

Mar 7th, 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM

When to “Open It” Only Meant Untying the Pyjama Strings: Partition and Narrativity Gone Astray

Sarbani Banerjee

Western University, sbaner3@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/mlgradconference>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Banerjee, Sarbani, "When to “Open It” Only Meant Untying the Pyjama Strings: Partition and Narrativity Gone Astray" (2014).
Modern Languages and Literatures Annual Graduate Conference. 3.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/mlgradconference/2014Conference/MLL2014/3>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Annual Graduate Conference by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca, wlsadmin@uwo.ca.

Abstract :

My paper studies how brevity manifested itself through a complete breakdown of language system in reaction to the animosity circumscribing the Partition of India. I look into Sadaat Hasan Manto's selected Urdu short stories to demonstrate how the pared off pattern of writing coupled with creation of specific information lapses helps to project hostility in its denuded form. The dark side of language emerges through minimum clarification, where the unedited picture of gruesome carnage becomes the lone guarantor of informal accounts, generating perspectives that had hitherto been rebuffed by the selective versions of mainstream history.

Through his economization of words, Manto unfolds trauma in its glaring intensity that had permanently balked the smooth programming of articulation. The slippage in meaning transpires through a distorted relationship between the signifying word and its concomitant silent gesture. His writing suggests a mechanical responding quality that directly hits the libidinous components of massacre, thereby making it impossible to naturalize blind communalist violence. I argue that by paradoxically juxtaposing emotion and language with action, the terseness and often comic treatment of the gory sights in Manto's writings enable an empowerment of vision for the readers, thereby deliberately heightening the unguarded shocking impact.

When to "Open It" Only Meant Untying the Pyjama Strings: Partition and Narrativity Gone

Astray

Before moving on to his stories, a few words about Saadat Hasan Manto. Someone who has been chronically acclaimed and booed, tried at court for his "obscene representations" and called a "fraud", who had spent his last years in a geographically separated Pakistan as a drunkard and an individual sick of heart and mind, and who died of cirrhosis of liver, was then the author who had also captured in his writing particularly abrasive accounts about the Indian Partition. Dr. Waqas Khwaja reads, "The impatient, impetuous, iconoclast was brought into existence as a measure of self-defence. It was an act of rebellion against an obsessive fear of anonymity and obliteration". Situated in a polished Urdu-speaking society, Manto was fusilladed for what others saw as premeditated and to some extent predictable histrionics rife in his writings, and his

aggressive pitch judged as a conscious technique aiming to stand out as unique. Because to describe the armpit of a woman with a piece of plucked chicken skin meant spoiling the dinner of the aristocrats, and in Manto's own words, crossing the threshold of Tolstoy-defined parameters who was at times "Gandhi-like in his propensities", was he obviously boycotted even by the Progressive Writers' Movement. Yet, one also wonders, how else could this callous administrative decision be amply portrayed, so as to touch upon the uncountable stories of homelessness, butchery, displacement and rape? Formal History has systemically treated this human debacle in both the post-Partition States of India and Pakistan, and literature knows the scheme of betrayals involved in these official writings. It is no wonder therefore, that behind the voice hurling shock treatment in Manto's narratives is indeed the familiar Partition victim who has been stripped and stranded by the classy idea of nation, and who therefore needs to make grotesque gestures in order to drive home the truth about its crisis into the deaf-mute sensory organs of the national working principle. Dramatic performance and stridency through concentrated terseness thus comes handy in effecting that blow which is meant to break the ice.

The English translation of Manto's short story titled "Jelly" goes as follows: "At six in the morning, the man who used to sell ice from a push-cart next to the service station was stabbed to death. His body lay on the road, while water kept falling on it in steady dribbles from the melting ice. At a quarter past seven, the police took him away. The ice and blood stayed on the road. A mother and a child rode past the spot in a *tonga*. The child noticed the coagulated blood on the road, tugged at his mother's sleeve and said, 'Look mummy, jelly'" (149). This is the entire story. Words are economized so as to contain only the temporal slot that it takes for blood, an upshot of adult violence, to take the shape of jelly, a child's misinformed perception. The singular manifestation of mortal perversity combines the child's joy in what he fathoms to be jelly with the grown-up's realization of it to be coagulation of blood. Here the spectatorship and hence the responsibility of tragedy has been carried on to the level of juvenile sensibility that

through its joyful misconception amplifies the macabre vision. As Partition scholars observe, women and children have time and again been rendered a sub-human infantile status by the rehabilitating measures of the paternalistic State. Hence incorporation of a child Other's perspective in this case unnerves the total self-congratulatory rhetoric of Partition, which is not prepared to explain about its historico-political cause to the secondary inhabitants – the non-adult, the non-male, the non-upper class or upper-caste people who cohabit within the same territory. The minimal language of innocent perplexity upon seeing “jelly” on the road becomes the mythical map of a personalized idyll that is fundamentally cut off from the high-blown platitude of a compelling nationalistic discourse.

