



RESEARCH ARTICLE



POSTMODERN DISMANTLING OF GRAND NARRATIVES IN SAADAT HASAN MANTO'S SHORT STORIES

Mohammad Sharique Shahnawaz

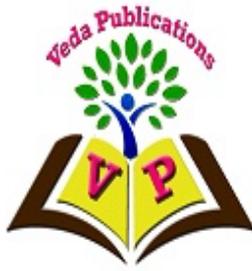
(Lecturer, Department of English Language & Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of Bisha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.)

E-mail- szwaz@ub.edu.sa

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2025.12410>

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories subvert the grand narratives of nation, religion, and morality in Partition-era South Asia. Focusing on *Toba Tek Singh* (1955), *Khol Do* (1948), and *Thanda Gosht* (1950), it shows Manto anticipating postmodernism through fragmentation, moral ambiguity, and destabilized binaries. Drawing on Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives," the study positions him as a proto-postmodern writer whose stories challenge nationalist, religious, and moral orthodoxies. While rooted in historical events, Manto's narratives prefigure the postmodern interrogation of truth, ethics, and human experience. Engaging with both Urdu and English-language criticism, the study shows how Manto's stories undermine binaries such as victim and perpetrator, sanity and madness, and nation and exile, instead presenting a vision of human experience that resists nationalist mythologies, religious orthodoxies, and bourgeois morality. The article concludes that while Manto's stories are historical in substance, they prefigure the postmodern ethical and epistemological interrogation of truth.



Article history:

Received on : 15-10-2025

Accepted on : 28-11-2025

Available online: 12-12-2025

Keywords: *Partition literature, Urdu short stories, Narrative fragmentation, Moral ambiguity, Metafiction, Historical trauma, Proto-postmodernism.*



INTRODUCTION

The partition of India in 1947 was one of the most catastrophic events in human history resulting in unprecedented violence, forced migrations, and communal hate. The period was marked by widespread anguish and upheaval. Literature of the time navigates memory, trauma, and historical reconstruction. Among its most provocative voices, Saadat Hasan Manto occupies a paradoxical space whose writings are simultaneously realist and allegorical, historical and anti-historical, moral and iconoclastic. His stories reveal both the events' brutality and the violence inherent in their narration. Manto through his minimalist style and unembellished description deconstructs the official histories of Partition that were often cast in the language of triumph or sacrifice. Indian historiography cast 1947 as the culmination of anti-colonial struggle, while Pakistani narratives framed it as the fulfillment of Muslim destiny. Both sought coherence by suppressing the lived experiences of dispossessed communities. Manto challenged these reductions and voiced individual trauma and guilt.

Postmodernism, as theorized by Jean-François Lyotard (1984), is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives" that means rejecting those totalizing accounts of progress, nationhood, reason, or morality that claim universal validity. Manto's post-1947 stories consistently challenge these 'grand narratives' of Partition. He with his micro-histories of ordinary people including prostitutes, pimps, madmen and refugees or victims or the perpetrators grills the macro-histories of nationalism and religious duty. Manto's fiction defies narratives of national, communal, or moral allegiance, exposing the

absurdities and tragedies that emerge when such stories oversimplify lived human experiences. His stories emphasize what Lyotard terms "petite récits," or "small stories" that refuse to close and question master narratives of history or ideology.

Monto's stories though written in Urdu resonate beyond the linguistic boundaries and portray historical trauma through disjointed perspectives, unreliable narrators, and unresolved moral tensions. This article argues that Manto's contribution lies not only in documenting Partition but also in using irony and fragmentation to reflect a world skeptical of absolute truths. In stories like *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht* Manto undermines narratives of nationalist victory, communal honor and moral purity. He undercuts official narratives of Partition and instead offers fragmentary worlds where the grand narratives crumbled under their own weight in the face of overwhelming human suffering.

This paper attempts to 'relocate' Manto from simply being "a Partition writer" or a realist chronicler into a more expansive postmodern narrative discourse of narrative breakdown. Earlier scholarships whether English or Urdu, have paid a great deal of attention to his humanism, psychological realism, and critique of patriarchy; however, less consideration has been given to the way in which Rushdie's work has been debated to show how they systematically undermine grand narratives of history, identity, and nationhood. This paper, therefore, will discuss Manto within global postmodernist aesthetics.



LITERATURE REVIEW

By common consensus, Manto is the best Urdu short story writer whose work has been translated into many languages, including Hindi, English, and Japanese. As such, the scholarship on Manto straddles between Urdu and English critical traditions. While the English language critics usually position him as a realist exploring the dark and complex aspects of human nature, especially during the partition and postcolonial realism, Urdu critics have explored his aesthetics and narrative innovations as well as his ideological stand among the 20th-century trends of Urdu literature.

