

**Vagueness in Literature Pertaining to the Indo-Pak Partition: Interpreting Human
Foolhardiness through Dark Humor and Reader Response Criticism in Saadat Hassan
Mnato's Short Stories**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper has highlighted the issues of migrants, religious fanaticism and moral bankruptcy during partition of the Indian sub-continent through dark humor while the researcher has gone through Saadat Hassan Manto's short stories which reveal the social senselessness, destructive tendencies of human nature and absence of national narratives in the Muslim and Hindu communities. The resettlement of the refugees in India and Pakistan, recovery of missing persons, rehabilitation of women, non-availability of support and guidance were the spatial and temporal issues of migrants in the aftermath of the Partition. Manto has revealed moral bankruptcy and essential evil tendencies of human nature like greed, revenge, looting and ego ridiculing the people who were being displaced through dark humor in his short stories. Sometimes, he has mocked individuals and sometimes he has ridiculed the whole society. Lack of National Narratives triggered the social and moral senselessness which in return formed the shape of communal chaos during partition to add to the misery of the people who were migrating from Pakistan to India and from India to Pakistan. The researcher has pointed out that Manto has disclosed the cultural, moral and social crisis during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The English translation of Manto's short stories is interested because hatred, love, compassion, virtue, evil, harmony, conflict, precision, immorality, purity and impurity can be vividly seen in them. This study has aimed to point out the scene of the division and how Manto has presented dark humor in his short stories to show the harsh aspects in a hilarious way. Women from both sides became an easy victim of religious extremity. They were raped, kidnapped and killed. Recovered women were not accepted by their families. During the partition democracy violated, economics hampered, emotions became static and ideology got vanished. Innocent people murdered, riots broke out, women raped, properties looted and destroyed, and these happenings made people displaced but those who anyhow could save their lives became insane forever. The researcher has accomplished this study using the Reader Response Theory and textual analysis of Manto's stories. Different articles of Manto's critics have also been helpful for the researcher in the completion of this work. The researcher has finally observed that Manto's representation of partition of the Indian subcontinent is based on the devastating facts. Religion, nationalism, politics, social differences and imperialism are all such factors which forced the people of the Indian subcontinent to toil for the separate countries and the British had to leave India not before dividing it into two separate countries to create killing, looting, lawlessness, abduction and violence which have no parallels in the history of the Indian subcontinent. This study can be helpful for future research to highlight the issues of partition presented by Manto in his short stories and can guide dividing nations not to go insane.

Key words: dark humor, social senselessness, absence of national narratives, rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

The partition of the Sub-Continent was brutal and bloody and to Manto it appeared maddeningly and religiously senseless. Manto has highlighted in his short stories that the two major communities, the Muslims and the Hindus who had both demanded and struggled for freedom and independence became the religious extremists when the partition started. These two communities had been living together for decades but their religious fanaticism divided them and their dream to get freedom from the British was realized but at the expense of human, moral, social and religious destruction. Yet, as the time approached and the goal of freedom came in sight, they who had lived like close neighbors, sheltered one another, laughed and cried together for centuries, now at the realization of their dream confronted one another like enemies, thirsty for each other's blood, honor and property. Saadat Hassan Manto's short stories bear the realities of life at such a standard that hatred, love, hopelessness, compassion, virtue, evil, harmony, conflict, precision, immorality, pureness and adulteration can be vividly seen in them.

The division of the Indian subcontinent not only shaped a foolish impression but also prepared its sufferers foolish, senseless, trailing their rational composure due to disturbing occurrences. Inhabitants from the both sides were perplexed about their exact recognition. They were also concerned about their geographical position. Resettlement of the refugees in India and Pakistan, recovery of missing persons, rehabilitation of women, non-availability of support and guidance were the major issues of the displaced people highlighted by Manto in his short stories. Many of his short stories focus on the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Manto vividly recreates the anger and horrors of this period and the trauma of refugees uprooted and victimized by the delineation of arbitrary borders. As the characters in Manto's stories confront the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence murder, rape and mutilation, their only conceivable response is madness. Religious and moral norms differentiate between right and wrong. Manto has highlighted in his short stories that religious values were violated by religious and moral bankruptcy. Most of the religions of the world propagate morality and courtesy. But the partition of the Indian Subcontinent shattered all good things related to morality. Manto has emphasized that the evil tendencies of human nature like ego, rage, greed and revenge had corrupted all moral principles during the partition and created killing, looting, lawlessness and moral bankruptcy (Jalal, 2013).

