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MANTO, THE TRAUMATISED VOICE : A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF SOME OF HIS STORIES

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ABSTRACT :

Opposed to formalism in terms of New Criticism or deconstruction that followed it, New historicism remains a mode of literary study which situates a literary text within the cultural history of a given time. Instead of representing just the historical events, as old historicism does, it serves the purpose of a cultural discourse of an era by way of projecting not only the hegemonic power but also the subversive forces as suppressed in the master narratives. The present paper seeks to explore that voices of silence as well as resistance against the nationalist rhetoric which worked behind the holocaust of the subcontinent in 1947 with close reference to Saadat Hasan Manto's stories "The Last Salute", "The Dog of Titwal", "The Price of Freedom", "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khol Do", which obviously includes the gender issue and the relevance of "oral history" to represent the traumatised voice in the true sense of the term. As an imperative to having a more comprehensive perspective, it finally makes a comparative study between cultural criticism and cultural materialism regarding the issue addressed in terms of "commitment" and relevance of the study of the past in the present context.

KEYWORDS : Old historicism, discourse, grand narratives, difference and deviance, oral history, cultural materialism.

INTRODUCTION:

In his essay "Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, psychology and trauma theory", Roger Luckhurst says –

New Historicism, fascinated by the ideological omissions and repressions of historical narrative, developed a mode of dissident or countervailing recovery of what had been silenced or lost in traditional histories. (Luckhurst 97)

Luckhurst's statement has a two-fold importance. First of all, it suggests that a Newhistoric reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's stories is possible since they mostly deal with the trauma or holocaust of Partition of India in 1947. Secondly, it underlines the difference between 'old' historicism and 'new' historicism by way of highlighting a few distinguishing aspects of the latter, namely, the ideological element involved in its analysis of interpretation of history and its nonconformity to the grand narratives or master narratives working in the interest of the hegemonic class. Precisely speaking—

i) Unlike old historicism, it does not intend to read a text in isolation from its historical context. Rather, it conceives of a literary text as "situated within the totality of the institutions, social practices and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and

producer of cultural energies and codes" (Abrams 244).

ii) A text is a discourse, and as such, unlike in old historicism, it does not just conform to the structures of domination or subordination of the power relation of a given society, but questions the same with its anti establishment agenda of difference and deviance.

Manto is neither concerned with the old question of British-Jinnah-Nehru responsibility behind Partition nor he is co-opted into ringing the nationalist discourse which the traditional history of the said event is mostly engaged with. Himself a victim of the trauma, he rather addresses the issue of state-sponsored violence causing havoc in the life of the common people in terms of psycho-somatic inflictions like abduction, rape, uprooting, train raids, trauma, madness, suicide, killings. As Gayanendra Pandey points out—

In fact Manto seeks to explode the myth of nationalism which in the name of achieving freedom from the nation cost so high in the life and property of the rank and file. (Pandey 204)

The writer calls in question the nationalist propaganda in two different ways in the stories "The Last Salute" and "The Dog of Titwal" set in the backdrop of Indo-Pakistan skirmishes on the border over Kashmir in the aftermath of the nightmarish event under discussion. In the first story the critique is made obliquely through the way Rab Nawaz, a soldier with the Pakistani Army is stupefied by the unavoidable feeling "Formerly all of them were Indian soldiers but now some were Indian and others were Pakistani soldiers" (Manto 29) as well as through the observation of the absurdity behind the identification of religion and nationalism over the question of war—"Were the Pakistani soldiers fighting for Kashmir or for the Muslims of Kashmir? If they were being asked to fight in defence of the Muslims of Kashmir, why had they not been asked to fight in defence of the Muslims of Kashmir, why had they not been asked to fight for the Muslims of the princely states of Junagarh and Hyderabad? And if this was an Islamic war, then why were other Muslim countries of the world not fighting shoulder to shoulder with them?" (Manto 29).

However, though utterly confused, Rab Nawaz could not "unravel this puzzle" (Manto 29). Is he not like his Indian counterpart (a childhood friend of his before Partition) subject to the "thought control" of the war office?

Manto like a Newhistoricist seeks to highlight that war ideology of the state power virtually paralyses the power of expression of the soldiers. Deviant thinking is virtually unthinkable to them being fed on the ideological construct that soldiers should not think; they should only fight.

This picture of the individual soldiers working as puppets in the hands of state power is made more poignantly pathetic in the story "The Dog of Titwal" in which a stray dog getting caught in the cross—fire between the Indian and Pakistani troops meets its end. Banta Singh, one of the soldiers on the Indian side says, "He is only a poor refugee" (Manto 23) playing with his tail. But what is sport to the war office (represented by Banta Singh with his individual voice crippled by collective voice) subsequently proves death to the dog. The dog obviously emblematises the countless confused, displaced, dislocated, uprooted and hungry people on both sides of the boundary in the wake of the Partition. And Manto mocks at the stupendous folly of the perpetrators of the cataclysmic event leading as it does the soldiers to attach nationalist levels—"Indians or Pakistani" (Manto 23) even to a subhuman creature innocent of the power game of the humans.

