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Partition and Aesthetic Expression: A Comparative Reading of Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* and Malik's *Savage Anguish*

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Abstract

The seminal short stories based on the Partition of India, Saadat Hasan Manto's Toba Tek Singh and Syed Abdul Malik's Savage Anguish (Bibhatsa Bedona), have several thematic and artistic parallels between them. These short stories employ unique aesthetic functions to unveil the absurdity, trauma, and moral disintegration that were unleashed by the Partition. Manto situates his satirical narrative within a lunatic asylum, symbolizing the broader insanity of a divided nation, while Malik exposes the same moral decay through the perspective of a self-centered middle-class narrator confronting the naked realities of communal violence.

The article calls attention to their craftsmanship in narrative technique and in the symbolic use of madness, nakedness, and light to expose bitter social realities lying underneath. Elements like irony, suspense, and the contrast between appearance and reality reinforce the emotional and ethical impact of the narratives. Both writers transform socio-historical tragedy into a profound artistic statement evoking pathos and self-reflection. The humanist vision of these writers questions the inhumanity of communal hatred, rendering these stories enduring reminders of the irrationality of Partition and the need for compassion in a growingly divisive world.

Keywords: Partition, Aesthetic, Trauma, Irony, Suspense

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Introduction:

Saadat Hasan Manto, an internationally reputed dramatist, poet, essayist, and short-story writer in Urdu, born in undivided India and shifted to newborn Pakistan in 1948, is particularly known for brevity of expression, exceptional presentation, exquisitely genuine characterization, unexpected turns of action, exposure of naked, disturbing reality, and mesmerizing finishes. His short story *Toba Tek Singh* is commonly held as the most powerful among the short fiction based on India's partition. Syed Abdul Malik, recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, is a well-known Assamese poet, novelist, and short-story writer in the realistic, humanist tradition. His famous short story, *Savage Anguish* (*Bibhatsa Bedona* in Assamese), is included in *Splendour in the Grass*, an anthology of Assamese short stories translated into English, published by Sahitya Academy in 2010. As partition narratives, these two stories are aesthetically successful in inciting pathos, sympathy, and a sting of conscience in the mind of the compassionate reader. *Toba Tek Singh* is better known to the subcontinental readers than its counterpart.

Objective and Aim:

The central argument of this article is that *Toba Tek Singh* and *Savage Anguish,* though written in different languages and cultural contexts, converge aesthetically and ethically in their representation of the trauma of the Partition of India. Both stories expose the madness inherent in communal hatred and political decision-making, but they do so through sharply contrasting narrative strategies. Manto employs satire, irony, and symbolic madness to indict the so-called 'sane' world, while Malik adopts a realist, confessional mode that gradually peels away middle-class complacency to reveal brutal historical truth. The article contends that these divergent aesthetic choices ultimately serve a shared humanist vision: to awaken moral consciousness by forcing readers to confront the naked painful realities of history. By comparing narrative perspective, symbolism, irony, suspense, and the tension between appearance and reality, the study demonstrates how both writers transform historical catastrophe into enduring works of art that challenge readers to reflect ethically on violence, displacement, and human responsibility.

Discussion and Analysis:

Jokinen and Assadullah comments that "Toba Tek Singh and the character of Bishan Singh are symbolic commentaries on the psychological trauma of the human displacement brought about by partition", and in a similar vein, Ayesha Jalal observes that Partition literature repeatedly exposes "the absurdity of political decisions when measured against lived human experience" (Jalal 98). *Toba Tek Singh*, very poignantly, satirizes the partition of India by setting almost the whole of the action in a lunatic asylum, which, in turn, is the central metaphor, functioning at several levels. First, it indicates that undivided India around the time of Independence, pregnant with communal hatred, malice, riots, etc., appeared to be another, greater, lunatic asylum. As Alok Bhalla notes, Manto's asylum becomes "a moral mirror in which the insanity of the outside world is grotesquely reflected"

(Bhalla 121). Secondly, the riotous, bloodthirsty, so-called, sane were more insane than most of the so-called insane. Thirdly, the insanity of the so-called sane infected the so-called insane with more insanity and more derangement, and news of partition involved them in further demented activities. Fourthly, the lunatic asylum is a safer place than the "normal" outside: most of the inmates are non-violent and non -conformist. The two who declared that they were the communal leaders, Zinnah and Tara Singh, respectively, were set aside in separate quarters and were not given heroic status as was enjoyed by the real Zinnah and Tara Singh.

