

Saadat Hasan Manto's "Khol Do": In Search of a Lost Daughter

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Abstract

Splitting India in the name of religion was one of the most complicated political decisions during end of the Raj. In 1947, India achieved its Independence after a long trail of political movements but it was not an unmixed blessing for its people. It was a blood-drenched freedom. A sort of caged conscience made the people ready to kill or be killed in the eddy of communal violence. Women and girls were the helpless victims of the perpetration caused by the men of their own society but of a rival community. Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Khol Do" or "The Return" captures the gruesome days when women could not even escape the lusty claws of their co-religionists.

Keywords: Partition; Rape; Refugee; Trauma; Women.

The millstone of Time goes around only once
Grinding everything fine in that one cycle.

—Gulzar, "Millstone"

The Partition of India in 1947 was a catastrophic incident in the history of the modern world. A political question of self-governance was soaked in religion. The answer to the question later devastated humanity in many forms. Saadat Hasan Manto was a vociferous author who well sketched the socio-political apocalypse of the time in his writings. He dipped his pen in the pain of the people who suffered the onslaught of the Partition and wrote about the naked reality they underwent. His short stories speak of the blistering abrasions that the time engraved on the heart and mind of the people. Losing life and property was the common fate of the general masses who were entrapped in the political imbroglio of intermigration

but more than that most people lost their mental peace. Sometimes psychological casualties were more scathing than physical ones and it was shared by all beyond age and gender. "Manto used his literary talent to reflect the consequences of partition for the lives of common people. He knew that the cataclysmic events make the unusual seem ordinary. Nothing shocks the human consciousness numbed by displays of human bestiality amidst massive social dislocation" (Jalal 24).

In any such socio-political disruption, girls and women become the soft targets of a class of assailants who like and love to inflict physical and mental trauma on them as there are very less chances of strong resistance and retaliation from them. "Mass scale migration, death, destruction, loss—no matter how inevitable Partition seemed no one could have foreseen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed . . . still less could anyone have foreseen that *women* would become so significant, so central and indeed so problematic" (Butalia 188). Before the Partition, communal violence and riots were nothing new in the Indian context. But the dignity of women was hardly compromised by the fighting communities on such a large scale. It was the first time in the Noakhali massacre of 1946 that women and girls were used as a tool of revenge. Hindu women and girls became targets of the Muslim mob who dishonoured them by raping them, parading them naked, converting them, marrying them, and maiming them mercilessly. After some months, the giant tree of women exploitation in the actual partition scenario was the result of the seed sown in the soil of Noakhali.

Of all the horrors of 1947, the experience of the women who were raped is the most difficult to write about. It is a history of broken bodies and broken lives. Rape was used as a weapon, as a sport and as a punishment. Armed gangs had started to use rape as a tool of violence in Bengal and Bihar in 1946 but this now took on a new ubiquity and savagery in Punjab. It sparked the deepest feelings of revenge, dishonour and shame. (Khan 133)

Muslim, Hindu and Sikh men picked up women and girls of their rival community and did what they wanted with them and their bodies. Women bodies became the soft sod under the feet of the male ego.

The tragedies of partition would not have been complete had they not been accompanied, as every conflict since the dawn of history, by an outpouring of sexual savagery. Nearly all of the atrocities cursing the unhappy province were embellished by their orgy

of rape. Tens of thousands of girls and women were seized from refugee columns, from crowded trains, from isolated villages, in the most widescale kidnapping of modern times. (Lapierre and Collins 518)

Manto's short stories are replete with such moments of mental and physical tortures perpetrated upon women across religions. His famous short story "The Return" delineates heart-rending tales of a migrant man, Sirajuddin, who loses his daughter while travelling to Pakistan from India. There were thousands of fathers and mothers who lost their children but kept their hope of getting them back alive. In the darkness of humanity where people could hardly trust one another, they continued their searches. In "The Return" Sirajuddin who journeys from a riot-ridden Amritsar to Lahore in a violence-infested refugee special train, finds that he has lost his seventeen-year-old daughter Sakina while they were desperately trying to catch the refugee train. At the Mughalpura refugee camp, he finds himself in "socks, suspended, as it were, over a bottomless pit" when he regains consciousness the next morning (Manto 8). The refugee camps are soaked in the tears of those who lost their own people while crossing the border amid "attack . . . fire . . . escape . . . railway station . . . night . . ." (8). He is somehow able to flee the rage of communal ferocity but loses his daughter in transit.