This study is an exhaustive analysis of Manto's short stories, recently, published in English. Dark humor is Manto's specialty. He has the knack to point out grim realities, human fragilities and essential evils in the nature of humanity through a very specific technique, coined by the researcher as Dark Humor. Humor is established in every society whether it be writing, theatre, political propaganda or social field. Dark humor and black humor are two identical terms. It is a particular sort of humor that writers can use as an exit during times that are worrying, miserable and dubious. Dark humor is defined as the writing that contrasts gruesome or grisly elements with hilarious ones that highlight the meaninglessness or pointlessness of life. Dark humor literature deals with subjects that are particular to an assured time, and search for to assist people to deal with those matters. It truly gives two viewpoints of a matter, one that illustrates the somber side and the other that explains the absurd and overstated view in order to make a statement about the grim side.

Manto's short stories are full of dark humor which makes light of series and disturbing subject matter of his short stories and merge the melancholic and bizarre with wit and mockery to give an alarming outcome and express the meaninglessness and malice of life. The chilling effect begins to wear off, however when it soon becomes apparent that, in contrast to other literature of partition, what is most important about these Manto's stories is not their theme, but their particular brand of dark humor. Often taking an ironic turn, the real effect of many of these stories lies in the contrast between the characters' understanding of the events in which they participate and the deeper understanding of both characters and events which readers perceive.

Saadat Hassan Manto has presented the dark and gloomy public conflict with much belief, reality and vigor in his collection of short stories *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches of Partition*. His many short stories highlight sensible comprehension of anarchy and exodus created by the alienation of the Indian subcontinent into two freed countries in the second half of 1940s. Manto highlights that religious fanaticism was such destructive factor during the partition that it created religious killing, looting, kidnapping and lawlessness. His stories are a realistic representation of the partition which proved destructive for the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Manto very realistically and clearly builds the anguish and horrible images of this very period. Resettlement of the refugees, recovery of the missing people and lack of guidance and support for the displaced people were the burning problems caused by the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The problems of refugees which multiplied by the presence of the divided boundaries have also been presented by him in his short stories. Manto has also shown the dearth of leadership which devastated the moral and social values. Looting, killing, homelessness and disappointment made people insane and they did not care for their own fellow beings. His stories show that religious and sectarian killing during partition was a dominant and driving force to bring looting, homelessness, and sexual molestation, violation of religious values, greed and helplessness to the refugees in the both newly born Pakistan and India. Both new governments were helpless spectators and couldn't do anything to stop all that devastation of human beings. Men, women and children were not spared if they belonged to the opposite religion. During partition, morality was not the guide for the people of India and Pakistan and they violated it as much as they could do. Moral bankruptcy harmed the morality of the people and they became insane and created moral, social and religious senselessness. Men, women and even children were not safe. They were robbed, killed, looted and raped. The Hindus and Sikhs killed the Muslims. The Muslims killed the Hindus and Sikhs. Manto has skillfully presented in his short stories that how the followers of same religion have taunted their own fellows. Morality was also followed by the people but their number was too low to resist the immorality of the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.