The concern of identity crisis consequent upon Partition which is common in many of Manto's stories assumes a new significance in his masterpiece "Toba Tek Singh" inasmuch as it opens up a fresh discourse on madness As goes the reading in the article "A whole way of life"—

Manto's Toba Tek Singh cannot be approached without a Foucauldian consideration of the politics of madness with the entire cultural history that goes into the construction of the discourse of insanity. (Web n.p. The Hindu)

As per the nationalist rhetoric, the act of division of the nation on religious line is a sane act but people living in a lunatic asylum are considered to be insane or mad, that is, behaving in a senseless and irrational manner But Manto, through his superb art of irony and satire, seeks to subvert this stereotyping. He tries to lay bare the truth from the vantage point of the very lunatics being exchanged across the border in keeping with their newly created national identities. He relies on the performative act of madness of these socially 'marginalised' class to ironically expose the insanity of the so called sane claiming to the subject position in the

power dynamics of the then society.

To begin with, a muslim lunatic describes Pakistan as "the name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured" (Manto 1). Side by side, a sikh lunatic speaks about India—" These devils always strut about as if they were the lords of the earth" (Manto 1). One of the Muslim madmen loses his balance and faints while shouting – "Pakistan Zindabad" (Manto 2). All these examples are parodic versions of the relapse of uninhibited bestial passion let loose in the moment of blind patriotism working during the said event. More importantly, Toba Tek Singh (actually the protagonist Bishan Singh getting identified with his homeland named the same suggesting a no man's land, the one which admits of no national boundary on cartographical lines). The fight between the madmen impersonating as Jinnah and Tara Singh and their getting locked away in separate cells is indicative of how the Government failed to curb the violence in the real world. Above all, Toba Tek Singh's gibberish stands for the collapse of language and understanding in the midst of such abysmal chaos – "Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight / which ignorant armies clash by night" (Arnold 96).

Manto offers the healing touch in this all round ambience of jingoistic madness in the philosophy of sanity in insanity. A madman climbing up a tree declares "I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree" (Manto 2). This obviously defies the arbitrary drawing of national boundary. Most strikingly, Toba Tek Singh's performance of standing on one leg remains symbolic of his protest against the trafficking of their bodies to foreign lands they don't understand. Does this projection of history not register a subaltern dissent against the dominant discourse of the Government based on the bizarre?

In "Price of Freedom" Manto's anti establishment project takes on a new dimension because here his resistance against the state coercion on the individuals involves the power dominance of the Patriarchy over its associated "other", i.e., the weaker vessel.

The story based upon the real life experience of his friend Ghulam Ali, is set against the backdrop of Jallianwallabagh situation. The said character projected as great revolutionary falls in love with a fellow revolutionary named Nigar. Deciding to marry her he seeks the blessings of a religious teacher known as Babaji, a figure likely to be drawn in the image of Mahatma Gandhi. Though attached with an ashram, he is not entirely free from the political aspiration of freeing India from the British yoke. So after initial objection, he ultimately gives consent to the said marriage on condition that they be attached with the ashram in a bond of "comradeship" (Manto 52) having nothing to do with "the gratification of the sexual instinct" (Manto 52). Ghulam Ali submits to this Babaji's ideology of self-negation and abstinence in the interest of the nation—"what is being sacrificed today will serve the cause of India's freedom" (Manto 52). But eventually being disenchanted with the revolutionary activities he breaks with Babaji and assists himself in an attempt at transcending his life of desolation (strikingly suggested by the image of his abhorrence of rubber associated with condom) through the act of procreation in company with Nigar.

In the story, Babaji, or for that matter his ashram can well be interpreted' as a Foucauldian version of the 'panopticon prison' i.e., the all seeing surveillance and discourse as illustrated in his seminal work Discipline and Punish. And, needless to say, in this power/knowledge paradigm, Nigar becomes the victim of double marginalisation, first to the state and second to the patriarchy represented both by Babaji and Ghulam Ali. Interestingly, in spite of their religious divide, they invariably remain the agents of patriarchal violence. To Babaji, the body of the woman stands as a symbol of indulgence and evil so as to divert the freedom fighter from his lofty mission. Not for nothing that he advises Nigar to join the ashram before marriage with Ghulam Ali. And Ghulam Ali, at least initially, not only works at the bidding of Babaji without caring a fig for what Nigar has to say about it, but subsequently goes to get rid of his dull and drab ("lifeless and pallid") life by using her body.

By the way, this phallogocentric practice of inscribing violence on female body which Manto ingeniously uses as a metaphor for the partition violence on the bodypolitical of the society, is a common trope in this Partition narratives, and in this respect, the story "Khol Dol" as well as "Colder than Ice" comes uppermost.

