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A Travesty of Independence: A Symbolic Interpretation of Sa'adat Hasan Manto's "The Dog of Tetwal"

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Abstract

The Partition of Indian subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan is one of the most unexpected and tragic incidents in the history. Millions of people of both the countries were uprooted, rendered homeless, tortured and even killed. Partition literature reflects the agony and distress of the people to a great extent. Sa'adat Hasan Manto is an author free from religious dogma and whose writings distinctly depict the pangs of the partition. In his short story "The Dog of Tetwal" he seeks to divulge the actual destiny of thousands of people who had to suffer due to the partition which was made purely on the basis of religion.

Keywords

Partition; Sa'adat Hasan Manto; Homelessness; "The Dog of Tetwal".



The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 not merely transposed the national integrity; it imparted a devastating holocaust, homelessness, displacement and dispossession of numerous people, especially of those belonging to the perimeter areas. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad describes it to be “one of the greatest tragedies of Indian history” (Azad 170). The Partition was solely made on the basis of the religious identity of the people-Hindu or Muslim who “lived side-by-side in settled communities” (Hasan 15) in pre-partition India. This event gave birth to the concept of communalism among the people of the newly-born nations. Urvashi Butalia observes,

By drawing a border that was based not on geographical features but on religious difference - Hindus on one side and Muslims on another - they thought they were solving the problems that exist between the two communities in India. But borders are never intractable, and for people who live alongside them, they can be easily transgressed - as the evidence of the ‘borderia’...It is this border too that denies them their rights as citizens, denies them a nationality, denies them an existence. (Butalia 120)

Communal violence and a stern outlook towards each other, the upshots of the partition have been best reflected in partition literature. Sa’adat Hasan Manto’s short story “The Dog of Tetwal” clearly portrays the trauma and suffering of millions of people who became homeless and victims of partition.

The story comes out to be an instrument in depicting the high tension between two states- India and Pakistan during cease-fire. Nature has been handled with a very minute accomplishment to bring a notable effect in the plot. At the very beginning of the story, the reader is introduced with an elaborate account of a pleasant weather- “The weather was pleasant; the wind was wafted across, spreading the scent of wild flowers” (Manto 2) - the description clearly indicates the state of truce. The blossoming flowers making the valley air heavy with their scents, the birds chirping, the kipping bees indolently sipping honey

from flowers and the white clouds floating about in the blue skies- all are indicative of a state of tranquility between the two countries, as if nature is also in a state of repose.

The equal height of the two hills, behind which the soldiers hide to protect themselves from the opponent camp, stands for the equal power of both the camps. The equal height makes no pace of advantage for any of the two groups, their equal strength has kept the other group in a position of surveillance - any time they can spring upon each other. The mountains have kept them separate; there is no scope of interaction or to know each other. The mountains exist as a barrier between the two countries which will perhaps never submit before the other. The stony structure of the mountains stands as the unbreakable mindset of the two states- India and Pakistan. The clear sky suggests that the clouds are just over and the entire valley is replete with the rays of hope and new life with the advent of the sun.

The September-end, with its pleasant weather reflects the seasonal cycle, which never stops and keeps on changing. Now both cold (winter) and hot (summer) have patched up with themselves. The armistice, as reflected in the pleasant weather is not permanent; it may be endangered at any time. This is suggested in the reference to the season, which is nothing but autumn is a short-lived season. The “winter and summer were negotiating peace with one another” (Manto 2) refers to the two opponent countries, a truce between them is only transitory. The predicament of an obvious attack is felt in the “wrong note” of a musician on his instrument. Here, the high tension between the two states is not simply bounded in the sphere of man; it also affects the nature, as at the shot of firing “the chirping birds would cry out in alarm and fly up” (Manto 2).

Another component of nature has been used very proficiently, and that is the stream. The stream comes as the source of life, as water is considered to be the other name of life. The stream here may be interpreted as beacon of hope for the two countries, but its zigzag way indicates the inconceivability of their hope.