Manto's stories show that frustration, greed and lawlessness paved the way for social, moral and individual unrest and people did not try to resist themselves at all to harm their fellow human beings. Those who were displaced to their new countries had to face adverse circumstances. Resettlement of the refugees was one of the taunting tasks for both Pakistan and India. Recovery of the missing and rehabilitation of the affected were other major issues of that time. Rich and land lords became penniless in their new countries. Political inexperience to handle such circumstances made the Pakistani and Indian governments ineffective to use whatever calculated resources they had, which contributed to the social chaos and senselessness. The tragedy of the partition hurried the political leaders to take their decisions hastily (Manto, 1997).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The partition of the Indian subcontinent brought many destructive concerns for the displaced people highlighted by Manto in his short stories. Resettlement of the refugees in India and Pakistan, recovery of missing persons, rehabilitation of women, non-availability of support and guidance were the major issues of the displaced people highlighted by Manto in his short stories. Many of his short stories highlight the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Religious fanaticism made people greedy, killers and senseless. People were killed, women were raped and properties were burnt on the base of religion. Religious identity became the most unwanted quest. Moral bankruptcy triggered social and religious extremity. The Muslims killed the Hindus and Sikhs. The Hindus and Sikhs killed the Muslims. Women were kidnapped, killed and raped.

Sudha Tiwari in an article entitled as "*Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hassan Manto*" mentions that the symbols of insanity and the subjects of identity-crisis are repeated frequently in the writings on separation, whether it represents orthodox historical literature or unreal illustration. Gandhi requested to the people not to answer foolishness with foolishness. It was also the suggestion of the newspaper editors,

ordinary men and women. The division of the Indian subcontinent not only shaped a foolish impression but also prepared its sufferers foolish, senseless, trailing their rational composure due to disturbing occurrences. Inhabitants from the both sides were perplexed about their exact recognition. They were also concerned about their political and geographical position. Manto mixes these two themes and writes “*Toba Tek Singh*”. This story has become a mark of the baffled and worn out individuals comprising from division from one’s inherited abode. He triumphs over those who assert to be sensible and who want to shatter his individuality, as his demise takes place in no-man’s-land, where the summons of neither nation could establish (Tiwari, 2013).

While recounting the carnage of separation, Khalid Hassan in his book *Introduction of Mottled Dawn* by Saadat Hassan Manto asserts that the enormous tragedy of the division of India rested in the sectarian and spiritual blood shedding which headed and pursued it. Even to the present times, nobody knows with any assurance that how many people on the both sides of the territory had been assassinated in bloody war of partition. This type of massacre which was witnessed at the time of division has few examples in the world history. A brutal madness seems to become the part of people who had been living for centuries. In 1947, something was shattered in late. The tragedy of division was surprisingly more appalling than the annihilation of European Jews by the Nazis. There was such human killing existed that nobody could stop it. The sources of the new governments were placed to complete this ghastly mission. It was planned and cautiously premeditated assassination. In the Indian subcontinent, it was not the state that killed people but the people themselves who became the sole executors of a gigantic and deathly production of death. Suddenly, cultured inhabitants curved into frantic slayers. Those who were friends became foes. Friends killed friends and neighbors killed neighbors. Killing and destruction were widely spread in the region. If one race murdered a hundred men, the other would carefully try its utmost that it assassinated the double. There was no stopping. Women were the easy sufferer of the division and mostly they were at the receiving end. Thousands of them were abducted, murdered and raped. Even children and old people were not spared. Total neighborhoods’ complete villages were burnt and the snubbing, shattering movers detected and killed with offhand weapons. That insanity has not been understood by anyone. It is apparent that not only persons but complete societies can go mad” (Hassan, 1997).

To quote Gilmartin, “The frantic effort to uphold the connection of place, heritage, sacredness, and moral order was cast against the backdrop of a fixed Partition of territory that symbolically torn these linkages apart. No work of writing summarizes this more vividly than Saadat Hassan Manto’s Urdu short story, “*Toba Tek Singh*” (Usman, 2014, p. 265).

