



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

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Abstract

One of the most important events in the history of India, the partition of Hindustan in 1947 witnessed a nationalistic fervour that defied comprehensibility. People were suddenly consumed by ideas of national honour, national pride and national solidarity. And all of these were based on the "othering" of India by Pakistan, and vice versa. This paper seeks to study the very thin line that demarcates the idea of nationalism from madness. It will look into the schizophrenic identity absorbed and adorned by people during partition, and how each one behaves under the effect of

jingoistic pleasure. The metaphor of “Madness” in conjunction with Nationalism needs to be explored. The paper, therefore, seeks to highlight not only skewed nationalism but also attempts to unfold the performativity of madness that Saadat Hasan Manto so cleverly and effectively makes use of in the three stories “Toba Tek Singh”, “Thanda Ghost” and “Khol Do”. Madness, in the end, only remains a rhetoric of Nationalism.

Key words: Nationalism, Madness, Performance, martyrdom, othering, subaltern, dissent.

The Partition of Hindustan in 1947 is one of the most important historical events of the twentieth century. The bloody riots and massacres that followed affected both the Hindus and Muslims on either side of the borders which was once porous and shared by the community. Millions of people lost their lives and many more suffered displacement, poverty, rape, brutality and physical and psychological trauma. The voice of the victims was muffled by the chaotic madness and butchering that went on during and after the partition. These silenced voices got heard through the voices of many writers, authors and poets, one of them being Saadat Hasan Manto. Manto, an Indian-born Pakistani writer, who migrated to Pakistan after Independence, brought forward explicitly and uncomfortably the traumatic realities of Partition. Unlike the histories sanctioned by the State and its institutions, Manto’s collection of short stories acts as history’s “alternate archives”, as a “repository of localized truths” that focuses on the simple voices and experiences of the downtrodden. (Trivedi 50)

The new dawn of Independence and the taste of freedom could never be realized. Instead what the collective consciousness of the society inscribed in its memory was a deep sense of

loss and disillusionment. Poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz rightly puts across the sentiments in his lines, “This stain-covered day-break, this night-bitten dawn. This dawn is not that dawn we craved for.” This paper, therefore, attempts to study the thin line that demarcates the idea of Nationalism from Madness, the man-made madness that engulfed the people during the riots. The schizophrenic identity people possessed, while committing crimes ranging to bestiality, needs to be explored. Manto’s three short stories “Toba Tek Singh”, “Thanda Gosht” and “Khol Do” highlight the concept of madness and nationalism in their own different ways. If “Toba Tek Singh” is a satiric take on the idea of madness and puts forward the question ‘who really is the mad one, the insane in the asylum or the sane making decisions outside; while “Thanda Gosht” develops two different concept of madness. One arises from Ishwar Singh’s mad-nationalist fervour which enables him to brutally kill and loot the enemy i, e the Muslims. The other arises from his wife Kulwant who slits his throat in a moment of madness and jealousy that arises out of strong libidinal and psychological impulses. Another controversial story “Khol Do” explores the psychological trauma experienced by women abducted on their way to their “respective” countries. Are women like Sakina “subalterns in India where they flee from or in Pakistan where they turn to, to pre-empt their marginality in India?” (Mehta 1). Here, a Muslim girl is victimised not by a Hindu but by men of her own religion and nationality. This skewed nationalism where the protector becomes the predator; where collective madness spares no one, therefore, needs to be looked into.

Madness as Performativity and the Subaltern’s Dissent

The partition is seen by many historians as a period of insanity. “The term ‘madness’ itself has a privileged status in the discourse on Partition. Analogies of madness appear in abundance and frightening frequency...Gandhi appealed to the people not to ‘meet madness with

madness' ” (Ravikant, *Saint 16*). The metaphor of madness highlighted the refusal to accept and understand Partition, it became a form of dissent. Madness, in Toba Tek Singh, can also be seen as the failure of Language, communication and comprehensibility. It parallels the failure of communication amongst the madmen to the failure of communication amongst the people outside; at the same time it also provides a contrast by highlighting the sensible questions that comes out of the insane minds. The whole concept of Nationality is poignantly brought forward through the body language and conversations of the lunatics. Madness has been “performed” by the insane very creatively. Insanity gives them the right to their thought-processes and actions. No one, neither the officials of Hindustan nor Pakistan, can take this agency away from them. The performance subverts the dominant discourse of the Government in its own uncontrollable and bizarre ways.

