

Trauma and Violence in Saadat Hasan Manto's "Thanda Gosht"

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Abstract— Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the most celebrated and controversial figures in Urdu literature. His writing, fueled by the trauma, and disillusionment of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, cut through polite society's decorum to reveal brutal, unsettling truths. Among his many stories that deal with the horrors of Partition, "Thanda Gosht" (Cold Meat) stands apart for its unflinching depiction of sexual violence, the disintegration of the moral self, and the psychological aftermath upon both perpetrator and victim. This paper attempts to analyse representations of trauma and violence found in "Thanda Gosht". It employs literary criticism, trauma theory, and Partition studies. It will address the gendered, bodily, and psychological facets of violence. It will also carefully look at Manto's somewhat unorthodox narrative style that minimizes the divide between victim and perpetrator, thus implicating all parties in their shared journey into suffering and unfeeling.

Keywords— Partition violence, sexual trauma, guilt, corporeal suffering, necrophilia

I. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 is perhaps the single most traumatic event in modern South Asian history, with more than a million dead, tens of thousands of women raped or abducted, and entire populations uprooted. Partition literature, as observed by scholars like Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, is defined by "the human cost of political decisions and the absurdity of communal hatred". Manto's work was an extension of this tradition but went further than that by refusing the morally simplistic binary orientations of perpetrator and victim and focused on the ways in which violence infects everyone and not just those who suffer directly but also those who inflict the suffering. Violence in the story of "Thanda Gosht" does not stay out; it enters inside persons; it paralyzes the psyche and injures the body. The Partition operates not merely as a historical backdrop but as what Cathy Caruth calls "a crisis of referentiality," destabilizing meaning.

The story is set in the immediate aftermath of a riot in a Punjabi city. Eesher Singh, a Sikh man, returns to his mistress, Kalwant Kaur, after participating in a riot in which he loots a Muslim household. There he kills several people, and takes a woman with the intent to rape her—only to discover that she is already dead, her body cold. After returning back home, he was unable to consummate sex with Kalwant. Manto writes, "Disappointed and infuriated, Kalwant Kaur got off the bed, picked the chador hanging on the nail of the wall and wrapped herself. Her nostrils expanded. She said furiously, Eesher darling, who is that bitch you have spent all these days with who has sucked you dry." He became consumed by guilt and psychological turmoil. Eesher is eventually stabbed by Kalwant in a fit of rage and jealousy. As he bleeds out, he confesses the horror of what he did and what he found, laying bare the psychic cost of violence.

II. CORPORAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A POLITICAL ACT

Many scholars agree that sexual violence in Partition literature functions as a metaphor for the violence enacted upon communities and nations. In Manto's "Thanda Gosht," the female body becomes the battleground where communal animosities are played out. The female body becomes the very symbolic site where violence is perpetrated, a symbolic statement of violence, an act of totalization. During Partition, to violate a woman of the "other" community was not only to cripple the perceived enemy but also to possess their cultural and social integrity. The narrative by Manto in the short story, with painful precision, elaborates this. The abduction of the Muslim woman and Eesher Singh's intended violation thereof are not presented as isolated psychosexual aberrations but are systemic, normalized acts implicating entire communities. Partition's chaos turns rape, murder, and theft into routine, almost expected behaviors—a terrifying normalization that Manto explores with disturbing frankness. Eesher Singh eventually confesses, "I picked up the girl thinking she was alive. ... When I put her down in the field, she was cold as ice. Her body was 'thanda gosht'—cold flesh." (Manto)

The story's title, "Thanda Gosht," encapsulates a chilling metaphorical register. "Meat" in this context refers to the objectification and commodification of the female body; "cold" is both literal (she is dead) and symbolic (suggesting the deathliness of emotion, empathy, and moral agency). Some commentators have pointed out that the story clearly insinuates necrophilia, but as Pramod Chowdhry observes, whether or not the protagonist actually engages in such an act, the implication is that violence has annihilated both human connection and desire itself.

By reducing the woman's body to inert "meat," the story reflected not merely the brutality of Partition but also its existential cost. An act of sexual violence, dehumanizing as it was when inflicted on the living, becomes an entirely different form of abjection when inflicted or attempted against the dead. It stands for the very meaninglessness and obscenity of communal vengeance: it destroys that which it lays claim to, leaving behind only cold, hard, lifeless flesh.

