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What It Means to Be National, Linguistically: A Case Study of Partition Narratives and Linguistic Loss

Abstract: Since its inception, language has transcended its primary purpose (communication). From being a storehouse and transmitter of traditions, memories, ideas, and mores, it has become closely linked in the postmodern, global world to notions of identity and home, and often engulfed in discourses of power and hegemony. Consequently, language becomes imperative in engendering and sustaining “imagined communities” (Anderson), and the sense of belonging is upheld and celebrated through it. Turning to the Indian subcontinent, Partition (1947) remains the most important historical factor in the carving of the nation. Language, in such circumstances, does not simply exist to “counter violence,” but becomes a means through which questions of identity are explored when the concept of “home” encounters transformation or denial. In this article, I propose to look into the “psychic aphasia” that spills out in the disturbed and disruptive expressions of Partition stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. The text itself becomes splintered, confronted by the linguistic and somatic experiences of a chaotic and dislocated time. Does language itself become a refugee in times of war and cartographical realignments? It is time to view historical, political, ideological, and postcolonial processes through the notion of “language rights” (Kymlicka) and linguistic loss in today’s global world, to attempt to resolve through language the transgressions of history.

Keywords: belonging, collective memory, home, identity, language, nation, Partition of India, representation

Language is now a political issue, transcending its earlier conventional purposes of communication and representation to be seen increasingly in terms of its association with identity and memory. There is an intrinsic link between memory and language, and it is the oral tradition of a society and nation through which memory transmits ideas of culture and practices. People created stories regarding their surroundings, and propagated myths which inspired awe and came to be reflected in the literatures of the time. This bond of memory and literature thrived on the relationship between identity and land, and its articulation through language.

Language has been looked upon in various ways – as a means of perceiving reality and also, sometimes, as something that leads us away from it. Wilhelm

von Humboldt (1767–1835) stressed the subjective feature of language: “Language is, as it were, the external manifestation of the minds of people. Their language is their soul, and their soul is their language” (Humboldt 1988, 24). In the postmodern global world, the essentialist conception of society in terms of “home” and “belonging,” and their expression through language, is being driven to replace its unified perceptions with plural, fluid, and heterogeneous understandings. The twentieth century saw nationhood as the most primary unit in politics: it is perhaps “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (Anderson 1983, 3). Anderson argues that a “nation is simply an ‘imagined community’: imagined because the members of even the smallest nation are unknown and anonymous to one another” (133). Anderson further states that the existence of the community or nation is often imagined through language, and thus stresses the role of language in the discourse of identity formation and derivation. He discusses this importance of language in forming solidarity shaped by “collective contexts.” Memory and identity have been linked together since time immemorial, and it was John Locke in the seventeenth century who observed that identities are formed and strengthened only through the successive undertaking of creating and rebuilding memories. The gap between individual and collective becomes easily bridged by social memory, but what happens when this social memory faces trauma both on an individual and a collective level? And more specifically, what effects does language face when it is forced to be displaced and become a refugee in such circumstances? These are the questions we need to deliberate upon.

This article is an attempt to define and contemplate the ruptures that language shows when trauma etches itself on the collective conscience. It does so by means of studying selected stories by Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955). Memory, here, becomes a way of engaging with the past, thereby blurring the boundary between fiction and history. The chronicling and documentation of the past has always been an important activity in creating and organizing the nation’s identity, where memory is linked to power and hence identity; and literature becomes the stage where these intricate relations are played out. With the emergence of multiculturalism, history and the politics of memory (who remembers what and how) came to be challenged, and calls were made for a space in which the repressed and hitherto silent groups can speak and voice their opinions.