Post Partition communal violence in Punjab was unbridled as warring religious communities were bent on annihilating one another. ". . . communities which had lived side by side for generations fell upon each other in an orgy of hate. It was not a war, not a civil war, not a guerrilla campaign. It was a convulsion, the sudden, shattering collapse of a society" (Lapierre and Collins 439-40). In those cannibal times, Muslim villages adjoining Amritsar suffered heavy communal attacks by the Sikhs. Armed garrisons of newly arrived refugees from Pakistan in collusion with the local troublemakers launched innumerable attacks on the Muslim villages and mercilessly killed people of all age and gender, raped and abducted women and girls, set their properties to fire and did what they wished to quench their thirst of revenge. "As always, it was the Sikhs whose attacks were the most formidable and the most savage. They would rise in shrieking hordes from the sugar cane and wheat fields to strike helpless stragglers or those parts of a caravan that were most vulnerable" (Lapierre and Collins 498). Bapsi Sidhwa's much-celebrated book *The Ice-Candy-Man* has a gruesome picture of such a ravished village called Pir Pindo. Defeated and devastated people rushed to catch the refugee trains which would take them in Pakistan. Sirajuddin is one among many ill-fated victims

who too tries to escape the bulldozing attack of the enemies. Though he and Sakina could escape death, his wife's "stomach ripped open" before his eyes at home. It left an indelible image in his mind and he could not erase it from his mind. V. P. Menon writes in *The Transfer of Power in India*, "The uprooted millions were in a terrible mental state. . . . Not many had the time to plan their evacuation . . . They had been subjected to terrible indignities. They had witnessed their near and dear ones hacked to pieces before their eyes and their houses ransacked, looted and set on fire by their own neighbours" (qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 19).

At the refugee camp, Sirajuddin desperately searches for his daughter but fails to trace her. He cannot even remember where he has lost the girl – "Had he brought her as far as the railway station? Had she got into the carriage with him? When the rioters had stopped the train, had they taken her with them?" (Manto 9) Many scary thoughts come into his mind as the time was not safe for women. Abduction, molestation, and murder of women were so common all around. "The official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan" (Menon and Bhasin 70). While he is pondering over these for some days, he finds that some gallant men are engaged in a rescue operation of the women and children who remained on the other side of the border. A ray of hope flickers in his heart. He describes to them how 'fair' and 'pretty' his daughter is, like her mother: "Big eyes, black hair, a mole on the left cheek" (Manto 9). The men assure him that if she is alive they will find her and bring her back to him.

Signing an inter-dominion treaty in December 1947, both the governments of Pakistan and India had launched Central Recovery Operation to bring back the lost and abducted women and children from across the borders and restore them to their families. "The machinery that was set up to recover women was to be made up of police officers, and women—social workers or those, usually from well off families, who were willing to give their time to this work" (Butalia 139). Many men and women volunteered for the risky job across the borders. Fortunately, on their second trip to Amritsar, the young men find Sakina on the roadside. She is frightened but when they convince her that they have come to rescue her, she settles down and agrees to accompany them. The men give her food and clothes. She returns in their truck to Lahore. Thousands of women and girls were thus rescued and many were reconciled to their families. Such humanitarian works got applause from all quarters of the society. "Even worse, many of those victims were not really 'women' at all. Girls under the age of twelve made up at least one third of the women recovered in the

state-sponsored recovery operation that followed. The rest of the women tended to be under the age of thirty-five and from villages" (Khan 134).