III. PSYCHIC TRAUMA AND THE PERPETRATOR'S GUILT

One of Manto's radical departures from conventional narratives of violence and victimhood is his focus on the trauma experienced by the perpetrator. Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Kali Tal emphasize that trauma is defined as much by its

inability to be assimilated or narrated as by its actual events; it is an “impossible history”. Eesher Singh, superficially a brawny, hypermasculine man, is rendered impotent—physically, emotionally, and morally—by his actions. He is unable to perform sexually with his mistress, haunted by the memory of the cold corpse, and eventually breaks down in confessional agony. The violence he inflicts is mirrored back on him, not just through Kalwant’s literal stabbing but through his own psychological breakdown. His trembling, sweating, and eventual confession show that trauma pierces the very sphere of the self and leaves him simultaneously perpetrator and victim.

The focus on the perpetrator's trauma in no way gives Eesher Singh any impunity; on the contrary, it goes to show that violence envelops one in a self-negating abyss. Critics say such depictions destroy the victim-perpetrator dichotomy, suggestive of the greater truth of Partition: there were never victors, only the endless drip of agony.

IV. GENDER DYNAMICS OF VICTIMIZATION AND AGENCY

While the primary victim in the story is the unnamed Muslim woman, Kalwant Kaur herself is a significant presence. She is not merely a passive recipient of Eesher Singh’s actions but an active, willful, even violently jealous woman. Her aggression, culminating in stabbing Eesher, both inverts and complicates gender relations—yet it is circumscribed by the trauma and uncertainty that surround her. Namita Goswami notes that Kalwant’s repeated question, “who she is,” queers the story by destabilizing fixed notions of gender and victimhood. The boundaries of sexual difference, agency, and identity are in flux, mirroring the broader dissolution caused by Partition. Kalwant’s violence against Eesher, while not equivalent to the atrocities he has committed, is shaped by the same environment of suspicion and betrayal.

Through these characters, Manto dramatizes what Ritu Menon has described as “the ways in which women’s bodies become the site upon which questions of nation and honor play out,” while also exploring women’s limited but potent capacities for agency under conditions of endemic violence. Critics have often remarked on Manto’s “unflinching realism.” He refuses to prettify or soften the violence he depicts. Instead, he foregrounds its rawness, often infuriating both readers and authorities—leading to his repeated prosecution for obscenity. Manto’s humanism lies not in optimism but in his refusal to dehumanize any character, no matter how flawed. According to a contemporary study, his characters are “masterfully constructed, exposing layers of human experience shaped by historical catastrophe.” The world of “Thanda Gosht” has no facile answers and certainly no moral catharsis. Rather it ensures a long-lasting discomfort, an ethical provocation that asks its readers to be implicated and not merely stand aghast.

His narrative style in “Thanda Gosht” is in direct parallel with the actual experience of trauma. Since it recognizes trauma, the story is interrupted--interrupted in action and language. The sexual act is attempted yet never completed; confessions come forth in fragments, through expressions of pain and impending death. There is “a quality of performance anxiety,” a persistent sense of being out of step with oneself and one’s environment, captured by the story’s cyclical, repetitive structure and its focus on “wordlessness,” and “silence.” This narrative style reflects trauma’s structure, its compulsion to repeat, its inarticulability, and its disruption of linear time. Eesher Singh’s inability to speak his trauma until he is fatally wounded, his sense of unreality, and his paralyzing guilt all echo the psychological literature on traumatic dissociation and belatedness.

V. CONCLUSION

“Thanda Gosht” powerfully illustrates that violence is never confined to its intended victims; it radiates outward, corroding perpetrators, bystanders, and society itself. Manto’s story, now more than seventy years old, continues to resonate because of its unsparring insight into the universal dimensions of violence and trauma. In the final analysis, Manto refuses to allow readers the solace of distance or moral superiority. His characters are what the world has made them—products and agents of chaos, shaped and deformed by forces larger than themselves. Yet even within this horror, there is the faintest trace of humanity: in Eesher Singh’s confession, in Kalwant’s painful search for truth, in the story’s refusal to let trauma disappear into silence.

“Thanda Gosht” is thus not just a record of trauma but a challenge to confront how, in the crucible of violence, everyone is scarred. As scholars have observed, Partition’s legacy is not simply one of territorial or political realignment; it is the searing of memory, meaning, and the moral imagination itself. Manto’s genius is to make us see—unforgettably—that in the aftermath, no one’s flesh remains warm.

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