During the Progressive Writers' Movement (1930s–1950s), critics like Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi and Syed Ehtesham Hussain criticized Manto's 'decadence' as a departure from socially reformist Progressive realism. Mumtaz Shirin on the other hand, in his *Manto aur uska daur* (1959), contended that Manto's unsparing realism was an artistic rather than ethical venture and that his exposure of social hypocrisy was not a moralist stand but a truthful record. According to Shirin, Manto's realistic representation "redeemed the humanity of all those whom society condemned as inhuman" and reflected an aesthetic honesty that trumped the moral.

Subsequent criticism highlights Manto's formal and psychological innovations in narrative. Jameel Jalibi (1993) in *Tareekh-e-Adab-e-Urdu* places Manto at the point when Urdu stories shifted from being mostly progressive social commentary to becoming more about existential and psychological exploration. Jalibi quotes Manto's ironic idiom and disjunctive

structure as the proof of his departure from collective ideology to individual alienation.

At this time, the seminal interventions by Gopi Chand Narang and Shamsur Rahman Faruqi were momentous. In his book *Urdu Afsāne kī Riwayat aur Masā'il* (History of the Urdu Short Story and its Problems), he writes that Manto is a progressive who without knowing it had become one of the finest advocates of Socialist-Realist method in Indian literature. He argues Manto freed the short story from the "duty of social reform" (samāji tabdīlī ke wazīfa se nikal kar) and turned it back toward the "depths of human consciousness." Narang's reading emphasizes Manto's transition from collective to subjective ethics: His characters are caught up in absurd scenarios, and the moral and ideological certainties of humanity were shattered. For Narang, tales like *Toba Tek Singh* and *Thanda Gosht* express an early manifestation of postmodern shattering or freckling, whereby "Manto's world refuses meaning because it resists closure." This framing is that by which Manto is put in a dialogue with what Lyotard (1984) would later describe as "unbelief in metanarratives".

Faruqi (1973, 1989) also interpreted Manto in modernist-aesthetic manner removing him far from ideological readings. Faruqi, in *Sher, Ghair Sher aur Nasr* and *Urdu Adab ki Tahqīq aur Tanqīd* argues that Manto's significant production doesn't lie in the social message of his works but rather the texture of his prose and its moral ambivalences. He famously notes that Manto's stories are "interpretations of silence rather than speech (mansūkhāt-e sukūt se ziyāda)" and ellipsis and restraint its tools of meaning. For Faruqi, the stylistic minimalism is an



estrangement aesthetic (begānagī) i.e. a tacit critique of the ideological totality. Faruqi, like Narang, emphasizes that Manto's narratives question fixed moral or historical truths, anticipating postmodern pluralism.

Subsequent critics, including Wazir Agha (1988) and Shamim Hanafi (2000), built up these claims, focusing on Manto's narrative innovation and ironic moral vision. Agha characterizes Manto's art as "creative rupture" (takhleeqi inqitā') reflective of the fracturing of modern consciousness, while Hanafi reads the storytelling of Manto within a proto-postmodernist condition that rejects authority and prescriptive narrative closure. In his book *Manto Nama*, published in 1995, Saleem Akhtar offers a comprehensive critical analysis that synthesizes psychoanalytic, social, and aesthetic viewpoints on Manto's writing, ultimately reasserting Manto's place among the most sophisticated practitioners of Urdu narrative technique.

In English-language criticism, Ayesha Jalal's (2013) *The Pity of Partition* continues to be the benchmark of Manto scholarship. Jalal reads Manto as a "moral historian" of Partition who writes against nationalist and communal historiography. Alok Bhalla (1994), Priya Kumar (2001) and Rakhshanda Jalil (2013) also discuss how Manto's stories bring to fore the discord between an individual traumatised self and the collective myth of nationhood. Leslie Flemming (1985) and Mushirul Hasan (1995) emphasize his ironist's subversion and his moral realist whereas Tariq Rahman (2011) considers his linguistic exactitude and cultural polyglossia.