Many days pass but Sirajuddin does not get any news of his daughter. He runs from camp to camp but without any success. One day he finds the same young men and asks them if there is any update of his Sakina. They lie to the bereaved father saying that the search is still on. The man prays for their success and earnestly hopes that one day they will bring him back his daughter. It was a cruel time for all those who were thrown into the boiling cauldron of Partition but crueller for the women. Under the guise of revenge, the dogs and jackals that lay deep in the psyche of men and waited for soft and defenceless female bodies. Their lustful eyes were always in search of some opportunity. They were following the scent of women's flesh like hounds. People of rival religions were the chief enemies of the honour of women but a section of their co-religionists could not suppress their desire to quench their lust. "As always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion)" (Butalia 3).

To be 'pretty', 'fair', and 'youthful' was a sin for the women and girls as being those would work as magnets to invite the claws of the men who, forgetting their religious identity, would jump on their prey. To be exploited at the hands of their co-religionists was the most unfortunate incident of Partition, especially when people were getting shelter and succour nowhere but in their shared religious identity. The young men rescued Sakina but enticed by the beauty and youthful body of the girl, they could hardly suppress their desire to 'enjoy' her, themselves. The girl is now out of the frying pan into the fire. She believes the men of her religion and hopes that they would deliver her to her father stationed in the distant refugee camp across the border. But she is fated to be the prey of the hungry youths who too forgot the promise they had made to Sirajuddin. Ironically, Sirajuddin prays for their success but the men are making their own 'success' for days.

In the evening of the same day Sirajuddin meets those young men who had made him repeated promise of recovery of his lost daughter, and he finds the unconscious body of a girl being carried by four different men. He follows them to the camp hospital and to the door of the room where the girl is kept. When the doctor switches on the light, to his utter surprise, Sirajuddin finds that it was Sakina lying unconscious on the stretcher. The doctor asks him to open the window. With the sound of 'open it' the 'pros-

trate body' on the stretcher moved and slowly untied her shalwar (Manto 10). "With painful slowness, she unfastened it pulled the garment down and opened her thighs" (10). The doctor understands what had happened to the girl and why she behaves like a programmed robot. She has been repeatedly gang-raped by her rescuers. This physical and mental exhaustion sapped her life and turned her into a programmed personality. She cannot think beyond the word 'open'. The physical and psychological trauma has numbed her to such a degree that she has lost sense of the outside world beyond her body. Recurrent rape has blunted her sense of time and place and thrust her into severe psychological disorder which was common among the ravished women and girls of her position.

After raping the girl innumerable times, the beasts had thrown her near the railway tracks. When the saviour becomes the slayer, humanity hides its face in shame and hatred. They did not care for the father who has been pining for his lost daughter for days since he regained consciousness in the unknown land of Lahore. Now Sirajuddin is happy to see that his daughter is alive. He does not know or rather does not want to know, for the moment, what had happened to her. The excitement of getting his precious daughter hardly permits him to enquire why she behaves like this. It is a miracle to get his lost family when millions were dead or had just vanished like bubbles. When the happiness of his daughter's return would subside he would definitely find out what had happened to her. Or, he has already guessed how she was brought there from the slush of lust.

But, for the time being, he is happy and relieved to see his lost daughter alive before his eyes. "His [Manto's] sensitive portrayal of the plight of uprooted humanity on the move, in his fictional and nonfictional accounts of partition, is unsurpassed in quality" (Jalal, Preface x). The father would never know who inflicted such heinous torture on his daughter. He escaped with her to dodge the danger of falling into the hands of people of 'enemy' religion. He was also lucky to escape the impending danger of travelling on a refugee train and being killed. He felt at ease when he found his daughter alive among his coreligionists in a 'safe' refugee camp. He believed that at least his coreligionists would not do any harm to him and his daughter. Nothing could be predicted in the ravages of ruthless time. While many from 'enemy' religion saved their neighbours, friends and even strangers risking their own lives, many from their own religion failed to fulfil the basic tenets of humanity. "Concerned ever with the present, Manto was interested not in analyzing the causes of partition but in dealing with its consequences" (Jalal 142).