1. Sakina (in "Khol Do") is raped by the members of the state sponsored recovery operation scheme, and it shatters the myth of the nationalist discourse on religious line since they belong to her own community. Moreover, it excavates yet another untold truth about the event and that is silencing the "other" i.e. the victim of

the physical violence of patriarchy. Sakina remains speechless and unresponsive until "her dead hands undid her salwar and lowered it" (Manto. tr. Aatish Taseer 54) as a reaction to the doctor's statement in the hospital, the window, open it!" (Manto. tr. Aatish Taseer 54)

While Sakina's father exclaims with joy – "She's alive, my daughter's alive!" (Manto. tr. Aatish Taseer 54), the doctor is drenched from head to toe in sweat" (Manto. tr. Aatish Taseer 54).

Understandably, Sakina's silence is caused first by the state of numbness overwhelming her following the traumatic incident of being gang raped, and secondly, for the unavailability of a compassionate listener who can truly share her experience. Even her father cannot live upto that ideal; he is happy on finding her just alive without taking into consideration the brutal violence inflicted on her body. But the doctor, her confidant as it were in her agony (though through sheer coincidence), goes to share it, and it leads her to connect the memory of her past with the present in terms of the phrase used by the former.

Noticeably, Sakina cannot articulate it in words but in terms of gesture. The suggestion is obvious. Any attempt at translating the traumatic memory, that is disjointed and incoherent one into a narrative memory would be a fiasco. That is why, written story, is rather unreliable for the articulation of the traumatic experiences of the women. It is not for nothing that Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin are inclined to make a counter discourse on the issue by relying on "oral history" to be had to a large extent of their fundamental work *Borders and Boundaries*. By reading this "oral history" side by side with the partition narratives like Manto's, one can have the experience of new historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history", as Louis Montrose's oft-quoted phrase goes. By contending that written history has "hidden" the truths about the "other", they also go to maintain with illustrations from their field study that, though for both men and women the trauma of partition violence was difficult to articulate, and this often made for a disjointed or sometimes wordless telling, there is a subtle difference—

With men, the representation of violence may take a formal or organised narration. Their telling has been incorporated into, and is part of the master narrative, that male consensus which incorporates many singular voices into a whole ... The women's telling on the other hand, exhibits the recalcitrantly ambiguous character of lived experience, and thereby challenges the normalising discourse of the men. (Menon Ritu and Bhasin Kamla 55-6)

We find, Manto makes a contrapuntal reading of the nationalist cause working behind the great trauma of 1947 to replicate the power dynamics of the colonial era. And this newhistoricist's engagement with the event invites comparison with that of the cultural materialists. True it is that unlike the latter's, the former's concern with the cultural phenomenon is not informed by the Marxist economic or material base structure analysis, but for that matter to suggest that in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanism of repression and subjugation, the "New Historicists tend to concentrate on those at the top of the social hierarchy, i.e. the church, the monarchy and the upper classes while cultural Materialists tend to concentrate on those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, i.e. the lower classes, women and other 'marginalized peoples'" (Tiwary Narendra & Chandra N.D.R. 81) would be a lopsided view. The people who are focussed in the stories discussed here as elsewhere (say, Mangus, Gamas Sugandhis, Zeenats, Saritas, Shadans, Sultans and so on) hail from the margins of the society in terms of their gender, class and profession.

And as far as "commitment" (after Dollimore and Sinfield) is concerned, generally speaking it is true to say that the New historicists restrict their duty to just analysing class dominance and exploitation instead of showing active interest in reforming the present social order. But there are some traces in Manto's texts where the attitude is not just defeatist or one of passive suffering but of active resistance. If the voice of protest of the soldiers in "The Last Salute" or "The Dog of Titwal" is ultimately subsumed in the voice of their authority, Ghulam Ali in "Price of Freedom", though ultimately compromises with the institution, at least once bursts into fierce revolt against it. When Babaji insists on reconsideration of their decision to marry, Ghulam Ali replies that it can never be changed "because we are committed to it as we are committed to the freedom of India, and while circumstances may change the timing of that event, it is final and immutable" (Manto 49). After all, the death of the protagonist in "Toba Tek Singh" is anything but pathetic-

Just before sunrise, Bishen Sing, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as

officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground. There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh. (Manto 7)

This has obviously a potential tragic enough to jerk a reader out of the smug stupor into revolutionary activity against social regression of the present context, if not the context in which Manto's texts were written. Peter Barry's observation is pertinent in this respect—

...the new historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the cultural materialists situate it within that of ours. (Barry 186)

In her *The other Side of Silence* which is generally held as one of the authentic reviews of the Partition history of the sub continent, Urvashi Butalia, drives home the same point while concentrating on the communal riots in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992---

...stories of 'that time' resurfaced. 1984 was like 'Partition again'. 'We didn't think it would happen to us in our country' was a feeling expressed by Sikhs and Muslims in 1984 and 1992. It was this increasing polarization of Indian society on the basis of religion, that led, I think, to a re-examination of the history of Partition, a re-examination that was deeply rooted in the concerns of the present. (Butalia 348)

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