Despite extensive scholarship, Manto's narrative art remains underexplored through a postmodern

lens. Urdu critics have credited his psychological realism and moral complexity, but they haven't connected them with postmodern skepticism about meaning and history. On the contrary, English criticism has tended to foreground Manto's social and historical realism at the expense of ignoring/underestimating his narrative experimentation as a philosophical position. This essay proposes to connect these traditions by demonstrating how Manto's stories systematically undermine both. By revealing nation, morality, and rationality as "grand narratives," his work thwarts traditional expectations of closure through specific narrative structures and irony, rather than just through his chosen subjects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LYOTARD AND THE DISRUPTION OF GRAND NARRATIVES

The theorist that initially comes to mind in respect of a framework for this study is Jean-François Lyotard. In his groundbreaking work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Lyotard famously suggested that a "suspicion toward metanarratives" is a defining characteristic of postmodernism. What Lyotard termed grand, or metanarratives were the "big" stories that justified political, social and historical projects like Enlightenment reason, Marxist emancipation, Christian salvation or nationalist destiny. These narratives claim universal coherence, but Lyotard argues that in the postmodern condition, such stories are no longer credible. Instead, there are "**petite récits**," that is little stories that emphasize heterogeneity, multiplicity and contingency rather than universal truth.



This framework is apt for analysis in the context of Partition literature. As both the countries India and Pakistan weaved “grandnarratives” to sanctify and justify the mayhem that followed 1947 division. Indian nationalism framed it as anti-colonial triumph, Pakistani nationalism as Muslim destiny, both celebrating sacrifice while masking the trauma endured by millions. The horrific violence of Partition included massacres, rapes, abductions and displacements, however, did not sit easily in those grand narratives of liberation.

Manto declined to comply with contemporary techniques advocating clear political ideologies and social reform. Instead, he used stark realism, directness, and irony to expose social hypocrisy and the brutal realities of human behavior and refused to deliver anything coherent or as neatly finished. His tales emphasize incomplete or compromised experiences and morally complex individuals, subverting official histories’ celebratory or moralizing tone. In Lyotardian terms Manto challenges the status of the grand narratives of ideology by giving precedence to the local, contingent and ridiculous anecdote that denies ideological explanations. His lunatics, whores, castaways and murderers testify not to the glory of freedom or sacrifice but to the splintering of experience and the idiocy of violence.

TOBA TEK SINGH: MADNESS AGAINST NATIONALIST METANARRATIVES

In *Toba Tek Singh* Manto offers possibly his most incendiary attack on the national grand narrative of Partition. Set in a mental asylum where Hindu, Muslim and Sikh inmates are to be dispatched across the new borders in exchange for each other as

“citizens” of India and Pakistan. At its center stands Bishan Singh, a Sikh detainee who repeatedly asks where his village, Toba Tek Singh, has been placed (India or Pakistan). The story ends with him falling in “no man’s land,” waiting for death on his feet, caught without a place in either new nation.

Both nations constructed grand narratives of Partition, portraying it as either the cost of independence or the fulfillment of religious duty. These competing narratives were predicated on binary allegiances, leaving little space for ambiguity: one was compelled to align either with India or with Pakistan. But Bishan Singh’s bewilderment “Toba Tek Singh kahan hai? (“Where is Toba Tek Singh?”) contradicts this simple logic (Manto, 2009, p. 18). The asylum inmates’ disorientation reflects the general confusion of millions of refugees, who did not easily fit in nationalist boxes.

In Lyotard’s terms, the nationhood grand narrative claims coherence, yet Manto’s story undermines this assertion. Bishan Singh’s struggle to understand the partition represents “incredulity towards metanarratives.” The story of national liberation sold by both the countries crumbles when it is confronted by the lived reality of separation. The asylum is an allegory of the irrationality of nation-making, as the “mad” uncover the madness of political rationality.

Jalal (2013) and other critics have made the case that Bishan Singh is the “inadmissible figure of Partition,” a figure who cannot be incorporated into either nationalist narrative. His corpse in no man’s land comes to stand for something symbolic that there is no space for him in history, as there has been none and will be none for enormous numbers of



dispossessed subjects when the celebratory tale of independence is told.

Hence, *Toba Tek Singh* is a classic example of how Manto dismantles nationalist grand narrative and replaces it with a ruptured, ludicrous tale of displacement, bewilderment and death. It's in the vein, as Lyotard would put it, of a "petite récit" one that doesn't want to be universalizable.

KHOL DO (OPEN IT): VIOLATED BODIES AGAINST THE MORAL GRAND NARRATIVE

If *Toba Tek Singh* compels us to unpack and demystify the nationalist logic, *Khol Do* rips apart from within the grand moral narrative that Partition was a saga of sacrifice and purification. The story is about Sirajuddin, an old man in the search for his lost daughter, Sakina, amidst the madness brought by Partition. Volunteers ultimately return her to him, but the narrative discloses that she has been gang raped. At the tragic climax when the doctor orders "Khol do" (open it) to ventilate a window, Sakina mechanically unfastens her trousers, showing how her body has become nothing more than reflex because of repeated infringement (Manto, 2009, p. 45).

