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## The Destroyed Self in the Partition: Destructive Plasticity in Manto’s *Cold Flesh* and *Open It!*

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#### Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 was a horrific event usually retold regarding human savagery and brutality. A process that divided the population through national boundaries. The migration after this displaced and dislocated people from their ancestral places. This forced migration disrupted the subcontinent’s individual and collective psyche—literature written before the Partition proves this argument. In Khushwant Singh’s terminology, pre-partition literature discussed a subcontinent that seems like a utopia in the face of post-partition literature (Nisar 9726). The idea of the communal violence that occurred after the Partition is shocking, as communally violent narratives were rare in the pre-partition era (Bhalla 3120). It becomes important to investigate this identity reformation of the subcontinent, where Trauma studies can help envisage this issue.

The shift from this pre-partition utopian era happened after the riots of 1947. These events retold in fiction by writers like Manto are horrifying. One of the most common features of these narratives is the people who populate them. They are ordinary beings who are involved in these tales of brutality. But the idea of a utopian pre-partition era might work as an imagined lacuna in understanding pre-partition India. Shashi Joshi critiqued the concept of this tolerant utopia based on stereotypes that existed in pre-partition literature (148-49). Even Alok Bhalla, who previously claimed a pre-partition utopia, acknowledged the existence of these fragmentary rifts between people (3120-123).

There is a considerable gap between minor incidents and the mass killings after the Partition. The sudden shift can be interpreted and understood through people’s traumatic experiences as a catalyst.





Still, for an event to be traumatic, it needs to fulfil three primary conditions: (1) uncontrollability, (2) perceiving the experience as extremely negative, and (3) suddenness of the event (Carlson and Dalenberg 6-10). Partition fulfils all these conditions. The migration of people in this Partition was forceful and displaced them, taking away their agency. The perception of reoccurring images of horrors in Partition, like arson, rape and mutilation, can hardly be anything but extremely negative. Lastly, the event was highly logocentric and, in an accidental manner, divided the people according to their religious identities.

Identity formation or reformation becomes part of the discourse when an event is described as traumatic. Manto explored these identities in his writings. His writings expose a version of the subcontinent's collective identity that differs from its previous tolerant identity. Manto presents a hopeless world and leaves his story with a sting for the reader who craves an ending that is left unfinished. This ending (or lack of an ending) becomes integral to his writing as he never tries to solve the evils in his texts (Shashi 152; Alter 96). His style can acquire adjectives like cynical, sardonic and Sadean (Mubarki). Hence, Manto's 'self-reflexive' short stories or *afsana* were not interventions in the genre of short story writing but an invention. An invention that cast its 'shadow' on future Partition writers who then followed his path (Saint 58-59).



