

International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor: 8.3 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Madness, Violence and Marginalized Identities in Partition Literature: A Study of Manto's Toba Tek Singh and Antharjanam's A Leaf in the Storm

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ABSTRACT:

Partition literature foregrounds the lived experience of violence in contrast to detached historical accounts of 1947. The trauma of dislocation, nostalgia and rehabilitation found authentic representation in literary narratives which emphasized human suffering rather than political rhetoric. This paper undertakes a comparative study of Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* (1953) and Lalithambika Antharjanam's *A Leaf in the Storm* (1953, trans. 1997). While Manto uses madness and satire as tropes to highlight the absurdity of Partition politics, Antharjanam captures the layered experience of gendered violence and the resilience of women. Both texts foreground marginalized identities—a madman and a rape victim—and critique political and patriarchal structures through objective yet deeply human narratives.

KEYWORDS: Partition Literature, Madness, Gendered Violence, Dislocation, Manto, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Trauma Studies.

Partition literature focuses on the individual experience of violence in contrast to the detached collective data provided by historical facts. The effect of Partition of 1947 was immediate and long lasting on human psyche as even after the massacre, the issues of dislocation, rehabilitation and nostalgia lingered. Literature provided a space for sharing an alternate personalized history which focused more on human suffering and individualized agony rather than the documented socio-political facts related to the 1947 Partition.

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) wrote a short story titled "Toba Tek Singh" which was first published in an Urdu magazine called *Savera* in 1953. Set in a lunatic asylum of Lahore, it is a dark satire and also a bitter indictment which takes the theme of partition to the world of insane and highlights the absurdity of political processes and collective consciousness that produced Partition. It raised profound questions on the definition of sanity and the thinning of boundaries between the 'mad' and the sane world. The story presents itself as a deadpan, factual, non-judgmental chronicle as it begins in the style of a newspaper report with a mock serious tone, "A couple of years after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged" (Manto 11).

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961) describes madness as an alternate mode of human existence, he says that "In the serene world of



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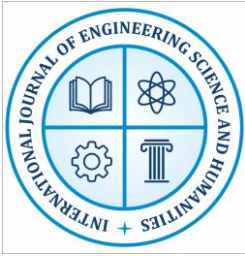
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mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman..." (Foucault x). Madness in "Toba Tek Singh" is not described as psycho-pathological disease but as an emotional state which everyone is prone to. This can be substantiated through the character of the Hindu Lawyer in the narrative who had lost his sanity as a consequence of losing his lover.

Manto effectively uses this alienation of madness in his depiction of the mental asylum where the patients are unaware of the politics and its reasoning. The narrative depicts the asylum as a microcosm of the outer world as it consists of people of all religious beliefs, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. It also provides a subtle critique on how the political leaders distanced themselves from the struggling masses. It seems to portray the plight of the common people who had to bear the consequence of the momentous decision which was taken by the bureaucrats of splitting the country into two. Through the denouncing of the rational world, Manto makes madness a relative term in the context of contemporary times and uses it as a trope to comment on three crucial and societal issues, i.e, the politics, religious dogmatism and emotional trauma surrounding Partition. Another trope which Manto uses in order to capture the chaotic state during Partition is the broken language which the protagonist, Bishen Singh, speaks. His varying nonsensical sentence comprises of a mixture of Punjabi, Urdu, English and gibberish, "*Uper the gur gur the annexe the be dhyana the mung the daal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittey moun*" (Manto 17). Critics like Alok Bhalla points out that Bishen Singh's nonsensical words become increasingly politically conscious as the story progresses. It suggests that even a madman's irrational words, which are out of the boundaries of logical understanding, are unable to escape the consequences of political turmoil. He holds both the sides equally responsible for this turbulence. Manto again plays with language as he blurs the difference between the protagonist and the place he belongs. It becomes symbolic as identity of the self is traced back to the place it has its association and familiarity with. The narrative ends with, "In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto 18).

Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909–1987) wrote a dark and gruesome short Malayalam fiction originally titled "Odumkattilpetta Orila" and later translated to "A Leaf in the Storm" which articulates the defiant nature of a rape victim during the partition mayhem. Through Jyotirmoyi Devpal, the protagonist of the story, Antharjanam captures 'all the scenes of human life'. The tale addresses layered issues of gendered communal violence, female subjugation, chastity, existential angst, rehabilitation and the patriarchal notion of nation's pride. The rehabilitation camps, as demonstrated in the story, became the symbolic and literal hubs for new beginnings for people who were forced to leave every trace of their past identity behind. However, in the case of Jyotirmoyi, she was carrying remnants of the horror she faced symbolically and literally through the figure of the unborn child.



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Menon and Bhasin, in their seminal work *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* critique the situation: "... the anticipation of just such a rejection by the very family and community that were to provide them support was one reason why many women resisted being recovered. Pregnant women were obviously more vulnerable than others and the decision whether to abort or carry their pregnancies to full term was an agonizing one for all women, especially young ones who were going to be first time mothers" (Menon and Basin, 100). Jyoti wanted revenge for the injustice she endured which she hoped to seek through abandoning her newborn, but when she becomes a mother her dark and grotesque reality transforms into a resilient motherhood.

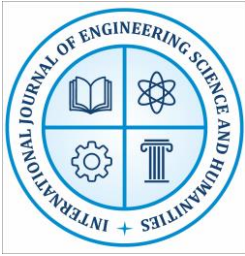
Debali Mookerjee states, "The nationalists engaged in a process of mythmaking whereby feminine sexual purity was endowed with the status of the transcendental signifier of national virtue" (Mookerjee 13). Her acceptance of her baby becomes a unique form of defiance towards the new patriarchal ideal of national identity which aimed to gain back its 'honour'.

"Toba Tek Singh" and "A Leaf in the Storm" are distinct narrative in the context of Partition because of their distinct points of focus. They concentrate more on the psychological suffering and anguish of rehabilitation in contrast to the physical remembrance of pain of the horrifying brutalities and the numbing meaningless violence that the different communities perpetrated on each other. "Toba Tek Singh" never directly talks about communal violence except for the slight vague suggestion of the atrocities Roop Kaur, Bishan Singh's daughter, might've endured during their journey back to India. "A Leaf in the Storm" does have instances where the protagonist recalls the harsh multiple rapes she endured but the positive note, her acceptance of her child as a means to create her self-identity, in which the story ends makes it different as she does not turn to violent means, like other women, in order to avenge herself for the horrors she endured. Another distinct feature of these particular stories is they struggle to depict the social truth and not just partial perspectives of a specific community which often blames the other community for resorting to violent means and views themselves as victims. They acknowledge that Partition equally affected the people of both Hindustan and Pakistan.

Concludingly, both the short fictions, "Toba Tek Singh" and "A Leaf in the Storm", are subject marginalized identities, a madman and an unmarried pregnant woman respectively and presented it with objective narration. They beautifully capture the mayhem of Partition with simple language and gut-wrenching stories.

CONCLUSION:

Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* and Antharjanam's *A Leaf in the Storm* stand apart in the corpus of Partition narratives for their focus on marginalized identities. Manto situates the absurdity of Partition within the walls of a lunatic asylum, challenging definitions of sanity and exposing the irrationality of political decisions. The broken language of Bishen Singh symbolizes both



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fragmented identities and the incoherence of nation-making. On the other hand, Antharjanam highlights the plight of women during Partition who bore the brunt of communal violence. Through Jyotirmoyi, she critiques patriarchal nationalism and presents motherhood as a mode of resistance and identity reclamation. While *Toba Tek Singh* emphasizes psychological alienation, *A Leaf in the Storm* depicts physical violence and its aftermath, yet both works transcend communal blame and reflect a collective human tragedy. Ultimately, these stories resist monolithic national histories and provide alternate archives of Partition through marginalized voices. Their significance lies not just in recording pain but in revealing resilience, defiance and the universality of human suffering across borders.

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