The dominant discourse of partition insisted on rationalizing the violence as sacrificial, individual people's suffering being necessary for the new moral and political order to come alive. Women especially were symbolically linked to the community's honor. Their bodies were transformed into vessels of purity, sacrifice and identity. *Khol Do* destroys this myth. It does not substitute sacrifice but violation, and not redemption but dehumanization.

As Urvashi Butalia (1998) and Veena Das (1995) have demonstrated men's narratives dominated nationalist accounts of Partition which kept women mute. Manto throws that silence back at the world by destroying Sakina's body. Her mindless compliance with "Khol do" is a total effacement of will. Partition's story becomes one of trauma and absurdity rather than purity or sacrifice.

Lyotard's (1984) account once more illuminates the interruption: the moral metanarrative of Partition assumes coherence and salvation whereas Sakina's body bespeaks incoherence and ruination. Some transcendent meaning, some historical justification? There is only trauma's "petite récit" that which cannot be reduced, a ridiculous shattering.

As Kumar (2001) aptly suggests, *Khol Do* denies any such soteriology of the payoff, re-inscribing rather than politically redeeming readers' amnesia about human cost bleached by moralist histories. Manto does not create Sakina as the emblem of community 'izzat' but as its ruin. In the process, he subverts Partition's moral grand narrative with devastating precision.

THANDA GOSHT (COLD FLESH): CONFESSION AGAINST COMMUNAL HEROISM

Thanda Gosht, its third story, has a confrontation with the communalist grand narrative that violence is heroic if it is done to defend religion and honor. The narrative is framed by Ishwar Singh's confession to his lover Kalwant Kaur that during a day of rioting during Partition he murdered a Muslim family and tried to rape a young woman but discovered she was already dead. This horrifying discovery has rendered him impotent by robbing him of his masculinity.



Communalist narratives glorify Partition's violence, but Ishwar Singh embodies the collapse of this rhetoric. It is not manliness that his act enhances but repels. The impotence he endures is a metaphor for the moral, psychological stasis in the aftermath of organized brutality.

In Bhalla's (1994) reading, *Thanda Gosht* can be read as a direct critique of the community-vacuum created due to pride and it "pulverize(s) violence beyond recognition by identifying it as desecration rather than defence" (p. 76). Through the confession of Ishwar Singh, Manto destroys this logic of communal pride and substitutes guilt, shame and terror in its place. It is an account that will not allow pride in violence to take root, and it subverts the common metanarrative from which such impulses emanate.

For Lyotard, the collective grand narrative assumes truth and universality and violence becomes justified in terms of defense and honor. In its place, Manto provides us with a broken off piece of deeply troubling petite récit: an admission of impotence and guilt that cannot be absorbed into common pride. The "truth" of Partition, according to Manto, does not reside in heroism but in the chilly cadaver of a dead girl which itself symbolizes the death of humanity.

DISCUSSION

The three stories that have been chosen for this study *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht* illustrate the narrative strategies which Saadat Hassan Manto employs in every one of his narratives to deconstruct the master narratives of Partition. Read via Lyotard's eyes of incredulity toward

metanarratives, Manto uncovers the brittleness of nationalist, moral, and communal narratives which attempted to lend sense and credentials to one of the most disorderly occurrences in South Asia. This article brings these discussions together to demonstrate how Manto's corpus reconfigures our perceptions of Partition literature from tales that oscillate between epic liberation and sacrifice narratives to ones that speak (in doses) of fragmented, disconcerting and disturbingly human experiences of absurdity, violation and trauma.

While historiography depicts Partition as a saga of triumph and destiny, Toba Tek Singh disrupts these narratives. Bishan Singh's stubborn refusal to identify as an Indian or as a Pakistani highlight the absurdity of national identity forced on individuals through arbitrary political decisions. His death in "no man's land" is, quite literally, a refusal of nationalist binaries. Manto obliges us to understand that millions of people did not fit neatly into nationalist narratives and were instead forced to endure lives rife with confusion, trauma, and unbelonging.

This narrative disruption aligns with Lyotard's emphasis on local, individual stories over unified grand narratives. In placing a "mad" man at the center, Manto tells that the history of Partition is too complex to be reduced to grand tales of independence. Instead, it is made up of absurd experiences of individuals that destabilize the legitimacy of the whole chronicle written in nationalist tint.

