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Nationalism and Madness: A Study of Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories "Toba Tek Singh, "Thanda Gosht" and "Khol Do"

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Abstract

One of the most important events in Indian history, the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, witnessed intense nationalistic passion. People were suddenly absorbed by ideas of national pride, national solidarity, and national honor, all of which were rooted in the Partition of India and Pakistan. This paper aims to study the very thin line that distinguishes the idea of nationalism from madness. It examines Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories *"Toba Tek Singh," "Thanda Gosht,"* and *"Khol Do"* through qualitative textual analysis**,** highlighting characterization, narrative structure, and language. It examines the schizophrenic identities assimilated and adorned by people during the partition and analyzes how individuals behave under the influence of excessive patriotism. The metaphor of "madness" in alliance with nationalism is examined in this study. This paper intends not only to highlight nationalism but also explains the performativity of madness that Saadat Hasan Manto so wisely and effectively employs in his three short stories. In the end, madness remains only the rhetoric of nationalism.

Introduction

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 remains one of the most significant historical events of the twentieth century. The massacres and violent riots that followed affected both Muslims and Hindus on either side of the newly drawn borders, which had once been shared by a single community. Millions of people lost their lives, while countless others suffered displacement, brutality, rape, poverty, and severe physical and psychological trauma. The voices of the victims were largely muffled by the chaotic madness and carnage that accompanied and followed Partition. However, these silenced voices found expression through the works of writers and poets.

A vast corpus of Partition literature has been produced by eminent writers such as **Ismat Chughtai, Bhisham Sahni, Khushwant Singh, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Mushirul Hasan,** among others. What distinguishes Saadat Hasan Manto's art of storytelling is its ability to strike at the central nerve, evoking a range of painful emotions and memories that cannot be ignored in the discourse of Partition (Tiwari, 2013). The essence of Manto's literature lies in its universal and humanistic appeal, which challenges divisions based on religion and race that dominated Partition narratives. His writings engage with issues of religion, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and color, and foreground stories of abuse, oppression, and suffering. Manto emerges as a powerful interpreter of these emotions, as his stories create a direct connection between lived reality and the reader, enabling an intense sense of identification.

An Indian-born Pakistani writer who migrated to Pakistan after Independence, Manto foregrounded the traumatic realities of Partition with stark honesty. In contrast to state-sanctioned histories, his short stories function as an alternative archive—repositories of lived experience that center the voices of the marginalized and oppressed (Alex, 2017) The promise of a new dawn of independence and freedom remained largely unrealized; instead, the collective

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consciousness of society became marked by loss and disillusionment. This sentiment is aptly captured by Faiz Ahmad Faiz's famous line: ***"This dawn is not the dawn we have been craving for."***

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the fine line separating nationalism from madness—the man-made madness that engulfed individuals during the riots. It explores the schizophrenic identities adopted by people while committing acts of extreme violence and moral transgression. Manto's three short stories, *"Toba Tek Singh," "Thanda Gosht,"* and *"Khol Do,"* examine the themes of madness and nationalism in distinct yet interconnected ways.

Metaphor of Madness

"Toba Tek Singh" satirizes the concept of madness and raises the fundamental question of who is truly insane: the inmates confined within an asylum or the so-called sane individuals making irrational decisions outside it. *Thanda Gosht*, on the other hand, presents two distinct forms of madness. One emerges from Ishwar Singh's frenzied nationalist zeal, which enables him to commit acts of brutal violence and plunder against Muslims. The other arises from his wife Kulwant, whose act of cutting his throat reflects a moment of madness fueled by jealousy and deep psychological impulses. Another controversial story, *"Khol Do,"* unfolds the profound psychological trauma experienced by woman who was abducted while migrating to what they believed to be their homeland. The narrative raises a critical question: Are women like Sakina subalterns in India, from where they flee, or in Pakistan, to which they migrate in order to escape marginalization? In this story, a Muslim girl is victimized not by a Hindu but by men belonging to her own religion and nationality. This distorted form of nationalism, in which protectors turn into predators, reveals a collective madness that spares no one. Partition has been described by many historians as an era of insanity, and the term "madness" occupies a privileged position in the discourse on partition. The analogies of madness are numerous and recur with disturbing frequency (Alter, 1994). The metaphor of madness emphasizes a refusal to accept and comprehend the reality of Partition, transforming disbelief into dissent.