In an interview with Wusatullah Khan, Fahmida Riaz reflects about Manto: “Manto did not use symbols. He was not a writer to use symbols. He used to write openly. Where he wanted to say ‘breast’ he used to write ‘breast’ and people criticised him for that. The criticism came because our minds were so used to symbols and metaphors and to hiding things that we could not digest his pure and open writing. We did not know how to deal with it.” The naked body of his female character Mozail, a Jewish woman is precisely what characterizes Manto's writing. The woman who has thrown off her Jewish robe to cloth the ‘modesty’ of her ex-lover's fiancé, yet who herself refuses to be covered up by this Sikh man's turban material because it signifies a second skin of another sham religion, is then the agent of a crowd-pulling spectacle before the homicidal mob. By virtue of being naked to the core, in my reading Mozail becomes an a-religious a-communal neuter body, whose exactness of being what she is makes her too sophisticated to be classified only as a seductress, a victim or as someone who is empowered. Same for Manto's stories; he pares off the human body or the human-committed offence its usual territorial and sacrosanct apportioning in terms of belonging to the Hindu or the Muslim fold – its being tagged with Sikh vandalism, Hindu fundamentalism or Muslim victimization. By that logic, his depiction of woman becomes a difficult encumbrance for the hyper-macho groups, who can no more

visualize her only as a womb or a vagina without being disturbed by the awareness of her “tufts of pubic hair” and her malodorous odour. Here, choosing not to explain further in his stories not only makes a proclaimed unapologetic statement on the face of the ridiculous double-standards of the elitist political figures, but also functions as a conscious means to block any kind of naturalization or dilution of what became the order of the day in the pre-Partition phase. By ruminating only in the coordinates of actual human misery, Manto’s short stories construct a counter-silencing device for the high-flying nationalist names, who had wanted to stifle the agony of the masses with dubious and overdue promises of rehabilitations and recompenses.

Manto’s stories are incisive commentaries on the elemental aspects of human nature and its fiasco on the face of such political turbulence and ideological madness as Partition. Brevity of his style summarizes two points – that the violence centring Partition was cumulative, repetitive and very much selfsame irrespective of religion and region, and that the much known truism about collective religious motivation behind such acts is a pure myth, whereas in reality unprovoked assaults were made for very personal intentions, which could be as inevitable as lust for women, power and money. The act of pillaging an emigrating family’s belongings was given the lofty façade of “socialism”. Thus, in “Losing Proposition”, a story where two friends buy an abducted girl newly taken into prostitution and ravish her, thinking that they are penetrating and blaspheming every symbol of the “Other’s” community, yet in the end discover from her name that she is but their religious sister, reprehensibility cannot be zeroed down on a single person. What was the religion of the man who had abducted and sold the girl? Of him who had disguised her and passed her as “the girl from the other community?” Of all the hands that she kept changing, wasn’t it obvious that at least for once she would be violated by her “own people”? Manto refuses to answer. Instead, what is pointed out in this case is the amoral and ungodly nature of the randomness of men-sponsored crimes that were fanned up in the Partition decades. In the story called “Modesty”, the great paradox that the human character had to come in terms with

during these riots, is evinced. “The rioters brought the train to a stop. Those who belonged to the other religion were methodically picked out and slaughtered. After it was all over, those who remained were treated to a feast of milk, custard pies and fresh fruit (158).” This train becomes in essence the twin post-Partition nations recently torn from the umbilical cord of the undivided Indian subcontinent, and the act of feasting amid bloodbath the onerous celebration of a supposed independence that both the countries had thrust on their respective people. Between the conferring of food and geniality to one set of people and killing of the other stands the pen-and-paper formula of citizenship and entitlement, which denies the hitherto existing plural communities their due legitimacy, in perverse hopes for communally “pure” political nations. Manto’s heartbroken tone of simultaneous laughing and mourning while looking back at such inhuman events, as well as the specific information lapses such as muting of any obvious religious credentials of the killer and the killed in the above story, calls attention to an obsessive nature of mass execution, which bypasses the rationale of vengeance, heading for a disbalanced human quotient.

