

**DECONSTRUCTING MANTO: THE INTERSECTION OF OBSCENITY,
REFORM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRUTH IN PARTITION
LITERATURE**

Ms. Prachi Malik

Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of English,
University of Delhi,

North Campus, New Delhi 110007

Dr. Prerna Malhotra

Associate Professor
Department of English,
University of Delhi,

North Campus, New Delhi 110007

Abstract

Sadat Hasan Manto's creative output serves as a raw, unflinching chronicler of the 1947 Partition of India . His notable literary achievements encompass his short story compilation *Black Margins* or *Siyah Hashiye*, featuring powerful narratives like *The Black Shalwar*, *Open It!* and *Cold Meat*. These tales expose the raw wounds inflicted upon humanity during this cataclysmic period of Partition documenting brutal violence and mass migration on marginalized communities—women, minorities, and the dispossessed . He sought to initiate crucial conversations and foster societal transformation within the community he deeply observed and chronicled. The research will demonstrate that he was a social reformer who wielded storytelling to expose cultural realities; he was not a purveyor of indecency, as alleged by the Progressive Writers Association.

Keywords : Slut shaming , Fanaticism ,Marginalization ,Post traumatic stress disorder , Violence .

On 16th January 1950, the trial court delivered a controversial verdict against writer Saadat Hasan Manto , declaring him guilty of obscenity in his literary works . The Progressive Writers Association further tarnished his reputation by labelling him as indecent writer . The landmark trial of Court against Manto emerged during a period of intense social upheaval and moral policing in newly-formed Pakistan, where censorship laws were being rigorously enforced to establish cultural boundaries. The verdict reflected broader anxieties about literary expression in a nascent nation grappling with its identity. Manto's conviction was not merely a legal judgment but a cultural statement about the limits of artistic freedom in post-Partition South Asia .The stories *The Black Shalwar*,*Open It!*and *Cold Meat*drew judicial ire demonstrate Manto's commitment to psychological realism – a literary approach that delves deep into the human psyche to expose uncomfortable truths.The Progressive Writers Association's condemnation of Manto reveals the complex dynamics within literary circles, where ideological purity often

conflicted with artistic honesty. While progressive writers advocated for social reform, many balked at Manto's method of exposing societal wounds of Partition without offering neat solutions or moral clarity.

Manto's approach to storytelling aligns with Caruth's understanding of trauma literature – his narratives exist in the liminal space between "knowing and not knowing." His characters often cannot fully comprehend their experiences, mirroring how societies process collective trauma. The stories in *Siyah Hashiyeh* capture the psychological fragmentation of Partition-era society, where traditional moral frameworks collapsed under the weight of unprecedented violence and displacement. Contemporary analysis reveals that Manto's supposed "obscurity" was actually a form of social documentation – preserving the psychological landscape of a traumatized society for future understanding. His stories serve as historical testimony, capturing not just events but their emotional and psychological impact on ordinary people. The trial's verdict, therefore, represents a moment when legal and literary interpretations of reality collided, with lasting implications for artistic freedom in South Asian literature.