Through Bishan Singh , whose identity cannot be separated from his homeland Toba Tek Singh, Manto expressed the utter confusion and helplessness people faced when Pakistan, a new nation was crafted out of Hindustan. Nobody really knows what Pakistan means. They try to understand this through their own performances inside the asylum. A Muslim lunatic describes Pakistan as “the name of the place in Hindustan where cut-throat razors are manufactured”, thus describing the slaughters and madness outside. One of the Muslim madmen loses his balance and faints while shouting “Pakistan Zindabad”. Manto here highlights the harmful consequences of hollow factional patriotism brought about by uninhibited fervour and passion. A mad-man climbing up a tree and declaring how he would live there forever instead of living either in Hindustan or Pakistan, is symbolic of how people could not accept this random thrusting of national identities on them. The fight between the madmen impersonating as Jinnah and Tara Singh and their getting locked away in separate cells is indicative of how the Government failed

to curb the violence in the real world. It also exposes the fact that people, who once lived peacefully, when they acquire communal identities, saw the “other” as the enemy. Most importantly, Toba Tek Singh’s gibberish represents the collapse of language and understanding in the midst of such jingoistic madness.

Toba Tek Singh’s performance of standing on one leg is almost like a “stand-in-protest” against the “trafficking” of their bodies to “foreign lands” they don’t understand. His death in no man’s land is symbolic of his rejection of Partition, of Communalism and especially of his changed Nationality. This reminds one of how Foucault sees “madness as being located in a certain cultural ‘space’ within society; the shape of this space, and its effects on the madman, depend on society itself.” Even the mad man reflects what is being played out, performed and enacted in the “sane” world outside. Choreographed ceremonial exchanges in the Wagah border mirrors, in complete contrast, the aggressive dystopian partitioned world where train full of bodies reached either side of the border. Toba Tek Singh’s refusal to cross the border becomes a political performance which denies the new nation states any take on his body or his land.

Madness as Induced by Extreme Nationalism

Nationalism is a phenomenon that exists on the idea of fervour and frenzy itself. Without a little push towards madness, induced by strong nationalist feeling, mass mobilisation is not a possibility. The arousal of the masses to action and production of national meaning and identities happen through the arousal of the mob mentality of people; people who believe in that imagined community that has been fed to the masses time and again.

Thanda Gosht is another strong testimony that blurs the line between nationalism and jingoistic madness. The identities of the people, during partition, had been polarised to plain

“murderous oppositions”, either Hindu or Muslim; India or Pakistan. Ishwar Singh represents all those who, in the name of patriotism, engaged in barbarism and extreme madness. After several days of looting and killing, Ishwar comes home to his young wife Kulwant, only unable to make love to her. He confesses his attempt to rape a young girl after killing all her family of six. When he is finally ready to ravage her, realisation dawns upon him that she is nothing but a dead body; like cold meat. This moment of near necrophiliac rape becomes the epiphanic moment that leads to his impotency and later his annihilation. The coldness of the corpse is juxtaposed by his raging masculine heat, which makes the scene even more hard-hitting. “Partition not only created a ‘mad’ atmosphere but also made its victims ‘mad’, ‘insane’, losing their mental balances due to traumatic experiences” (Tiwari 55).

In “Madness and civilisation” Foucault explores the relationship between madness and passion. He writes, “The savage danger of madness is related to the danger of the passions and to their fatal concatenation.” Therefore, the danger of madness is determined by the degree of the passions. To him, madness and passion are fundamentally linked. In Kulwant, there can be seen a volatile mixture of madness and passion. Both Ishwar Singh and Kulwant are deeply sexualised character. Their hyper hetero-sexuality strikes the reader even today. When Ishwar Singh answers affirmatively when asked if he had another woman in his life, Kulwant is consumed with a madness so unfathomable that she picks up the dagger and stabs to death her own husband.