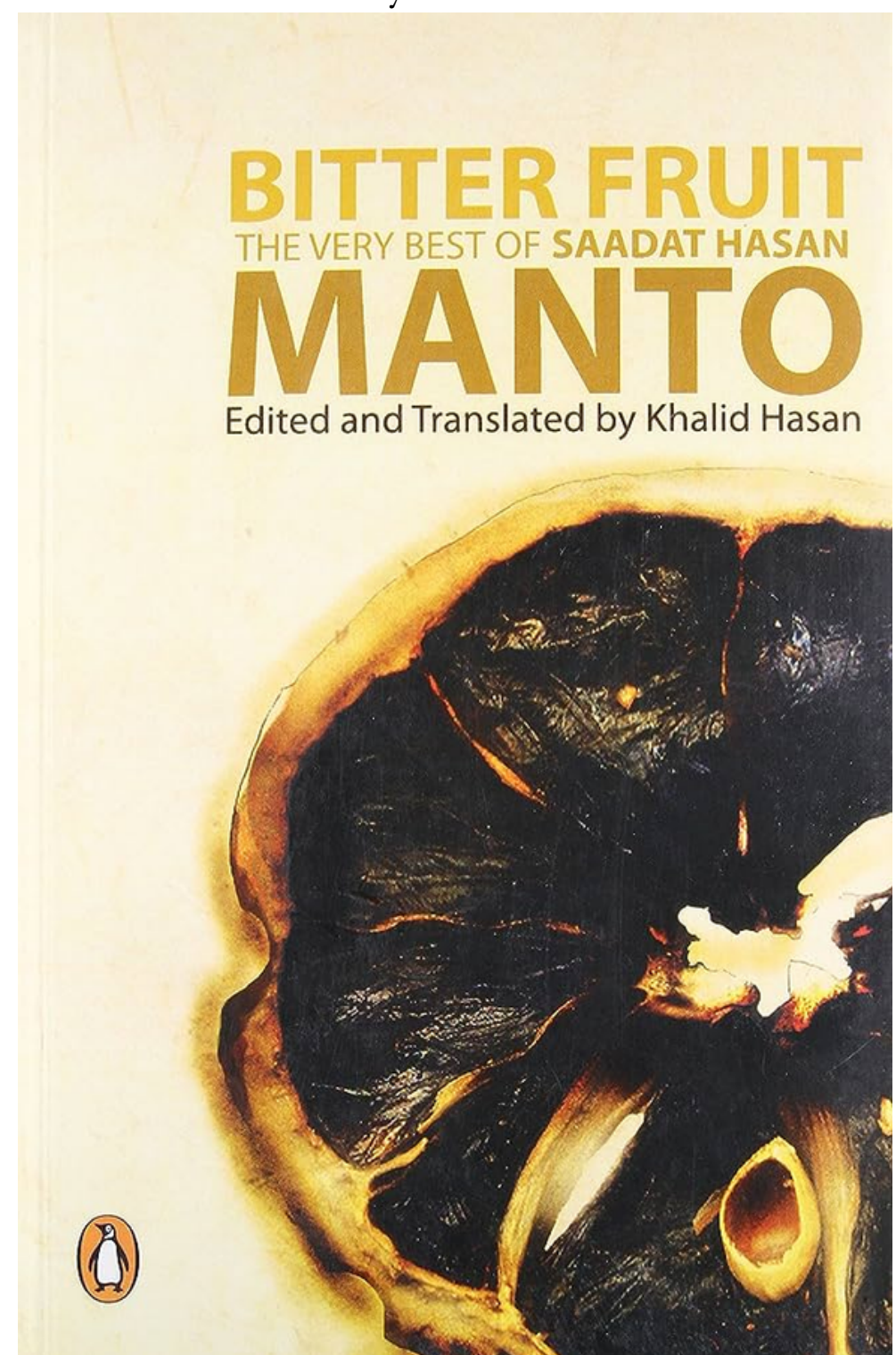
*Sa'adat Hasan Manto*

Another integral part of Manto's literature is the moralistic call in his stories, presenting a scream for righteousness (Panthi). This humanistic craving of Manto is why he is relevant in today's contemporary society (Inpaper Magazine; Akhtar). But the deliberate silencing of this call is where Manto portrays the strength of his writing and Partition trauma. A force impactful enough to change individuals because of its centrality in identity formation (Berman).

This silencing is evident in his stories "Open It!" and "Cold Flesh", as there is an abrupt death of moral voice. Both stories deal with very severe cases of identity disruption. Bhalla writes the stories absolutely refuse to give any—political, religious, or ethical "solution" to the miseries Manto tells as testimonies as they exist in the absurd space of Partition (3123-124). This complete annihilation of socio-moralistic order is also present in "Open It!". The death of the being within Sakina in "Open It!" becomes the finality (Alter 96).

On comparing Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and "Cold Flesh", Tarun K. Saint wrote that Pritam had to expand on the remorse that was felt by Ishar Singh in "Cold Flesh", thereby giving it some ending (59). Manto's iconic conclusion, or the lack of an ending, exists in both stories. There is no resolution.

The paper will elucidate the idea of an identity formed after the subcontinent's Partition. It will theorise that this redefining process is also visible in the collective identity of the subcontinent that is made visible in Manto's short stories. The lens of destructive plasticity would be used to investigate the permanent metamorphosis of the collective and the individual identity of the subcontinent.