By persistently talking about human body that at the time of Partition had become the sole transporter of religion – with or without a turban, a *tilak* or circumcision – and by hardly mentioning about religion itself, Manto points out how both (body and religion) were put up on sacrificial scale, as receptacles of human corruption. Based on the futile arguments about the ‘right’ way in which an animal should be killed (the Hindus, who slaughter it by the neck and the Muslims, by the throat), the story called “Ritualistic Difference” captures how unquestioning faiths, donning the garbs of behavioural correctness and political authority, reduces humanity into a hunter-and-quarry interplay: “I placed my knife across his windpipe and, slowly, very slowly, I slaughtered him. And why did you do that? What do you mean why? Why did you kill him Kosher? Because I love doing it that way. You idiot, you should have chopped his neck off with one single blow. Like this. And the kosher killer was killed in accordance with the correct ritual

(154).” Here, the onus of Manto’s writing is the telegraphic socio-religious codes, which at the time of Partition were deemed sufficient for killing a member of the opposite group. Another of his stories called “Mishtake” goes as follows: “Ripping the belly cleanly, the knife moved in a straight line down the midriff, in the process slashing the cord which held the man’s pyjamas in place. The man with the knife took one look and exclaimed regretfully, “Oh no! *Mishtake* (164).”

Through conscious ellipsis of religious specification of this stock event that had endlessly been reciprocated at inter-communal levels, Manto’s writing outgrows the regular Hindu-Muslim-Sikh diatribes about mutual blaming, justification or precedence of crime that had for a long time occupied the bureaucratic modes of dialogue, by simply making the absurd hatred look in its own eyes. In this story, the “mishtake” could as much have been committed by a Hindu perpetrator as by a Muslim, who afterwards discovers his own brethren in the murdered victim by looking at an uncircumcised or a circumcised penis. Similarly in Pathanistan: “You, at once, who’re you? ”

“I..I!” You offshoot of the devil, at once...are you Indoo or Musalmeen?” “Musalmeen.” “Who is your Prophet?” “Mohammad Khan.” “Let the man go. (151)” The fact that a vague question like “Who are you?”, which can have numerous answers is not answered at all, whereas upon compressing the option between two synthetic and diametrically opposite choices – “Indoo and Musalmeen”, a ready (and almost automated repartee) is elicited, makes a strong commentary about the inane attempt on the part of the militant frontiers to verify and categorize people merely according to their religion. That the man names the Islamic prophet wrongly yet is allowed to go invalidates the entire procedure of the predictable and curt routine enquiry, in the process revealing how the show of muscle becomes larger than the religion itself which it is supposed to vindicate. Language serves the execution of a dead habit between two races that have receded from one another to a point of no return. Brevity here is thus concomitant of a blunt aspect of speed – the speed with which a brutal or empty action is carried out, the speed with which such an action is recounted in Manto’s writings. While speed becomes essential in forestalling any

baggage of guilt or hunch at the immediate moment of the unthinking action, at its literary level, speed coincides with the urgent authorial desire to tell what has been witnessed without so much as rendering an aesthetic or scholarly meaning to the palpability of the experience. Thus, in my argument, the tardier a Partition narrative gets towards reaching the epicentre of assault, the more it invests on efforts to justify or annotate on what had happened back then. Not intending to talk about any euphemism that had hijacked the scenario either before or after the political onslaught, Manto's literature can be viewed in the same capacity of historical reliability as that of the so-called transparent primary documents, such as the government archives, police records and existing journals and newspapers.

Intizaar Hossein studies how Manto gives licence to the socially downtrodden characters, such as the pimps, thieves, prostitutes, gamblers and swindlers. Yet, unlike the romantic or mawkish flavour that would frequently characterize the writings concerning these types of characters, Manto's objectivity and abruptness has a cruelly realistic expression, making no concession between his pen and his unprompted reaction. For example, in "Kali Shalwaar", he portrays a prostitute, who in a very matter-of-fact way is worried about losing her market-value. Against the backdrop of Muharram – a mourning observance for the Muslims – her lacking of a pair of black shalwar resonates with this aforesaid anxiety of hers, transforming her from being only a coveted sex object to an individual with human dimensions. In addition, such realism in its starkness is capable of bringing out the incongruity and even the comic side of human character. For instance, in the one-liner story called "Determination": "Under no circumstances am I prepared to be converted to a Sikh. I want my razor back" (159), the sign of razor as if splits up the populace into two supposedly irreducible and homogeneous possibilities – the Sikhs and the Muslims, making simultaneous joke about the sanctimonious beards and hair as well as about the circumcised penis. That to preserve such exterior corporal emblems could count more important than one's dear own life, emerged as a matter of hilarity before the humanistic visions of Manto.