Kalwant Kaur went berserk. She She picked up the dagger from the floor, removed its cover like a banana-peel, and stabbed Ishwar Singh in the neck. Blood gushed forth from Ishwar Singh’s neck. In frenzy, Kalwant Kaur kept stabbing him and cursing the other woman. (2)

Her passion for Ishwar Singh was so deeply entrenched that she does not think even for a moment before falling into a fit of madness. Ishwar Singh loses his identity as a man, therefore Kulwant's lack of fulfilment results in the killing of an impotent husband who can satisfy her no longer. She behaves like an injured tigress, inconsolable and revengeful. It also brings forward the idea of how a man can never survive without his libidinal manliness. Ishwar Singh, after his inability to neither kill nor satisfy, has to perish in the end.

“The dagger that just slit my throat is one that I used to kill six people.” (3) Ishwar Singh, who had spilled the blood of the many innocent in petty nationalistic delirium, now tastes his own oozing blood. “This metonymic tasting of human blood is a moment of transcendence”, he no longer remains only a perpetrator but gets converted to a victim himself - victim of the trauma of partition and its aftermath. The destabilising effect of Partition was, thus, relegated not only to the victims but the victimisers as well.

Women and Partition: Blurring of “us” versus “them”

The year 1947 was a witness to extreme national jingoism and mass murders. The slogan was that of an eye for an eye, a Hindu's dead body for a Muslim killed, and vice versa. The nation was created on the idea of religious difference and intolerance, a boundary that divides the “us” versus the “them”. If religious fanaticism is what propelled the killings and rapes after Partition, what about victims like Sakina who are preyed upon by her own co-religious rescuers? Here, the hatred and enmity towards people on the basis of national boundaries gets blurred. A woman, irrespective of whether she is a Hindu or a Muslim, gets victimised. Manto's story “Khol Do” presents not only a psychologically traumatised girl, but portrays a society that has slumped into psychic madness. The only pointer left that differentiated an “us” from a “them”

also gets pathetically obscure. Sirajuddin and his daughter Sakina come to Pakistan with the hope of finding their own nation in the midst of chaos. However, it is in this very nation they thought their own that Sakina is brutally gang-raped by her “own” people until she falls unconscious.

Like “Thanda Gosht”, Manto concludes “Khol do” with a sharp and shocking end that leaves not only the doctor in cold sweat but also the readers. When the doctor instructs the window to be opened (khol do), Sakina very mechanically undoes the string of her salwar, immediately surrendering herself to all kinds of brutalities without a word. As M. Assaduddin points out, her relationship with language and linguistic meaning becomes so fractured that “khol do” brings in just one meaning for her. Sirajuddin instead of noticing the dreadful gesture, only exclaims about her survival.

Manto here presents how men who were considered the rescuers of national honour and pride were the ones who turned to bestiality and madness. The thin line between nationalism and madness collapsed in the chaos that devoured the nation and its people. It is the dehumanisation of people.

Conclusion

According to Suvir Kaul, there are versions of metaphors of partition. One of them is the claim that all nations are founded in blood and that it is only violence and sacrificial flow of blood that porous boundaries can be sealed and a strong nation built. “The vocabulary of martyrdom (shahidi) is an important feature of such understanding... a nation demands its shahids and is strengthened by them.” The idea that borders have to be drawn by blood has been very well presented by Manto. If excess of violence on religious grounds becomes the true

embodiment of nation formation, the future of that nation will always be embroiled in such religious fundamentalism.

In all the three stories “Toba Tek Singh”, “Thanda Gosht” and “Khol Do”, the trope of madness has been cleverly incorporated by Manto. Madness in “the theatre of Politics”, Madness that arise out of deep seated passion, and finally Madness that comes out of sheer human crookedness and bestiality can be seen in all of Manto’s works. Political violence arises out of a collective madness; it erases all the distinction between madness and sanity. Madness thus occupies a space in the discourse of Identity, Nationalism and Patriotism. Madness becomes the rhetoric of Nationalism.

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