1 Language disrupted and Manto

Contemplations on identity and memory have continued in contemporary post-colonial literature, for it was post-colonialism and its whole *oeuvre* of extracting and establishing native identity from the colonial ideology that initiated “writing back to the empire.” This literature emerged from a context of violence, genocide, border-formations, and partitions which left natives traumatized and numbed as the processes of decolonization set in after years of struggle against imperial rule. Turning to the Indian subcontinent, the Partition (1947) remains the most important historical factor in the carving of the nation. Partition brought upon forced dislocation and displacement among many as new borders came to be drawn in dividing a nation. There have been many writings on the Partition in the form of prose, poetry, and survivor and testimonial accounts, but Saadat Hasan Manto’s short fiction seems to stand out for its brevity and vituperation that seems to attack the reader’s complacency and present the brutality and violence of Partition in all its starkness. Saadat Hasan Manto chose to express in Urdu the numerous individual memories which were scarred beyond reparation in the face of the murders, rapes, plunder, and savagery meted out during the Partition. The individual scarring became the psychological scarring of the collective memory of the nation. Manto, apart from depicting the violence of the Partition, in his fiction draws the attention of readers to the ideas of nation, community, and identity that inflamed and stirred up the people. His stories stand out as bare, without any ornamental usage of words, and deliver the truth in all its complexities and deep emotional resonances: “Look, this is hardly fair. You sold me impure petrol at black market prices and not even one shop could be put to the torch” (Manto 2008, 410). The characters in his stories are defined in a definite way and belong to a particular historical moment and time, from which much of their distinctiveness and many of their ideologies are derived. His stories are knit in a satirical way so as to retain not only the absurdity of, but also remorse for the slaughter during Partition without passing any sort of judgement on communal or ethnic grounds. He gives the story of a land torn apart by the selfish and virulent human need to classify and categorize the “other” and trigger violence against them. Nietzsche tells us humans need collective memory apart from genetics to consistently maintain their nature through generations, but in Manto’s fiction we find that this “nature” has a fragile existence and, in the face of violence, just rips apart. Transformed topographies after Partition not only altered the course of life for many people but also introduced a new chronology as people struggled with their displaced experiences in a new land with cleaved collective memories and a shredded sense of belonging. Memory, in such circumstances, does not simply exist to “counter violence” but becomes

a way through which “the history of atrocities is not forgotten, neither is a life of connectedness” (Bhalla 2012, 27).

2 “Toba Tek Singh”

The first short story taken for analysis is “Toba Tek Singh” (Manto 2008, 9–15), which was published in 1953 in *Savera*, a print magazine, and emphasized the impact of memory and lived culture on one’s sense of identity and rootedness in a place. The story is a satire and an indictment of the political processes which led to the Partition. It is set in a lunatic asylum in Lahore and told through an omniscient narrator who narrates in a factual, non-judgemental way. The story begins a few years after 1947, narrating the ludicrousness and absurdity behind Partition, and Manto tells us in a serious, satirical way how it “occurred” to the governments of India and Pakistan to exchange, on the basis of religion, the lunatics kept in the asylums of their respective countries. The lunatics in their own ways denounce the politics of naming and marking that have suddenly been thrown upon them. Among them is Bishen Singh, who had spent fifteen years standing, without sleeping, and muttering gibberish which becomes a sort of refrain in the story, reflecting on the prevalent absurdity. When he gets to know that his village, Toba Tek Singh, is now in Pakistan whereas the rest of his family have now migrated to India, he refuses to move to Pakistan. His refusal to move and his subsequent death in no-man’s-land become a protest against the politics of cartography and mapping. With Bishen Singh/Toba Tek Singh, one realizes that, though new lines and borders are created, it remains difficult to erase old thought systems and ideas, especially memory. The protagonist becomes eponymous with the place in the course of the story, so much so that, in the end, readers come to identify the person with the name of the place: Toba Tek Singh. In the course of the story, we learn that not all the people housed in the asylum are mad and that, to keep them out of the clutches of the law, their families had them placed there by bribing officials. Such people, Manto hints, perhaps had a slightly better idea of the situation outside than the real lunatics, yet felt clueless and helpless like the rest. They were powerless in the face of a geopolitical decision which tore apart a nation and polarized communities. Madness, here, apart from many other things, can also be seen as an erasure of memory, since lived experience had become too horrific in the throes of Partition to be recounted. However, Manto’s aim is to make narration not a means for reconciliation but rather a witness to the injustice and brutalities that man can cause. If 1947 was the time of the unifying force of nationalism, then Manto chooses to show the sectarian violence that led to com-

munal frenzy and mayhem. Manto's fiction thus become a sort of witness to and record of the atrocities that were committed in the name of political and religious fervour. With more than twelve million people displaced, nearly one million dead, and around seventy-five thousand women abducted and raped (Butalia 2000, 27), Partition was more than a demographic transformation. Pia Oberoi states:

Those persons forced to leave their homes at Partition were refugees in a meaningful sense. They were fleeing persecution, individual and generalized, they had crossed international borders in their flight, were unable to return to their homes, and the states in which they sought refuge, though not unwilling eventually to host them, believed that the vast majority of them would return to their places of origin. (Oberoi 2006, 47)

In this narrative, Manto ushers in questions regarding literature, language, and culture, and whether they too will be partitioned and change form. Urdu, the language of his writings – can it recover from such a loss, or will it entirely disappear from India, confined to a corner and segregated on religious grounds? On the other hand, in Pakistan, what new form will it emerge in, and will language also become crippled along with the collective conscience, enduring religious bigotry and brutal intolerance? This sort of pondering emphasizes the turmoil of those times and also of Manto as a writer. Wandering helplessly, he witnessed the utterly horrific conditions of the refugee camps and the displaced and riotous conditions caused by men in their inhuman communal and divisive frenzy, which caused a sort of “psychic aphasia” (Rand 1994, 17) that spills out in his disturbed expressions of language. The dark shadows of brutality and inhumanity loom and spread in his stories, but his characters reveal a “residual goodness” (Jalal 2013, 67) even in times such as these, indicating his faith in humanity even in its darkest hour.

3 *Siyah Hashiye*

Saadat Hasan Manto frames the physical and existential violence of Partition and the estrangement of people from the cultural topographies of their former lives. It is in Manto's fiction that the association of humankind with land is deftly brought forth. He undertakes, through “Toba Tek Singh,” to ask the question of what, if cultural topography is central to one's identity, happens to someone who is forcibly displaced from it. New forms of “communal identification” emerge, but a community dislocated from its origins finds it hard to grapple with the new sense of identity. Despite the brutal beginnings of an independent India, many have argued, including Bright (1948) and Butalia (2000), that oral narratives retelling

the Partition stories have always upheld harmonic relations among the communities in India, advocating that Partition was an aberration and that the ideals of communal harmony will be restored. The political history of the origin of a nation born out of bitter strife based on communality, ethnicity, and religion made identity derivation dependent on religious ascriptions. In October 1948, Manto published *Siyahe Hashiye* [Black Borders], a collection of thirty-two vignettes which are precise literary snapshots, sometimes of three lines, sketching, in painful detail and in short sentences, the violence, trauma, and unbelievability that was Partition. *Siyahe Hashiye* was also Manto's first collection of stories based on Partition. As Alok Bhalla says, "there is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment" (2012, 33). It was a historical circumstance which could never be hastily forgotten, yet an apparent erasure of it became the only way to deal with the physiological and psychological upheaval and devastation. In those days, whenever the newspapers printed appalling or tragic news, it was given a black border, and *Siyahe Hashiye* draws its name from this practice. Much like the tragic loss indicated through the publication of such news, *Siyahe Hashiye*, with its precise short accounts, penetrates the hearts of readers reeling under the effects of Partition. These stories become important in documenting the "human dimensions of the event" (Tiwari 2013, 46). "Taqseem" [Division] emphasizes what Partition actually did metaphorically, as the story in a page narrates how, when plundering, one man chanced upon a huge crate and, when he was unable to move it, another man offered his help and asked for a share of the spoils. The man agreed, and the other man, being physically stronger, carried the crate away from the place where the looting was going on. Setting down the crate, he demanded: "Tell me, how much of the stuff in this box will I get?" (Manto 2008, 407). Finally it was agreed that the goods would be shared equally; however, when the crate was opened, out came a man with a dagger who cut the two men into four pieces. In "Karamat" [Miracle Man], a man who has stolen two sacks of sugar when looting a grocery store gets scared when the police start conducting raids on homes, and decides to dump the sacks in a nearby well. However, in the middle of the night, while throwing away the second sack, he too falls down into the well and dies. The next day, people start lighting lamps at his grave as the water of the well now tastes sweet.