Thanda Gosht was regarded as a sexualized story written to evoke the carnal pleasure of the reader and would corrupt young minds by undermining the social order. Ishwar Singh after looting a house and killing six members of a family takes away the only person left - a young girl - tries to rape her but realizes that she is dead. And after this incident he becomes impotent and confesses the same to his love interest Kulwant on his death bed. He says "man is a damned motherfucking creature." Manto through the character of Ishwar Singh exposes the dark side of humanity, mental instability plays at the core of his character and towards the culmination of story his own residual humanity punishes him. His character reveals the *modus operandi* of raping women during post-Partition scenario. According to a survey "between 75,000 and 1,00,000 women were raped and abducted apart from families that were torn apart." Manto is not presenting his characters through a heroic lens be it Razakars or Ishwar Singh, his characters are flawed. The psychological trauma embedded within Ishwar Singh's character extends far beyond the immediate horror of his actions. Manto masterfully constructs a narrative where the perpetrator becomes the victim of his own brutality, creating a complex psychological portrait that defies simple moral categorization. The protagonist's impotence serves as a physical manifestation of psychological castration - his body rejecting the very violence his mind orchestrated. This psychological depth reveals itself through Manto's exploration of dissociation and moral fragmentation. Ishwar Singh's realization that the girl is dead triggers a complete psychological collapse, suggesting that even in his dehumanized state, some vestige of conscience remained intact. The author demonstrates how trauma operates as a boomerang - the violence inflicted upon others ultimately destroys the perpetrator's capacity for human connection and sexual intimacy. The communal violence of Partition created an environment where ordinary individuals transformed into instruments of terror. Manto's genius lies in his refusal to present Ishwar Singh as an inherently evil character. Instead, he emerges as a product of systematic dehumanization that characterized the Partition period. The story illuminates how communal hatred operates through psychological conditioning - turning neighbours into enemies and transforming acts of extreme violence into perceived necessities. The looting, killing, and attempted rape represent not isolated incidents of individual depravity, but rather systematic patterns of violence that defined the Partition experience.

Historical accounts document that sexual violence during Partition was weaponized as a tool of communal humiliation. Women's bodies became battlegrounds where communities fought proxy wars, with rape serving as both individual gratification and collective revenge. Manto's narrative captures this dual nature - the personal and political dimensions of sexual violence during communal riots. Manto's narrative technique creates psychological claustrophobia - readers experience the suffocating weight of guilt and trauma alongside the protagonist. The story's circular structure - beginning and ending with impotence - suggests that violence creates inescapable psychological prisons. The author's refusal to provide cathartic resolution reflects the reality of Partition trauma - there was no healing, no redemption, only the *endless* repetition of violence and its psychological aftermath. The open ending forces readers to grapple with uncomfortable questions about complicity, forgiveness, and the possibility of moral recovery after extreme violence. Through Ishwar Singh's psychological journey, Manto creates a mirror for post-Partition society - forcing readers to confront not just the violence that occurred, but the psychological mechanisms that made such violence possible. The story remains relevant because it exposes the universal capacity for dehumanization that exists within all societies during times of crisis.

As eloquently articulated by the distinguished writer Qurratulain Hyder "Colonialism assumes myriad faces therein those of religious dogmatism, moral determinism, cultural convention, political treason, and gender exploitation amidst the hierarchical matrix of class, caste, and gender; rife in the momentous phase of India's pre-Independence partition and post-Independence era."

Open It! reveals the commodification of human relationships in times of crisis. The story function as mirror, reflecting society's moral contradictions back to readers who preferred comfortable distance from such realities. The psychological trauma inflicted upon women during this dark period finds profound expression in *Open It!* The story of Sakina, a minor repeatedly violated by razakars - members of her own community tasked with her rescue - reveals the betrayal of trust at its most fundamental level. Her automatic response to the doctor's command "khol do" by lowering her garment demonstrates how deeply the trauma has rewired her understanding of human interaction. While Ahmed Ali, a Progressive Writers' Association member, criticized this narrative as promoting rape culture, calling it "perverted tasks apparent in Urdu writings today," this interpretation misses the story's essential purpose. *Open It!* does not aim to moralize or perpetuate didacticism; instead, it serves as a mirror reflecting the psychological reality of post-partition trauma, where protectors became perpetrators and victims lost their basic human dignity and ability to communicate normally. The intersection of language and action in this narrative powerfully illuminates the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by a minor, revealing both physical violation and psychological destruction. The story captures how trauma can fundamentally alter a person's relationship with language, turning simple commands into triggers that expose the depth of their psychological wounds. Through this devastating portrayal, the narrative forces readers to confront the lasting impact of partition violence on its youngest and most vulnerable victims, making it an essential piece of literature that bears witness to this historical trauma. As noted by Cathy Caruth, "the language of Literature and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma intersect at the site of knowing and not knowing."