## Discussion

### *The Ubiquitous Presence*

The plastic nature of Partition and its trauma is made textual through Manto's writing style. The voice of Manto is highly journalistic and narratorial. These narrations, combined with his journalistic view, present Manto as a witness to the horrors he writes about. This writing makes Manto's stories "fictive testimonies" (Saint). This testimonial literature places the reader closer to the violence and the atmosphere he creates. In "Cold Flesh", the narrative starts with some event that has already occurred. The knowledge of Partition and its violent nature is assumed—the quality of Partition to be ubiquitous plays an essential part in the world-building of post-partition literature. The presence of an event that is there without any explanation portrays two disturbing necessities: (1) Partition does not need any mentioning in the text as it is the event that presupposes the setting of the text, and (2) it is always dictating the lives of its characters without their consent or will. These two tropes can be experienced only through engaging with Partition narratives through their plastic nature.





The atmosphere in Manto's stories happens out of loss or lack of agency. Thus, this lack of agency is understood through the fleeting atmosphere, which itself is a "form of flight" (Malabou 11). The impossibility of dealing with Partition can only be exercised in the form of a changed form. A state that takes the shape of an unknown atmosphere that does not resemble the previous surroundings of the characters signifying the severe lack of comprehension and agency. For example, the lack of linguistic markers for the looming presence of Partition, as seen in these lines, "It was past midnight, and the outskirts of town had been plunged into a strange, disquieting stillness" (Manto, "Cold Flesh" par.2).

It is interesting to note the transitive verb "plunged" here. The verb suggests a form of externally forced activity. Ishar Singh and Kulwant Kaur experience the stillness caused by this plunging, told to the reader by Manto. The trauma is moulding an experience understood by everyone present within and outside the text. Here, Partition is starting to become an event capable of plastic forces rather than just a historical event. The presence of trauma (and Partition), thus, adds to the moulding of the characters through spatial factors of the narrative. These spatial factors—like the room in which Kulwant and Ishar are present—seem familiar, but because of the over-looming context of Partition, it becomes mysterious. This is evident in lines like, "Ishar Singh, with his head, bowed, remained standing silently in a corner" (Manto, "Cold Flesh" par.3). Though Manto uses this spatial moulding as a tool to explain Partition's presence, the very existence of this tool is there because of the collective and individualistic change the sub-continent went through after Partition. And this transformation of everyday spatiality, when looked through Malabou's lens, is a "moment of destruction". The identities in "Cold Flesh" have already been through this destructive transformation. It is a kind of destruction that does not result in "post-traumatic growth" but in a drastically altered self that is indifferent to the plastic forces that moulded it.

This presence of Partition is yet again felt in "Open It!" when Manto uses the phrase "special train" for the train to Amritsar (Manto, "Open It!" 74). Even here, Manto makes the same assumption about the epistemological, ontological, and linguistic existence of Partition in the reader's consciousness. What follows this special train is, in a black comedic nature, not special. As Manto writes:

The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, taking eight hours to reach Mughalpura. Quite a few passengers were killed along the way, several received injuries, and some just wandered off to God knows where. ("Open It!" 74)

Like an anchor reading stats and facts from a teleprompter, the narrator reads out the violence that occurred before the story. The ordinariness of violence and death results from the altered self that trauma has forged, seeping deep into the consciousness of people of the now divided state.

This altered self does not exist just as an individual experience as well. The social practices people followed in the pre-partition era were also disrupted after Partition. In this stream of thought, Sukeshi Kamra's, *Ruptured Histories: Literature on the Partition (India, 1947)* pointed out the altered space of a mohalla. The enumeration process caused the disruption that influenced this space during the Partition (113). The method of enumeration in practical life does not hold a troubling existence post-partition as it is an easily occurring experience. The process entails the idea of "countable" identities. People can be subjectivised into Hindus, Muslims, Indians or Pakistanis in the Partition context. At the same time, the mohalla was a space, according to Prakash Tandon, where people lived in biradaris (brotherhoods) that were "loose" and "undefined" (qtd. in Kamra 111). The Partition and its tacit existence rigidly defined these undefined identities, and that too on the accounts of religion. These tightly knit groups transcended the social barriers of caste and religion, but Partition made them visible, and that too in an accidental manner. Partition narratives acknowledged this destructive force of trauma. Mohallas did not just go through a change because of enumeration but ended. They reached their ends because of a force always in the background that separated human connections and laid arbitrary borders between them, again concretising these altered selves.