The question arises, how can one provide with hope if he himself is aimless? The “rivulet wriggling like a fat snake on its chest” suggests the seizing power of a viper that grasps its prey with a violent posture. Besides, the stream has been compared with a snake, perhaps because of its zigzag way. One connotation may be given- a snake remains harmless, having a clasp of venom, but if it is in danger, it presently makes the proper use of its poison. Similarly, the stream which apparently looks like a harmless one, has an enormous power, and can burst out with all its strength.

Time passes on; darkness has conquered the light of the sun. The soothing element of the morning air is now carrying a ‘chill’ with it, giving a foreboding of encounter between the two camps. It gives a hint of the cold relation between them. The night has come with its soothing lap of rest for the soldiers, but they have to keep a vigilant watch, for whom, “sleep was a distant proposition, as distant as the stars in the sky.”(Manto 3) And the effort to reach them is next to impossible. In other way, the stars on the sky are as impalpable as dreams that always remain untouched.

Jamadar Harnam Singh hums a folk song- “*Bring me a pair of shoes, studded with stars/ Studded with stars/ O Harnam Singh/ O Yaara/ Even if you have to sell your buffalo.*” (Manto 3) Here the stars are again symbolic of the unfulfilled dreams of the life of the soldiers. It is also the symbol of hope in their life that is equally important and intangible like dreams. They want to materialize them, and to do that, are ready to sell the buffalo. The shoes and the buffalo are the two objects of necessity- shoes to protect the feet from the unequal path of life, and the buffalo serves man by providing with milk and enormous labor. But the beloved is desperate to have her dreams fulfilled and prompts her lover to sell the buffalo, because reality no longer satisfies her, she wants her dream to be fulfilled. Harman Singh becomes sentimental as his lovelorn self has become a melancholic one, instead of being romantic and is ready to sell the buffalo to satisfy his beloved.

The unrealized dream of Harnam Singh's beloved is contemplated in his song, the melancholic note of his song is intensified as Banta Singh, the youngest of the group began singing from "Heer", a story of unrequited love by Waris Shah. According to Ravikant and Tarun K Saint, "...the allusion to the one who has left, never to return, is an emphasis on inward attainment, the intimacy of the self's encounter with truth. Ranjha is the divine beloved, and Heer the lover who seeks him. The quest is for a final unity of the self and the Ultimate, the seeker and the sought, the lover and the beloved..." (Ravikant 99, 100)

The silence compounded by the melancholic note of the songs is suddenly battered by the barking of a dog whom Banta Singh, the youngest of the crew discovers. The dog gets the name "Jhun Jhun" that lies beyond its knowledge. The sight of a cracker restores its natural instinct, it starts wagging its tail. That a dog is an animal and belongs to a deficient species than mankind, and also is at the mercy of man, becomes obvious as Harman Singh creates a situation to make it realize its real position in the world. Harnam Singh suspects the dog to be a Pakistani one, and refuses to offer it any food. He mediates whether it will be worthy to offer any food whose identity is not proved. At first he exhibits an instance of kindness by offering a cracker to the dog, and when it is ready to accept the food, the stronger wants to prove his superiority- he snatches away the cracker and demands, "Show me the identification!" The condition of the dog reminds us of the eternal question of the helplessness of the weak who long for the mercy of the superior. The wagging of tail cannot unfreeze the heart of Harnam Singh, he is only merciful at Banta Singh's request -"The poor thing is a refugee!" (Manto 5) Harman Singh exhibits an instance of mercy by throwing the cracker to the dog.

The touch of suspiciousness is once again apparent in the song of Bashir, the Pakistani soldier. He sings a song where the lover asks his lady-love, "Where did you spend the night, my love. Where did you spend...?" (Manto 6) The lover did not find her last night, and, in the morning enquires about the matter. He

suspects that she might have gone to another person and thinks himself to be the authority to know the reason. He enjoys the song and soon finds the words of the song to be uttered in reality, as Subedar Himmat Khan screams at a dog, “Where did you spend the night?” Himmat Khan possesses the authority to ask a dog that came to them a few days ago and “had first come to them and stayed for several days, and how one night, it disappeared from their midst” (Manto 7). As it was first a visitor to the Pakistani camp, the soldiers think that they have every right to know why and where it disappeared last night.