In *"Toba Tek Singh,"* madness may also be understood as an impediment to language, speech, communication, and intelligibility. Manto situates the narrative within an asylum to distinguish between rationality and irrationality. The asylum functions as a space where marginalized subaltern voices articulate the logical anxieties of Partition in contrast to the illogical rhetoric of nationalism outside (Das, 2005). The breakdown of communication among the inmates mirrors the failure of communication among people in the external world. At the same time, the story highlights the rational questions emerging from supposedly irrational minds. The concept of nationality is poignantly conveyed through the body language and conversations of the lunatics, whose madness becomes a form of performance. Insanity grants them the freedom to think and act without restriction; neither the officials of Hindustan nor Pakistan can strip them of this agency. In this way, the narrative challenges dominant state discourse through uncontrollable and bizarre expressions.

Two or three years after Partition, the governments of India and Pakistan agreed to exchange asylum inmates on the basis of religion. As a result of this agreement, Indian inmates in Pakistani asylums were to be transferred to India. Through the character of Bishan Singh, who refuses to relinquish his attachment to his home land. Manto captured the confusion and helplessness experienced by ordinary people following the creation of Pakistan from Hindustan in Toba Tek Singh (Habbard, 2022). The meaning of Pakistan remained elusive, and the inmates attempted to

comprehend it through their actions within the asylum. One Muslim madman described Pakistan as "the place where sharp razors are manufactured," symbolizing the violence and carnage outside. Another inmate collapses while chanting "Pakistan Zindabad," highlighting the destructive consequences of hollow, unreflective patriotism driven by unchecked passion. Similarly, the mad man who climbs a tree and declares that he will live there instead of in Hindustan or Pakistan symbolizes people's inability to accept the arbitrary imposition of national identity.

The confrontation between madmen impersonating Jinnah and Tara Singh, followed by their confinement in separate cells, reflects the failure of the state to control violence in the real world. It also reveals how individuals who once lived peacefully together came to perceive one another as enemies after adopting communal identities. Most significantly, Bishan Singh's unintelligible speech symbolizes the collapse of language and understanding amid the frenzy of Partition. The poignancy of his death lies in the haunting position in which officials discover his body. His death in no man's land represents a rejection of division, communalism, and, above all, the enforced transformation of national identity (Yusin, 2011).

This portrayal resonates with Michel Foucault's concept of madness as a culturally situated phenomenon, shaped by social structures and power relations. Even the mad man reflects what is enacted, performed, and staged in the so-called sane world outside the asylum (Alter, 1994). The choreographed, ritualistic exchanges at the Wagah border stand in stark contrast to the brutal reality of Partition, where trains transporting corpses arrived on both sides of the border. Bishan Singh's refusal to cross the border functions as a symbolic act, denying both newly formed nation-states authority over his body and claim to his homeland.

Madness induced by Nationalism

Nationalism is a phenomenon based on ideas of frenzy and fervor. Mass mobilization is impossible without a touch of madness induced by strong nationalist sentiment. The formation of national meaning and collective identity occurs through the activation of group consciousness, whereby individuals internalize factional ideologies that are repeatedly reinforced over time.

Thanda Gosht is a significant narrative that blurs the line between nationalism and chauvinistic madness. During Partition, people's identities were sharply polarized into violent oppositions—Hindu or Muslim, India or Pakistan. Ishwar Singh represents those who participated in extreme acts of brutality in the name of patriotism. After days of looting and killing, he returns home to his young wife, Kulwant, but was unable to engage in physical intimacy. He later confesses that he attempted to rape a young girl after murdering her entire family of six. When he prepared to carry out the act, he discovered that she was already dead, reduced to corpse-like flesh. That moment of near necrophilic realization becomes a pivotal point that leads to Ishwar Singh's masculine failure and, ultimately, his destruction. The coldness of the corpse sharply contrasts with his aggressive desire, intensifying the psychological impact of the scene. The Partition not only produced an atmosphere of chaos and violence but also deeply destabilized the mental and emotional balance of its victims, leaving lasting psychological trauma.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault explores the interrelation between madness and passion, observing that ***"The wild danger of madness is associated with the dangers of the passions and their fatal interconnection. Thus, the danger of madness is determined by the degree of the passions."*** He emphasizes that madness and passion are mutually reinforcing, with one intensifying the other (Alter, 1994). In *Thanda Gosht*, Kulwant manifests a volatile interplay of

passion and madness. The extreme desires of Kulwant and Ishwar Singh continue to resonate with contemporary readers. When Ishwar Singh responds calmly to inquiries regarding another woman in his life, Kulwant's suppressed jealousy and rage erupted into violent action. In a frenzied state, she seized a dagger and fatally stabbed him to death, while cursing another woman. This act exemplifies the destructive convergence of emotional intensity and madness, reflecting the broader psychological destabilization caused by the trauma and moral disintegration of Partition.