Savage Anguish is narrated from the viewpoint of a selfish middle-class character running after the dream of his self-establishment in post-independent India. Dr. Hiren Gohain remarks, "Cast in the classic pattern of a journey into the heart of darkness, where the narrator, representing our normal, complacent, and secure middle-class life, comes across shocking, unspeakable evidence of human cruelty and bestiality that is part of the most sordid of our legacy of freedom" (viii). This middle-class moral paralysis is what Ranajit Guha identifies as a failure of elite conscience in moments of historical rupture (Guha 47). It is through this narrator's perspective that the deplorably terrible reality of communal riot, along with its tragic and traumatic consequences, has gradually been exposed. Religious fanaticism and communalism are forms of madness, and they spread the germ of madness among their perpetrators and victims. This is why Deepak is insane. Uma, its victim, also thinks, "Maybe even our brains are not completely normal" (Malik, 61). Here Malik aligns with what Urvashi Butalia calls "the psychic damage of Partition that lingers long after physical violence has ceased" (Butalia 189).

Initially selfish and indifferent to Uma and Padma, the middle-class narrator, through a series of strange experiences, senses by degrees their misfortune and wretchedness; within his comfort zone, he develops certain sympathy for them and purchases two dress materials for them. But the moment of climax arrives before he can offer those clothes to them. When one day the narrator and Padma are not around, the insane Deepak comes, strips Uma naked, and snatches away her clothes in the dark. Moments later, in the light of the lamp that Padma holds in her hand, the perplexed narrator is shocked to discover that Uma is stark naked. The two women share the scanty clothes of Padma and go on telling their unspeakable story. The middle-class narrator, incapable of redressing the disgrace of these living images of naked and rotten reality, retreats from the infernal world of Uma and Padma to his world of comfort and ease. His escape is significant.

But, victimized by an atmosphere rife with inhumanity and opportunism, the tormented characters, Uma and Padma, practice the principles of humanity as far as they can. These oppressed and marginalized characters form a family among themselves that depends on their mutual help and support. They extend their respect to the paying guest as a guest, keep an eye all the time on everything that may keep him happy at their home, and don't take any undue advantage of him. How touchy Uma's sense of responsibility for the insane Deepak: "I have never let him see my body. If he sees that I, the Laxmi of his imagination, too am carrying

scars of disgrace, he will kill himself by banging his head against something. That's why whenever he comes, I blow out the lamp" (62).

Craftsmanship:

Manto and Malik have skillfully and aesthetically presented the stories' powerful contents. The following discussion examines the narrative craftsmanship of both texts.

1. Narrator:

a) Restrictively Omniscient Narrator in Toba Tek Singh

The story has a largely omniscient narrator, but interestingly, he cannot peep into the interiors of the characters' minds. Third-person perspective is employed throughout. Here the narrator is not a participant in the action; thus, he is a detached narrator.

b) Double Narrator: Bi-polar Points-of-View in Savage Anguish:

Malik's narrator is not omniscient but one who participates in the action as a major character of the story. The larger part of the story is narrated from the middle -class point of view of the pro-establishment narrator, who is bereft of the vision of the dark recesses of social reality. A smaller part but the actual core of the story is narrated by Uma, that is, from the point-of-view of the disgraced. The perspective of the middle-class narrator brings to light the superficial reality, that is, appearance, and that of the disgraced and oppressed Uma unravels the real core of existence. Both the narrators are major protagonists of the story greatly involved in its action.

2. Structured Contradiction of Appearance vs. Reality:

Several small incidents gradually and cumulatively build up this main contradiction between appearance and reality, which forms the inner structure of *Savage Anguish*. For instance, the narrator guesses Uma's age wrongly: "She looked around 35/36 years of age" (49). Uma's revelation towards the end proves him to be mistaken: "My actual age is 24 years" (60). The narrator thinks that Padma is Uma's daughter. However, Uma's reply again disproves his assumption, "Daughter! I am not even married" (60). In the first part of the story, Deepak seems to be a goon, but finally, it is revealed that he is insane. The discovery of naked Uma with Deepak in the darkness makes the narrator guess that physical intercourse has taken place between them. But Uma's statement ascertains this guess to be wrong once more. Thus the structure of appearance and reality is built up cumulatively, and it is based on the contradiction between the superficial reality of the first narrator's narrative and the actual, deeper reality of Uma's narrative; thus the surface reality seen from the middle-class perspective and the pathetic core of social reality exposed from the perspective of the oppressed are pitted against each other.

In *Toba Tek Singh* the contradiction of appearance and reality is not so elaborate, but it is there. Bishan Singh and his fellow inmates only seem mad, as they are capable of making wise decisions, while those outside appear sane but are actually insane. Further, some murderers were also hiding themselves in the asylum

in the guise of madmen.

