as normal (Manto 19). An abstract space is possessed by Sarita, a space subversive of the subtly dominating space of patriarchy, nation, and law. This can also be connected to a "metonymic act of witnessing" (Amir 11), where the victim, as a first-person narrator, is made to be the testifier for herself and substitutes the whole act of violence with layers of fantasy and transcendentalism. The story, at the end, is about a prostitute whose fictional fantasy seems to be the equipment for subverting the testimonial reportage of a victim. However, Sarita, in Manto's craft, cannot be simply broken down to an instance of an inhuman act in the aftermath of partition, but through a satirical tone of the story, Sarita tries to lessen the gap between the violence of the historical event and the 'living present'.

Language, and its Failure – “Toba Tek Singh”

It becomes evident from the modes of testimony in the texts that there is a dearth of language to be expressed both on the part of the complete witness who is stripped of the normalcy in life and on the part of the narrator whose testimony is haunted by a language of difference and insignificance that continuously defers meaning and understanding, in a constant slippage to find its aimed signified. The author Manto's position as the pseudo-witness, who speaks for the trauma and the sufferings that the victims of Partition gone through has been attempted in the short story “Toba Tek Singh”. The sense of slippage can also be experienced in “Toba Tek Singh”, in which Bishan Singh utters his everyday gibberish speech that makes no sense to his companions or the readers of the text. This also suggests how the everyday colloquial language becomes a paralyzed medium to express the trauma but ultimately ends up giving an utter incomprehensibility to his companions and the readers. In “Toba Tek Singh”, Bishan Singh, who is a victim of both spatial and psychological displacement and alienation, stands on ‘No Man's Land’ (a place between the India-Pakistan borders, politically named Line of Control) for fifteen years, which is difficult for the readers to grasp as one of the examples of realism and literal testimony. This long-standing of Bishan Singh in an unclaimed land indicates the alienation he suffers after being stripped of his spatial affiliation. Bishan Singh's resistance to the partitioning of his self strongly resonates with the split of consciousness of the lived space, Toba Tek Singh. When the narrator writes about Bishan Singh: “He was always to be found standing. Because of this, his legs were permanently swollen, something that did not appear to bother him”, the abstraction of standing for fifteen years in the same position bewilders the readers (Manto 11). At last, we see his death in a space that is geographically unlocated and remains a space of in-betweenness: “There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh” (Manto 15). In this discussion, Caruth's assertion is relevant that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past” but only identified in “the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (56). Bishan Singh's abnormal gesture speaks of his trauma that kept on haunting him and that trauma is not referred specifically to anywhere, the trauma is dislocated in physical and psychological spaces, blurring the normality of life and one's self.

Bishan Singh is not capable of signifying his experience through the dominant discourse of language. His incapability to belong to the comprehensible and abnormal is a manifestation of the trauma partition disseminates. His language, “Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain” (Manto 13) remains untranslated by Manto and remains undecipherable even to the readers. Between the truthful testimony and literature lies an in-between space of testimony and the impossibility of a transparent and ‘original’ truth. This is where fiction peeps through the testimony of an event, and this is where Manto's fiction can be analyzed as a possibility of testimonial impossibility.

Remembering the Trauma of Partition

Although caught in the possible fallacy to draw Western theories on non-Western and South Asian contexts, this research finds the concepts and perspectives drawn, apt and relevant in Manto's context. The trauma of any event cannot be generalized in terms of its intensity and specificity. Having said that, the theories discussed to provide a cross-cultural reading to the discussion of this article, where it opens a different dimension of the complexities of testimony and witness to look at

Manto's select texts. Manto's short stories qualify as a fictional testimony of the historical time implying an inseparable reciprocity between the language of fiction and the language of testimony. Cited as a realist writer, presenting the reality of social paradigm, Manto bears the responsibility to make the violence appear transmissible within its fictional dimensionality and accessibility. The protagonists Sakina, Sarita, and Bishan Singh are the "complete witnesses" (Agamben 33) who can't bear witness to their own experiences and are psychologically or linguistically crippled to stand as a direct witness. They take recourse in the narrator or in the author Manto, who is the letter that speaks on behalf of the witness.

From the aforementioned reading of the texts, it is decipherable that testimony resides in the space of both possibility and impossibility. The testimony happens in the absence of the event that took place somewhere in the past; testimony happens in the memories of that event where neither the direct witness nor secondary witness can be faithful enough to testify. Here, the distinction between complete witness and pseudo-witness falls in a category where it lays bare the flexibility through which the essentiality of fiction and testimony overlaps and becomes a literary testimony: "The possibility of this form of bearing witness for an impossibility of bearing witness depends on the letter and its insoluble ambiguity of literal and literary, of proper and quasi-testimony— in its movement from literal to literary, the letter discovers the "playing space" of testimony" (Heiden 13). The distinction between the literary testimony and literal testimony seems to blur as the truth always defers from its destined referents, enabling a play of truth and non-truth.

Existing in a fragmented concept of nation, self, and consciousness with its voyeuristic community and its humanistically paralyzed people, Manto realizes that the embedded suffering of partition can neither be expressed in mathematics, history, or through any other logic, as they will all be futile. This futility/fragility can only be subverted through signifiers that do not refer to its immediate signifieds, always dislocating itself back and forth. In the journey of remembering and recollecting the trauma of partition, fiction provides the opportunity to fill the gap between history and the remembrance of history with silence or ellipses. Manto envisions what Heiden states about testimony: "The human being exists...in the missing articulation between the living being and logos" (Heiden 14). That is to say, between history and the memory, between the knowledge and the unknown, lies the meaning of human existence with all its silence, ellipses, and remembrance.

Conclusion

So far, this paper tries to uphold how language is 'articulated' by Manto through the fictional tropes and narrative devices that eventually lead to a discussion of fiction and testimony. The language, through its presence and absence, is suggestive of a negotiation between the possibility and the impossibility of a literary testimony, and thus renders a more subtle, and nuanced registers on the trauma and psychological alienation. However, with the linguistic inability to adhere to the normalcy of life, the stories leave the readers with a moment of undecidability, a moment of testimonial pause where both the victim and the witness suffer from the difficulty of bearing witness to the readers.

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