Sakina has returned from the mouth of death and is reunited with his father but she is alive only in her body not in her mind. She would hardly be able to overcome the trauma and the disbelief she had experienced for days in the cage of the wild beasts. She would have to live a life of shame, hatred, and trauma. She would never be at peace with a wounded memory and a lacerated body. "Many children, Partition survivors, developed severe psychological problems, and found they could not live in families" (Butalia 254). This was the fate of thousands of girls and women across religions and borders. Bodily violence on women was so horrific that many of them did not return to normalcy after years and decades. The parents or family members of the women had to bear the brunt of the ravaged body and mind of their women. Many could not marry their daughters and sisters as society was not eager to accept those 'fallen women' who had been abducted, raped, or forcefully married. If they were already married, many families did not accept them when they were rescued to reunite with their families. They became untouchables within and without the family. Many were doomed to lead a cursed life throughout their lives. Male political ego in combination with religious animosity resulted in such a cataclysmic world for the women.

Prostitution, life on the street or in a state-run home became the grim options if women were rejected by their families . . . Ironically, the misogyny and patriarchal value that cut across North Indian society at the time meant that Indian and Pakistani men had much more in common in their attitudes and actions than they ever would have admitted. Women became, as Gandhi later described them, 'the chief sufferers' of 1947. (Khan 135)

Sirajuddin would perhaps never know how the youths of his own religion deceived him and destroyed the life of his daughter. He believed their words and prayed for their adventurous nobility as if they were messiahs for many like him who had lost their near and dear ones. Ironically, they emerge as the devils who feign to help humanity but in reality destroy the trust of helpless men and women. To fulfil their lust, the opportunistic men did not hesitate to glut on the conviction, compassion, and conscience of the other people. They betrayed many Sirajuddins and many Sirajuddins believed people like them. It was a vicious time when judging people by face or religion was a futile exercise. The poison of opportunistic religious politics trickled down to the lower strata of the society and many like Sirajuddin and Sakina were its easy dupes.

Manto wrote short stories that were not about violence as such but

about people and their different faces. The perpetrators and the victims of their oppression interest him only insofar as they help to lay bare the all-too-human characteristics that can momentarily turn the gentlest of souls into the most demonic monsters. . . . It was part and parcel of an unfolding drama that gave glimpses into the best and worst in humankind. (Jalal 24)

The quest for a better social, political, and economic life as propagated by the leaders and preachers of Partition ended up in a search for a safer shelter in an alien land. Here too the search continues in many forms – lost season of sun and shower, lost dignity of home and hearth, and lost memory of peace and tranquillity. Partition and its perilous memories would not let the victims breathe in a fresh lease of life.

It is also evident from personal experience that memories of sights and sounds from our early childhood come back to us later in life, particularly during emotionally aroused states. One goes back to old familiar tastes of food when one is unwell. Smells and sounds trigger memories and may also underlie the biological bases of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders. Displacement and uprooting can have lasting effects on our mental state. (Sarin and Jain 2-3)

Manto's many stories like "Blouse", "My Name is Radha", "Ten Rupees", "The Assignment", "Colder than Ice", "The Woman in the Red Raincoat", "The Dutiful Daughter" "A Girl from Delhi" uncover the bloody truth of the time and establishes him as one of the remarkable artists who coloured his world of writing with the harshest realities of Partition and its myriad ramifications. Those macabre days showed their fiercest face and somewhere led people to vengeance and existence. He unhesitatingly unmasked the murkier side of humanity and presented some live characters in his writings. The writer's personal visits to the refugee camps in Lahore and its appalling pictures moved him to write about the predicaments of the refugee families. "After mingling with the ocean of displaced people huddled in camps across Punjab, he was not only one of the first to address the issue of abducted women; he also questioned commonplace assumptions about partition violence." (Jalal 144)

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