Another powerful Partition narrative peddled to the masses is that the suffering and sacrifice of individuals are essential for the purification and regeneration of a nation, and it is the moral and



righteous duty of its citizens to bear those pains without complaining so that a great nation is recreated. Women were expected to forfeit more; they became the symbol of community honor and were expected to live by the established codes which reframed their sufferings as sacrifice.

Khol Do annihilates this discourse. Sakina's body is not a symbol of purity or sacrifice as hawked by grand narratives but becomes a site of repeated violation. The desecration is so deep that when in the climactic scene doctor says "khol do" (open up) she instinctively obeys the command by loosening her trousers. This shows how the violence of Partition has reduced her into a body sans volition and dignity (Manto, 2009: p.45). This unconscious response of Sakina testifies the collapse of moral order.

The tale demonstrates that moral grand narratives crumble when women's traumatic petite récits are foregrounded. Manto's decision to end this on the chilling note underscores his refusal of the order of closure and redemption. As Kumar (2001) notes, *Khol Do* compels the reader to engage with the "trauma that resists subsumption into nationalist or moralizing frames" (p. 159).

The third story *Thanda Gosht* annihilates the communal grand narratives which often cast violence as an expression of masculine honor and religious duty. Communalism creates an "us versus them" mentality by dividing society based on religion and this otherization legitimizes atrocities and violence against others as heroic defense of faith and community. However, in the story Manto decimates this brutality often done in the name of protection and pride. Through Ishwar Singh's confession Manto shows that these violences are not heroism but

desecration. Ishwar Singh's attempt to rape a corpse renders him impotent and overwhelmed by shame. Instead of asserting communal pride, it disarms his manliness and lays bare the ugly face of communal bloodlust.

In this disintegration of Ishwar Singh, Manto challenges the logic of metanarratives. He offers a painfully personal tale of guilt and impotence instead of the collective pride that is usually associated with such violence. As Bhalla (1994) observes, *Thanda Gosht* "strips communal violence of its rhetoric of glory, showing it as moral and physical paralysis" (p. 76). Ishwar Singh's impotence is a metaphor for the failure of the communal grand narrative, an exposure of its hollowness in the face of lived atrocity.

The narrative techniques themselves actively dismantle grand narratives in each story. Manto's hallmark terseness and sudden breaks, his refusal of a conclusion enact the very fragmentation Lyotard identifies with postmodernism. *Toba Tek Singh* ends with Bishan Singh dying in no man's land, giving us no resolution; *Khol Do* ends with a mechanical gesture of violation, offering no redemption; *Thanda Gosht* ends through confession and impotence, providing us no heroic moral.

These endings defy the teleological arc of grand narratives. While nationalist, moral and communal discourses build towards liberation, redemption or pride, Manto's stories end up in absurdity, trauma and paralysis. The rejection of narrative coherence here mirrors the rejection of ideological coherence. His stories become formal enactments of disruption, aligning structure with thematic resistance.



Manto's disruption of grand narratives places him within that which Linda Hutcheon (1988) has described as "historiographic metafiction", a mode of writing that challenges the authority of historical master-narratives by foregrounding multiplicity and constructedness. While Manto predates an explicit postmodern turn in theory, his stories staggeringly fulfill such a skepticism toward historical coherence.

Manto foregrounds disjointed voices, such as madmen, raped women, and impotent murderers, to craft counter-histories that center local, personal experiences rather than national narratives. It is in this respect that Manto's stance resembles postmodern denouncers of the historical-factual thus placing him as a modern realist and a proto-postmodern skeptic at the same time.

CONCLUSION

Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories powerfully disrupt Partition literature's grand narratives. Close readings of *Toba Tek Singh*, *Khol Do*, and *Thanda Gosht* show how he replaces nationalist, moral, and communal metanarratives with fragmented, absurd, and traumatic accounts. In *Toba Tek Singh*, the national narrative collapses as Bishan Singh refuses both India and Pakistan, exposing the arbitrariness of Partition. *Khol Do* subverts the moral tale of sacrifice through Sakina's violated body, while *Thanda Gosht* reveals the hollowness of communal honor in impotent shame.

Together, these stories fulfill Lyotard's (1984) call for incredulity toward metanarratives, foregrounding local, fragmented, and deeply human histories that destabilize grand historical narratives. Manto not only records Partition's violence but deconstructs the

ideological paradigms that justified it. His narratives refuse closure or redemption, reflecting history's divided nature and ensuring that Partition is remembered through those who suffered such as madmen, the violated, the impotent. By subverting grand narratives, Manto compels us to rethink how history is written, emphasizing trauma and human experience over nationalist, moral, or communal abstractions.

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