Some critics are of the opinion that, Bishen Singh, the major character of the story, is a tool for Manto through which he discloses the calamitous upshots of the separation that demolished the lives of so many naïve during partition. He is a personification of Manto’s condemnation of the existing biased verdict that was destined for nothing. The judgment brought no alteration in the lives of common people apart from making them destitute and ruined. It contributed a considerable role in sketching the retainable blockade between India and Pakistan, between Hindus and Muslims. The query that disturbs Bishen Singh, that is, “Where is Toba Tek Singh?” is in fact the issue that hampered Manto for not being competent to decide the perplexity between India and Pakistan. As he deliberately points out in a letter to Uncle Sam, “My heart is drowned in sadness today. A strange melancholy has descended on me. Four and a half years ago, when I said goodbye to my second home, Bombay, I had felt the same way. I was sad at leaving a place where I had spent so many days of a hard-working life. That piece of land had offered shelter to a family and it had said to me, ‘you can be happy here on two pennies a day or on ten thousand rupees a day, if you wish. You can also spend your life here as the unhappiest man in the world. You can do what you want. No one will find fault with you. Nor will anyone subject you to moralizing. You alone will have to accomplish the most difficult of tasks and you alone will have to make every important decision of your life. You may live on

the footpath or in a magnificent palace; it will not matter in the least to me. You may leave or you may stay, it will make no difference to me. I am where I am and that is where I will remain”(Hashmi, 2013).

As Das and Nandy wrote that it was the genius of Manto to have created the form through which the deafening silence accompanying the trauma of being simultaneously the subject, object, and instrument of violence could be represented. They further asserted that they hoped that scholars would be stimulated into examining that kind of literature for understanding the theoretical constructions within which violence might be located in human societies (Ahmad, 2005).

Stephen Alter in one of his essays, “Madness and Partition: the Short Stories of Saadat Hassan Manto” said that no writer has been able to convey the violent ambiguities of communal conflict with as much force and conviction as Saadat Hassan Manto. Many of his short stories focus on the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947. Manto vividly recreates the anger and horrors of this period and the trauma of refugees uprooted and victimized by the delineation of arbitrary borders. As the characters in Manto’s stories confront the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence murder, rape and mutilation, their only conceivable response is madness (Nisar.2014).

The story “Toba Tek Singh” is a memorable narrative which portrays a person’s personality predicament created due to the suffering of the separation. Although the setting of the story is in a lunatic asylum, Manto’s inventive stroke attributes the sanctuary a symbolic significance. Different intellectuals have explained that Manto has intentionally used the setting of the lunatic asylum as the location of his narrative for his reason is not only to demonstrate how the division of India and Pakistan devastated people by building them mad but also to emphasize the reality that the pronouncement of separation was not even tolerable for the lunatics in the refuge. In other words, Manto, by explaining the wisdom of the irrational in shelter, has toiled to illustrate, on the one hand, the distress that ordinary people bore due to the division of Pakistan from India and on the other; the uncertainty existed because of the helplessness of the people to isolate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India. According to a scholar the “lunatics, in the asylum of Lahore, stand as an epitome of a harmonious community that is governed by a world, without any overarching tropes of nationhood and religious differences. A small community of theirs is an indirect satire on the sane society whose trifle rationale makes them actually saner than the lunatics in the madhouse. Bishen Singh exemplifies a world without the bars and boundaries, who wants to live his life neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan. These national boundaries are identities that have been attached with him without seeking his consent that is why he keeps on resisting; he wants to go back to Toba Tek Singh, form where he belongs and which gives him his identity. Manto proclaims the lunacy of splitting the nation on the basis of religion, through his mouthpiece Bishen Singh, who would rather prefer to die in no man’s land than make a choice between Hindustan and Pakistan. Thus, the death of Bishen Singh at the wahgah border stands as a metaphor of doom and curtains for both the nations”(Zargar, 2014).

Saadat Hassan Manto once said “When I sat down to write I found my mind in a confused state. However much I tried, I could not separate India from Pakistan or Pakistan from India. My mind was invaded by the same puzzling question again and again; will the literature of Pakistan be different? If so how? Who has the claim to what was written in undivided India? Will that be divided as well?”(Trivedi, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study claims the use of Reader Response Theory by the researcher to do thematic analysis of Manto’s short stories, recently published in English. The researcher has taken subjective Reader Response theory and social reader response theory arguing that these are his subjective analysis that dark humor is the technique which Manto has used to point out the bleak aspects of humanity and partition and highlight that the issue of partition is a social reality. Reader-Response theory gained prominence in the late 1960s. It focuses on the reader or audience reaction to a particular text, perhaps more than the text itself.