The title of this story poses a sarcastic reverse to the actual emergency of its contemporary time – when during the border crossings that had accompanied the materialization of Partition, religious identity had in fact become a fluid category, causing people to take up the cover of the opposite groups' signifiers, such as a burqa or a turban – in other words, the advantage of disguise – so as to ensure safe passage.

In his much talked about short story “Open It”, brevity manifests itself through a complete breakdown of language system. By assigning a flabbergasted quality to the individual responding mechanism, Manto unfolds trauma in its glaring intensity that had permanently balked the smooth programming of articulation. Here the dark side of language emerges through a lacuna in the power of comprehensibility, such that the mind of the maimed girl through multiple encounters of rape is able to interpret each and every signifier only in terms of the signification encompassing her distraught body. The closing few lines from this story are as follows: “The doctor looked at the prostrate body and felt for the pulse. Then, indicating the window, he said to the old man: ‘Open it’. The young woman on the stretcher moved slowly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her *shalwar* tied around her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs (10).” This then was the historical moment that had warped the normal functioning of a message and thereby the human contact, colouring each and every expression with an overtly orgiastic import. As to “open it” continuously hinted at the cataleptic act of opening and closing of limbs, doing and undoing the pyjama strings at the command of a succession of rapists, brevity captures a given society’s crisis and shame owing to the loss of sane imagination while grappling under the weight of primitivity. The entire society at this point was enduring a unilinear and reductive thinking syndrome, which made it impossible to overcome the horrors of Partition and treat the command of “open it” with an otherwise prosaic act of opening a door or window. The overwhelming presence of only one meaning, as here in case of “open it”,

suggested that the situation of Partition had become overarching and larger than the condition of human existence.

Brevity, centring the stage of the Partition of India, meant fatigue after rounds of incendiary, mindless performances. It meant fragmentation of trust and discontinuance of shared memories through an imposed amnesia. Brevity at the official level comprised the daily flag-lowering ceremony observed to this day, which is followed by a brusque handshake between the Indian and the Pakistani soldiers before closing of the Indo-Pak gates at the Wagah border. When two countries came out of one and decided to part ways, precision of act and speech ascribed to such void protocols and policies, surprisingly not lamenting the death of the former comradeship but publicly swearing only to coexist and to tolerate one another. Behind the smokescreen of these remnants of military courtesies -- something that Ben Doherty saw as “ritual dance between bitter brothers”, lay prostitutes made by war, children born out of aggression. Manto’s stories are about these hushed, forbidden chapters of a disgraceful history that the gentlemen afterwards locked up in their closet. With his scandalous language and aesthetically crude briefness, it was his hope to keep the wound open and the blood flowing. The hatred might be infinite but it had to come to an end after all the venom had run out, Manto had gauged. As he envisions in his story called “Resting Time”: ““He is not dead, there is still some life left in him’. ‘I can’t. I am really exhausted (169).””

Works cited:

Hussain, Agha Ameer, I.A. Rehman. "Manto Remembered". *Dawn.com*. May 06, 2012 12:00am. Web.

Khan, Wusatullah, Mohammad Ali Siddiqui, Hasan Manzar, Zaheda Hina, Fahmida Riaz. "Manto Didn't Have the Heart to Stay Behind in India". *Dawn.com*. Updated May 06, 2012 12:08am. Web.

Khan, Wusatullah, Mohammad Ali Siddiqui, Hasan Manzar, Zaheda Hina. "Society's Biggest Critic Would Have to be Progressive". *Dawn.com*. Updated May 06, 2012 12:06am. Web.

Khan, Wusatullah, Mohammad Ali Siddiqui, Zaheda Hina, Fahmida Riaz. "How Does Manto Stand Apart from His Contemporaries?". *Dawn.com*. Updated May 06, 2012 12:09am. Web.

Khwaja, Dr. Waqas. "Poetics of Story-telling". *Herald Beta*. 18 May, 2012. Web.

Jalal, Dr Ayesha. "He Wrote What He Saw – and Took No Sides". *Herald Beta*. May 10, 2012. Web.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. *Black Milk : A Collection of Short Stories*. Tr. Hamid Jalal. Sang-e-Meel, 1997. Print.

---. *Mottled dawn : Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*. Tr. Khalid Hasan. Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

Memon, Dr Muhammad Umar. "The Historian of the Individual". *Herald Beta*. May 14, 2012. Web.

Sehbai, Sarmad. "The Politics of Exclusion". *Herald Beta*. May 14, 2012. Web.