Identified as a Pakistani, the dog does not receive a warm welcome from the Indian camp. But at least they showed mercy to it by offering a cracker. But the same dog that is labeled as a Pakistani by the Indian soldiers and that first visited the Pakistani camp receives a bitter experience from the Pakistani camp as they suspect it to leave them at night. The Pakistani camp is afraid of losing their authority over the dog. Subedar Himmat Khan throws a pebble at it, showing sheer disgust - “Saala knows nothing except how to wag his tail” (Manto 7). To prove their authority over the Indians, Bashir, the Pakistani soldier invents the name “Sunsun” for the dog which counters the Indian name “Jhun Jhun”. The Indians claims it to be an Indian dog but Himmat Khan claims, “This is a Pakistani dog!”(Manto7). Here the identity of the dog is in question; it portrays the highly suspicious mentality of the two nations against each other, and this is exposed in their effort to impose an identity on a dog. But at the time of welcome, it is greeted with a cracker, though in an unwilling manner by the Indian camp and with a pebble by the Pakistani camp, though with some food. The dog does not get the food at the first instance. This is not all, Himmat Khan warns him, “Look friend, don’t commit treachery... Remember; the punishment for a traitor is death” (Manto 8). The instance of inscription of names on the dog’s collar is only but a warning to the opponent camps that they own equal power.

The futile dispute between the two camps becomes obvious at the indecisive and playful manners of the soldiers. Himmat Khan orders the dog to

carry the message to the Indian camp which will perhaps prove that the opposite camp has committed an unjust deed and they have to face the inevitable consequences. Himmat Khan lets the dog to go towards the Indian camp, but it was merely an occasion to display how much power they actually possess. He starts firing which is replied by the Indian army. In the process of the display of power, the dog is shot dead by the bullet of Harnam Singh, the Indian Jamadar. It becomes the victim of a game between the soldiers of the two camps. The dog is caught in a maze of firing and runs for help to both the camps, but with no result. They take it to be a mere plaything that can live on at their mercy. The death of the dog at the arbitrary will of the soldiers of the two camps stands for the homeless and uprooted people during partition. Mushirul Hasan rightly observes,

When the Indian subcontinent was divided, the way in which ordinary people in urban areas and villages conducted their life was violated. Their faith in the inter-religious arrangements...was shaken... And as the violence increased, their imaginative resources became narrower and meaner; they ignored their holy books and their friendships, and became nastier. Identity politics made them- as it always makes people- paranoid, resentful, and vengeful. It is not surprising that those who resisted the moral and physical displacement and derangement of the partition were abused, killed, abducted, raped, or sold into slavery. (Hasan 14)

The story is a sheer attack on the outlook of communal violence which the people of both the nations nourish for the other country. The dog stands for those millions of people who became victims at the face of the destiny. Their condition reminds of the words of Gloucester in *King Lear*- "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,/ They kill us for their sport" (IV, 1, 41-42). A dog is considered to be an insignificant animal on this world; similarly, its death is also insignificant. Manto's centre of attention is a dog which is thought to be the most

trustworthy animal for man. But the truthfulness of a dog is questioned when Himmat Khan says, “The punishment for treachery is death.” This is a sheer irony that Manto uses mockingly at the whimsicalities of the two independent countries.

The condition of the dog as delineated in the story recalls the circumstance that Manto himself had to undergo after the partition. His biographer Jagdish Chander Wadhawan sums up his condition in the following words,

The harsh reality of the partition stood mountain-like before him. The India of his imagination, the united India, solid and whole, lay shattered before his eyes. Even in his wildest imagination he could not have thought of such country-wide butchery, arson and loot in the name of religion. Lahore, with which he was once so familiar now looked alien to him and its atmosphere foreign. (Wadhawan 28)

He portrays the miserable condition of the hundreds of thousands of people who had faced severe consequences and were butchered on the basis of their religious identity. As Alok Bhalla rightly notes, “Manto’s stories about the partition are more realistic and more shocking records of those predatory times [than those of his contemporaries]. They are written by a man who knows that after such ruination there can neither be any forgiveness nor any forgetting” (Bhalla xvii). The two countries won independence, but at the cost of massive carnage and along with it the excessive butchery of humanity. Manto’s short story “The Dog of Tetwal” thus sharply brings out the jeering attack of the author and also the mockery of independence to the people of India and Pakistan.

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