Through this masterful storytelling technique, Manto creates a haunting commentary on the human condition during times of social upheaval, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable

truths about society's treatment of its most vulnerable members. The post-partition era, marked by unprecedented violence, brings to the forefront Freud's concept of the id - the primitive, instinctual part of the psyche that demands immediate gratification. Manto captures this barbaric atmosphere with remarkable precision through his strategic use of language and the visceral actions of his characters. His genius lies in his ability to create authentic, lifelike characters who speak and behave with natural spontaneity, avoiding the common pitfall of turning them into mere vehicles for moral lessons or didactic messaging. This naturalistic approach lends his work a raw, unvarnished quality that heightens its impact.

The Black Shalwar, Manto explores the psychological aftermath of communal violence during Partition via lens of a traumatized woman, revealing how external brutality manifests in internal fragmentation. The story's power lies not in explicit content but in its unflinching examination of how violence reshapes human consciousness. The character of Sultana in *Black Shalwar* presents a nuanced and realistic portrayal of a prostitute who defies conventional literary stereotypes. Unlike typical depictions of sex workers as either completely immoral or possessing a "heart of gold," Manto crafts Sultana as a complex human being with a full range of emotions and characteristics. Her anxiety, kindness, and passionate nature are depicted alongside her religious sentiments, as evidenced by her request to her pimp for a black shalwar during Muharram. Significantly, Sultana neither seeks moral redemption nor appears concerned with categorizing her actions as right or wrong, making her character refreshingly authentic. The raw, unfiltered language used by Sultana, particularly her bold statement "Sahab, you're a fool, a real bastard" (Margins, 57), has been criticized as a corruption of Urdu literature's refined traditions. However, this criticism misses the broader significance of Manto's characterization. Through Sultana, Manto gives voice to a marginalized segment of society that literature often silences or stereotypes. Her character embodies multiple layers of complexity that offer a feminist perspective on the social dynamics of her time. By labelling such stories as merely obscene, critics create artificial barriers that prevent deeper analysis through various interpretative lenses. *Black Shalwar* is an example of desperate pragmatism and haunted conscience further emphasizing how material possessions become repository of trauma, carrying forward pain of the past into an uncertain future. Thus the story is a representation of fragmented reality of Partition survivors; not just a story about Partition but embodies Partition experience. Through his brutally honest portrayals, Manto exposed how colonialism manifested in multiple forms of oppression - from religious fundamentalism to gender discrimination - especially during the tumultuous period of India's partition and its aftermath.

Manto's literary works powerfully amplify the voices of society's most vulnerable and marginalized groups - innocent children, oppressed women, impoverished individuals, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. His characters - Ishwar Singh, Sultana, and Razakars - embody the darkest aspects of human nature, revealing humanity's inherent capacity for original sin, murder, mischief, and unrestrained violence. Rather than dismissing his works as merely obscene or pornographic, his stories serve as profound sociological case studies that illuminate the harsh realities faced by these overlooked segments of society. The criticism levelled by his contemporaries like Sajjad Zaheer and Qazi Abdul Ghaffar reveals their own limited perspective and inability to truly understand or represent marginalized communities. Saadat Hasan Manto occupies a singular position in South Asian literature, particularly within the tumultuous period surrounding the Partition of India in 1947. His refusal to conform to the ideological framework

prescribed by the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) stemmed from his deeply individualistic and idiosyncratic approach to storytelling. While the PWA championed literature as a tool for social reform and political awakening, Manto boldly declared his commitment to writing "Literature for Literature's sake"—a philosophy that drew inspiration from his extensive reading of Oscar Wilde, Anton Chekhov, and Guy de Maupassant. The writer's technique of presenting disturbing content without explicit moral judgment challenged readers to engage actively with ethical questions rather than passively consuming predetermined messages. This methodology positioned him as a reformist storyteller who believed in literature's capacity to provoke social consciousness through emotional and psychological engagement rather than didactic instruction.

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