Unlike text-based approaches such as New Criticism, which are grounded upon some objective meaning already present in the work being examined, reader-response criticism argues that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences and reads it. The reader-response critic's job is to examine the scope and variety of reader reactions and analyze the ways in which different readers, sometimes called "interpretive communities," make meaning out of both purely personal reactions and inherited or culturally conditioned ways of reading. The theory is popular in both the United States and Germany; its main theorists include Stanley Fish, David Bleich, and Wolfgang Iser. There are multiple approaches within the theoretical branch of reader-response criticism, yet all are unified in their belief that the meaning of a text is derived from the reader through the reading process (Soter, 1999).

Subjective Reader-Response Theory

Subjective Reader-Response theory, associated with David Bleich, looks entirely to the reader's response for literary meaning as individual written responses to a text are then compared to other individual interpretations to find continuity of meanings. This study unravels the issues of migrants, religious fanaticism and moral bankruptcy during partition through dark humor in Manto's short stories which reveal the social senselessness, destructive tendencies of human nature and absence of national narratives in the Muslim and Hindu communities in his recently published English short stories through subjective reader-response theory (Bleich, 1986).

Dark Humor and Manto's Stories

Dark humor literature deals with subjects that are particular to an assured time, and search for to assist people to deal with those matters. It truly gives two viewpoints of a matter, one that illustrates the somber side and the other that explains the absurd and overstated view in order to make a statement about the grim side (Holmes, 1998).

The researcher has explored that Manto has used dark humor to interpret lawlessness, assassination, homelessness, killing, looting and mismanagement of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Through this theory the researcher has also studied the mind set of Manto that is not in favor of the Muslims and Hindus. Rather, it is shown that how destructive evil tendencies of human nature like revenge, greed, irrationality and ego threaten the existence of human beings. This theory has also helped the researcher understand that partition is used as a symbol throughout the stories which divides Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims as for as their religion, rituals, way of living and their new countries are concerned.

Using Subjective Reader Response theory, the researcher has concluded subjective analysis that dark humor is the technique that Manto has used in his short stories to point out the bleak aspects of humanity and partition that have devastated the Indian subcontinent religiously, socially and politically. It is a particular sort of humor that the writers can use as an exit during times that are worrying, miserable and dubious. Dark humor is defined as the writing that contrasts gruesome or grisly elements with hilarious ones that highlight the meaninglessness or pointlessness of life. Manto has used dark humor describing the aspects like looting, lawlessness, political upheaval and mismanagements. Difference of religion, social norms, education, economic gains, outlook and ideology could not unite Muslims, Hindus and other minorities and led the way to the division of the Indian Subcontinent into two separate countries Pakistan and India. When this division took place, cultural unity altered into cultural chaos, rationality disappeared, religion ignored, and the political environment of the Indian subcontinent surrounded by material benefits. The researcher has pointed out that bleak aspects of humanity and partition like killing, looting, lawlessness, homelessness, moral depravity and social senselessness collectively damaged the society, politics and economics of Pakistan and India in 1947.

Manto has masterly depicted the satirical irony and dark humor showing lawlessness and senselessness in his story "The Garland" when he depicts that the attacking gang swiftly changes its way, its rage now aims at the sculpture of Sir Ganga Ram. Sticks are hurled through the air to hit the statue; bricks and stones are used excessively. One man tries to grim the statue's face with the firewood tar. Another person makes a garland of shoes which he is about to place around the neck of the statue. Then the police arrive with all guns roaring. The garland man is shot, and then taken to be nursed at Sir Ganga Ram hospital.