3. Suspense and Surprise:

The element of suspense is there in *Toba Tek Singh*, but it's not so conspicuous. What is going to happen to the lunatics at the time of transfer is a haunting question for the reader. But the thing that generates the highest suspense is Bishan Singh's recurring question, "Where is Toba Tek Singh? Will Bishan Singh somehow obtain a satisfactory answer to his question?" (Manto 137). This question in the reader's mind adds much to the gripping interest of the story until the end.

But, in *Savage Anguish,* the masterly application of suspense and surprise is a main constituting element. For example, on the narrator's first night at Uma's house, she comes to his room at midnight and suggests he close the door before falling asleep; there is the incident of the attempt to strip a European lady naked by raising her skirt in broad daylight by some unidentified goon; there is the long absence of Deepak, who is introduced as a member of Uma's family; there is the silence and melancholy of the beautiful lass, Padma; there is Deepak's strange chiding and warning on Padma's return with the narrator from the cinema hall; there is Uma's request to Padma not to bring a lamp in the dark night of the climax; and there is Uma's nakedness in front of the narrator - all these cumulatively build up intense and dramatic suspense. Finally, Uma's autobiographical narrative unveils all suspense and astonishes us through the exposition of unspeakable, loathsome reality.

4. **Dramatic Irony in *Savage Anguish:***

Irony contributes to the overall aesthetic effect of the story. Initially, the narrator thinks that going back to the hotel from the house of Uma and Padma is perhaps the right thing to do. But the narrative later proves that the right thing to do was not to come away from the miserable, oppressed, and disgraced women but to stand by them. He observed that both Padma and Uma always covered their bodies with care. But when suspense melts away and reality catches us by surprise, we come to realize that the gown is not the usual cover of the bashful women of Indian society but an attempt to cover up the taints of cruelty generated by communal frenzy. Further, at a crucial moment, the narrator says, "Bring the lamp, Padma - it's too dark" (Malik 58). But later when the light of the lamp exposes Uma's naked and oppressed body, he says, "The light of the glowing lamp became unbearable" (61). Such skillful application of dramatic irony is characteristic of high-class art.

5. Appropriate Symbolism:

In *Savage Anguish* a woman's nakedness made visible by the light of the lamp is a very powerful symbol. According to Homi K. Bhabha, such moments of exposure in Partition narratives "force history to erupt into the private body, making trauma visible and unavoidable" (Bhabha 145). The sight of the unclothed bodies of Uma and Padma and the words "Long live, Pakistan" (Malik doesn't mention "Pakistan" but indicates it) embossed in black on their bodies symbolizes the naked reality of our society dehumanized by communal frenzy. The nakedness of Uma and Padma

represents the loathsome nakedness of our social history; the spots and scars on their raw, soft flesh are just the stigmas, spots, and scars of our social history. The glowing light of the lamp symbolizes conscience. Seen in the light of reason or conscience, the naked reality of the body of our society, instead of its appearance, along with its spots, scars, and stigmas, will become visible. The self-centered, selfish, and complacent middle class finds it hard to bear such a view of truth.

In *Toba Tek Singh* the lunatic asylum itself is symbolic of the situation in India and Pakistan before and after the partition. Partition is implied as a lunatic act. One critic correctly observes, "It is even more significant to see Manto drawing a criticism on the sane world under the garb of a madhouse or an insane world" (Arora). As Leslie A. Flemming further argues, Manto's satire "derives its power from moral restraint rather than emotional excess" (Flemming 76). That a lunatic wept and hugged the Hindu and Sikh lunatics as they were transferred spoke of our basic solidarity. Another, earlier, a Hindu lawyer, cursed Hindu and Muslim leaders who compelled him to live in Pakistan and his beloved in Amritsar in India. Bishan Singh's meaningless murmuring, like "Oper di gur gur di annexe di bay dhania di mung daal di of di Pakistan Government", symbolizes the meaninglessness of the partition (Manto 134). His death in no man's land suggests two things: 1) The partition is unacceptable; 2) One must either accept the partition to live or die.

Conclusion:

There are invisible exchanges of shared themes, ideas, between these two stories. Both artistically register how deep the wound of India's secession was and how many traumatic experiences were unleashed for common people by this irrational act, from which the subcontinent is still not free. Besides, they effectively depict the tragedy of the human soul caused by the unnatural, irrational, inhuman, insane, and unnecessary partition of India and Pakistan.

This they do through the skillful application of artistic techniques like double narrator, omniscient narrator, appropriate symbolism, the structured contradiction of appearance and reality, suspense and surprise. Thus, in pathos, in artistry, and in kindling conscience, these two stories are unique among the short stories founded on the partition of India. The lesson and the message of these stories may be particularly effective in the current ambiance of communal and sectarian malice let loose in the subcontinent in particular and throughout the globe in general.

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