All through the collection, Manto maintains his ironic, disruptive stance with the digressions and elisions that are also seen in his other stories – a conversational style which conveys the horror of the circumstances at the time. It is a "splintered text" (Bhalla 2001, 33) where language and somatic experiences have become disordered and dislocated. In "Munasib Karawai" [For Necessary Action], a couple hides in the cellar of their house to escape death at the hands of rioters.

Starved and dehydrated, they decide to give themselves up to the rioters and end their lives in this manner. However, as they come out, they find themselves among people who are prohibited by their religion⁵ from indulging in any killing of living things and so hand the couple over to men from another neighbourhood for proper action (ironically, murder). “Dawat-i-Amal” [Invitation to Action] depicts the irony when all the shops in a neighbourhood are destroyed in a riot, except for one that has a signboard stating “All building and construction materials sold here” (Manto 2008, 403). All the stories, some not more than four lines, bring out the pathos of partitioned India, and Manto uses the Urdu language in an adept way to convey the trauma and chronicle events.

Memory, no doubt, has gained critical importance in the discourse of history, identity, nation, citizenship, and ideology; but it has also been speculated whether remembering, especially in the context of traumatic and conquered pasts of a post-colonial nature, hampers reconciliation and the formation of anti-essentialist identities. In today’s context, globalization perhaps hoped to present a symbiotic unity in a multicultural world and, instead of assimilation, to celebrate the diversities of *ethnies* and languages without segregation and categorization. Collective memory may have helped in building up a solidarity among the people of a nation, which is a prerequisite for the existence of the idea of a nation, but, as Peter Novick tells us, collective memory “simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective,” and is “ahistorical and even anti-historical” (1999, 3). However, I would like to differ both with Maurice Halbwachs and Novick, for collective memory, in the case of Partition, did bludgeon solidarity, contrary to Halbwachs’s idea of its role in the building and buttressing of a nation. Novick, on the other hand, talks of collective memory being “ahistorical” and “anti-historical,” which is so in some cases, untouched by trauma, genocide, and the scars of history. But what happens when collective memory is formed due to the scarring of collective conscience by catastrophic events such as Partition and colonial encounters? It no longer remains ahistorical and anti-historical, but explores history and memory to reconcile, rewrite, and in some cases justify the collective memory and hence identity.

Borrowing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome in order to look at the fiction of Manto, one could say that Manto’s short fiction exemplified the breakdown of the structure of society and its concepts in the face of Partition. The rhizome theory put forward by Deleuze and Guattari in the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987, 11) has come to occupy

5 Manto does not mention the name of the religion. However, Khalid Hasan in his translation adds a sentence saying that they were Jains.

an important place in media theory and beyond. Deleuze and Guattari outlined their theory based on the morph-like ability of the rhizome, seeing the rhizome as non-hierarchical, multiple, heterogeneous, and devoid of a centre. Rhizomes tend to resist structures of domination, are anti-genealogical, and indulge in cycles of “deterritorializing” and “reterritorializing.” We know that Manto’s short fiction becomes a narration of society divided along binary lines and identities. The rhizome, for Deleuze and Guattari, is a metaphor for subverting hierarchies; extending it to Manto’s fiction, one can say not only that the latter’s way of narrating the story becomes a protest against the dominant way of storytelling but also that, in the face of violence and trauma, he deciphers the fact that language fails to portray all the pain. Thus, he breaks the linearity of narration, where tortured time becomes an overwhelming present as the characters and their lives are destroyed and torn asunder.

In a post-structuralist analysis, we know that place is not simply an innocuous creation but is bound up in dialogue with social processes of the society that created it. Place is not always inclusive; it can employ the “othering” process, making identities more particular and circumscribed, which ultimately leads to everything being judged on the basis of inclusion or exclusion. This gives rise to sites of contestation and resistance. Consequently, places remain exposed and reflect the transformations which bring changes to the social processes of belonging and identity. “The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” (Massey 1994, 14). By associating place with identity, its synonymous connection with home is underscored and place becomes a constructed ideological site. Places are not, as Foucault tells us, devoid of power, and are as much locations of “hegemonic discourses” as they are of resistance.