The researcher has highlighted his subjective assessment that during partition neither government could provide safety to the people who were being displaced. Manto, in his stories, has ridiculed the arrangements made for the safety of the people. In the story "Precautionary Arrangement", the situation becomes all the more humorous when the first explosion takes place in front of the hotel and a sergeant is hired there to handle the situation. The next evening the second blast happened not far from the general store. The guard is hurriedly moved to the location of the second incident. The third explosion takes place in front of the laundry. The guard is given instructions to stand at the new spot. He very humorously asks that he should be informed where the next incident is going to take place. So that he could make precautionary arrangements to stop that.

Every artist is the embodiment of social norms of the society he lives in. The more he projects the social values and models through his writings the more his skill of writing gets supplemented and conquers enough exactness to supply to the ideas and standards of the age. He clears the way for his generation and descendant towards illumination and wisdom. Manto's short stories bear the realities of life at such a standard that hatred, love, hopelessness, compassion, virtue, evil, harmony, conflict, precision, immorality, purity and impurity can be vividly seen in them. He shows the powerful evil still a ray of hope in the form of visible virtue. In the darkness of harsh cruelty a beam of light is also foreseen. He thinks that a man is neither completely wicked, nor full righteous. Humor is established in every society whether it be writing, theatre, political misinformation or social field. Dark humor and black humor are two identical terms. It is a particular sort of humor that the writers can use an exit during times that are worrying, miserable and dubious. Dark humor is defined as the writing that contrasts gruesome or grisly elements with hilarious ones that highlight the meaninglessness or pointlessness of life (Colletta, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative as it presents a new comprehension about the religious, social and moral causes and their effects on the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The researcher has applied reader response theory on the text and disclosed that Manto has a knack of using dark humor in his short stories to present the bleak aspects of humanity and partition. The methodology of basic research has also been used by the researcher which includes diligent and critical analysis of the primary as well as secondary sources. This study has been further elaborated by using and making the contextual as well as textual analysis of the relevant sources following the APA format.

DATA ANALYSIS

This study's analysis reveals how Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories employ dark humor to dissect the moral and social collapse during the 1947 Partition. Through stories like "Toba Tek Singh" and "The Garland," Manto juxtaposes violence with absurdity, exposing the irrationality of religious fanaticism and bureaucratic failure. For instance, in "The Garland," a mob's attack on a statue culminates in the attacker being hospitalized at an institution named after the same statue—a cyclical satire of vengeance and futility. Such narratives align with Reader Response Theory, as they force readers to confront trauma through ironic detachment, prompting subjective interpretations of collective madness (Bleich, 1986; Colletta, 2003). The researcher's textual analysis highlights how Manto's humor serves not just as critique but as a survival

mechanism, rendering the incomprehensible horrors of Partition into digestible, albeit unsettling, and narratives.

A dominant theme emerging from the data is the erosion of moral and national identity. Secondary literature, such as Jalal (2013) and Hassan (1997), corroborates Manto's depiction of Partition as a period where neighbors became executioners and women were reduced to spoils of war. The story "Toba Tek Singh" epitomizes this, with Bishen Singh's refusal to align with India or Pakistan symbolizing the absurdity of imposed borders. Comparative analysis shows that while scholars like Tiwari (2013) read the story as an allegory for identity crisis, this study expands the lens by tying it to the broader "social senselessness" Manto critiques—where even the "sane" world mirrors the asylum's chaos. The researcher's application of Subjective Reader-Response Theory underscores how Manto's stories resist singular meanings, instead inviting audiences to grapple with their own complicity in historical violence.

Finally, the study identifies gaps in existing scholarship, particularly the lack of focus on dark humor's psychological function in Partition literature. While prior works (e.g., Zargar, 2014) analyze madness as a metaphor, this research pioneers the link between Manto's irony and Freudian gallows humor—suggesting laughter as a defense against trauma. The stories' repetitive motifs of displacement and bureaucratic ridicule (e.g., "Precautionary Arrangement") reveal systemic failures still relevant to modern divided societies. Recommendations include extending this framework to gendered readings of Manto's female characters, whose voices often underscore the Partition's silenced atrocities. By merging literary analysis with trauma theory, the study positions Manto not just as a chronicler of history, but as a theorist of human resilience.

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