Kulwant's strong passion for Ishwar Singh made her act without thinking, driving her into madness. Ishwar Singh, in turn, lost his sense of masculine identity, and Kulwant's unfulfilled desire led to the murder of her husband. She acted like a wounded tigress—angry, heartbroken, and vengeful. This demonstrate the fragility of male identity when it is defined through physical strength and masculine authority. The dagger that killed him was the same one he had used to murder six members of a family, showing the destructive cycle of violence. Ishwar Singh, who had killed many innocent people in his nationalist frenzy, became a victim himself, tasting his own blood. This change from perpetrator to victim shows the deep psychological trauma caused by Partition. The effects of Partition went beyond its immediate victims, affecting the perpetrators as well, and revealed the moral and emotional breakdown caused by the violence and chaos of division.

The Partition of 1947 was marked by extreme nationalist fervor and widespread violence. The creation of India and Pakistan was grounded in religious partition, which reinforced a fragile distinction between communities. However, the experiences of individuals like Sakina challenges this rigid partition. She was victimized by members of her own religious group, showing that the violence of Partition often went beyond strict communal boundaries (Yusin, 2011). In this context, women, irrespective of their faith, were particularly exposed to physical and psychological harm. Manto's *Khol Do* not only portray Sakina's intense psychological trauma but also reflects a society in moral and social collapse. The distinctions between different nations become blurred, emphasizing the breakdown of social protection. Sirajuddin and his daughter arrived in Pakistan seeking refuge, only to face violence from within the nation they considered their own. Sakina's brutal gang-rape, which rendered her unconscious, highlights how Partition shattered social and moral structures and inflicted deep and lasting trauma on both individuals and the society around them.

Manto's *Khol Do,* as the title suggested, presented a painful story of sexual abuse and trauma faced by the character of Sakina, the lost daughter of Sirajuddin, who, after being repeatedly raped, was left almost lifeless. Through this story, Manto depicted the horrors of migration and the helplessness of ordinary people during Partition. Sirajuddin, as a father, was thrown into despair while searching for his daughter, showing the human cost of this historical crisis. The narrative also illustrated how trust and faith had broken down during Partition. By the end of the story, both the doctor and readers were confronted with the trauma she had endured. The trauma had left Sakina unable to speak, symbolizing the psychological damage she had internalized and her isolation from social interaction. Like *Thanda Gosht*, Manto concluded *Khol Do* with a shocking ending, compelling readers to reflect on the devastating effects of Partition on individuals and society alike.

Manto, through the character of Sakina, recreated the oppression and adversity that was imposed on millions of such harmless victims who, without any mistake, were consigned to a life of utter

suppression and dehumanization. As Muhammad Assad Uddin pointed out**,** his relationship with language and linguistic meaning had become so fragile that "khol do" brought only one meaning for him. Sirajuddin, instead of noticing the horrifying gesture, only screamed that she had survived were those who turned to bestiality and madness. The thin line between nationalism and madness collapsed in the chaos that engulfed the nation and its people, and it resulted in the dehumanization of people.

Each of the stories in this paper offered a slightly different view of the division and used madness in its unique way. Jalal acknowledged in his book ***The Pity of Partition*** **(2013)** that Manto was overwhelmed by the violence and chaos he witnessed around him, but as astute as he was**,** he realized that this level of dislocation and social upheaval could completely erase normal order and ethics. Rather than writing from a point of view that sought to judge the insanity or trivialize it into something ephemeral, Manto objectively wrote all of his characters as prone to this madness, trying to see it less as an illness and more as an aspect of humanity that everyone had to overcome (Rai, 2022). The theme of madness was multifaceted in Partition texts and was used to show characters trying to find clarity and articulate their new identities, as well as resisting the prison of their social roles.

Through these stories, Manto lifted the veil of false claims and protestation of morals and ethics, presenting the dark and sad reality of his time as it appeared to him. Using the medium of fiction, he did not convey fantasy and fabricated lies disguised as truth; rather, he went through all the farce and hypocrisy of his society to give a clear and truthful portrait of the ugly and bitter circumstances that existed at the time.

Conclusion

Manto's Partition narratives demonstrated how nationalism, when fueled by unchecked violence and religious zeal, slipped into collective madness and moral collapse. By exposing the brutal realities masked by ideals of honor, sacrifice, and patriotism, Manto revealed the fragile boundary between sanity and insanity during moments of extreme political upheaval. His recurring use of madness was not merely a literary device but a powerful lens through which the dehumanization of individuals and the erosion of ethical values were laid bare. Ultimately, Manto's stories suggested that a nation forged through blood and exclusion carried within it the seeds of perpetual violence, where identity, patriotism, and madness became inseparably intertwined.

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