4 “Gurmukh Singh Ki Wasiyat”

The question of who belongs to the nation often gives rise to inflamed political passions, and the Partition that India underwent is a testimony to the brutality and terror that the myth of nationalism can bring forth. In “Gurmukh Singh Ki Wasiyat” (Khalid Hasan has translated it as “The Assignment” [Manto 2008, 21–25], others as “The Will of Gurmukh Singh”), Manto depicts in a chilling way the brutality of which man is capable, and casual indifference to murder in the name of religion and nation. The plot recounts the story of a retired judge, Mian Abdul Hai, who, like his family, has not yet migrated but chooses to stay behind even when his Muslim neighbours flee the neighbourhood. He comforts his family, his daughter Sughra and son Basharat, and keeps hoping that the violence will

soon die down. However, he suffers a stroke and becomes confined to bed; when their old servant goes out to get help, little do they know that he will be unable to return. Manto perhaps hints with his absence at the fate which had befallen many in the frenzied riots that those times witnessed. Later, a Sikh knocks on their door; he turns out to be Gurumukh Singh's son bringing vermicelli for them on the occasion of Id. This was a yearly custom on the part of Gurumukh Singh, for Abdul Hai had done him a great favour by acquitting him of a false accusation in a legal case in which he was trapped. "Gurumukh Singh would say, 'Mian sahib, God has given you everything. This is only a small gift which I bring every year in humble acknowledgement of the kindness you did me once'" (Manto 2008, 15). However, this year Santok Singh visits him because his own father has passed away (albeit not before instructing him to continue this tradition). After delivering the vermicelli, he is stopped by a mob, and one man asks him if they can now go ahead with their "assignment" with regards to the family of Mian Abdul Hai; to this he replies, "if you like" (Manto 2008, 16), and walks away, highlighting his inability to stop such an action, as well as apathy about it.

Manto's stories become a witness to as well as capturing the socio-psychological trauma of the period and Partition. With each story, Manto brings out a strange combination of realism and detachment, intensity, and indifference – a sort of realism so stark and sharp that it rips apart the veneer of civilization exhibited by society. He shows that Partition, which changed the frontiers of a nation and split it in two, also brought about a partition in times of chaos and disorder among humans too, in whom bestial and inhuman nature became predominant. "Titwal Ka Kutta" [The Dog of Titwal] (Manto 2008, 193–197) is a poignant narrative in this respect and brings out the absurdity reflected in both the warring sides. However, it also exposes the cruelty that is inherent in warring sides who try to brand even a dog as Hindu or Muslim. The concept of identity and dislocation is the core of this story, and identity linked with power does not even spare a helpless animal (a dog). Questions about what is reality, and how much notions of identity and the "other" shape our existence and consciousness, are brought forth.

Two provinces that were at the heart of Partition debates in India were Punjab and Bengal. Representations of the violence and brutality of Partition appeared in Hindi, English, Punjabi, Bengali, and Urdu literature by writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991), Bhishm Sahni (1915–2003), and Amrita Pritam (1919–2005), as well as in the Bengali film trilogy of Ritwick Ghatak (1925–1976): *Mehge Dhaka Tara* [The Cloud-Capped Star] (1960), *Komal Gandhar* [A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale] (1961), and *Subarnarekha* (1962). However, scholars like Gyanendra Pandey (2001) have argued that there has always been a tendency to avoid the representation of Partition violence in nationalist hagiography, creating a distance from such acts of violence because they did not lend

themselves well to the character of a nation which had to construct a new identity in the era of post-colonial independence and the surge towards modernity and development.

Cultural identities are often politicized, and can never be completely comprehended without the idea of the nation state. Language becomes, in many ways, a transmitter and carrier of these ideas. However, diasporas provide an exception in which people are connected to the idea of home and belonging through language. Linguistic survival and linguistic rights are the keywords in contemporary deliberations on language policy, and there is a need to advocate the path of inclusion and celebration of diversity.

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