Hence, the connection between the traumatic self and the traumatised state is apparent. Both transformed into subjects so unknown to their previous forms that the pre-partition narratives of India read as if they were about a utopia. Partition did not just transcend time in forwarding motion but also corrupted the memories that existed before it took place. The idea of "pre-partition" is only possible when there exists a Partition that acts as an "explosion of self". Malabou calls this attribute of trauma as unnatural as "terrorism versus apoptosis" (5). Partition, in these instances, completes its becoming process into an "accident"—an event that creates "new people, others, re-engendered, belonging to a different species" (Malabou 13).

The Partition's forced and accidental quality was a force of terrorism for the collective and the individual identity. Ishar's contact with the cold meat of the girl, Sirajuddin losing his daughter and wife, Sakina's encounter with the volunteers, and the Partition of the subcontinent all mark the instances of violent self and spatial disturbances that were plastic and explosive. The sudden deviancy of these everyday identities into new deviant forms is what explosive plasticity is defined as by Malabou (3).





### *The Metamorphosis*

When it comes to Partition, three kinds of instances make it up: the before, the during and the after of Partition. All these narratives are very different but echo the same trauma throughout. The primary texts of this research belong to the during of Partition genre. Both texts refer to a time that has gone through a violent change in the characters.

Starting with “Cold Flesh”, two Ishar Singhs are perpetually present and simultaneously absent from the text. These two combined present the reader with a glance at the character. From the start of the narrative, Manto mixes the ominous atmosphere that lingers outside the hotel room with that of Ishar (Manto, “Cold Flesh” par.2). Much like the air, Ishar is also still, standing in a corner holding his dagger (kirpan). The reaction of Kulwant also suggests the identity crisis Ishar is going through. She uses bodily gestures to understand Ishar’s state of mind. For example, “She uncrossed her legs, dangled them over the side of the bed and began swinging them to and fro” (Manto, “Cold Flesh” par.3). These markers are there for the reader and Ishar to loosen up a little, yet both are trapped in some uneasy air. After this silence, Manto discusses Kulwant’s features, giving her the superficial characteristics of a stereotypical woman in regions near Punjab. Though it is Manto’s remark on Ishar that is more carefully placed. Ishar is a man that is “suitable” for Kulwant. This suitability connotes a stereotypical masculine character. Yet this conflicts with Ishar’s identity in the present. He is silent, worried and does not respond to his wife/mistress while she waits for him. Ishar’s masculinity, or its loss, is an essential feature of the story and his character. The Ishar, Kulwant is familiar with is only present through interactions where she expects him to be masculine. In contrast, this Ishar, present right now, is discontent with everything around him. The narrative moves forward with some coquetry and affection shared by Kulwant and Ishar, yet there is still something eerie in the air that is acknowledged later in the narrative. Manto’s detailed account of this scene is explicitly sexual and deliberate but not gratuitous. Ishar acts out his masculinity throughout the scene yet fails as Kulwant’s questions breach his act. The rupture in this moment of intimacy becomes the last remark: “What the hell! You are not the man I knew just eight days ago” (Manto, “Cold Flesh” par.17).

Kulwant’s assertion again describes an Ishar absent from the text. The destructive plasticity of a traumatic metamorphosis is very literal here. A character that was something else before the moment of destruction now resembles a self that presents its previous stage only in superficial features like his “hefty body”. Malabou refers to this phenomenon as an anecdotal utterance, “I would never have guessed they would ‘end up like that’” (6). Ishar’s emasculated form is concerning for Kulwant, but Ishar rarely mentions it. This is due to the indifference Ishar has towards his metamorphosis.

He repeats to himself that nothing has happened to him, yet only Kulwant knows something did. Partition moulds Ishar’s self in a perfectly destructive metamorphosis of his older self. His indifference to his emasculation contrasts Ishar with his previous self—he is completely othered.

The story moves forward with remarks of emasculation to a literal portrayal of emasculation when Ishar experiences erectile dysfunction (Manto, “Cold Flesh” par.28). After this event, a form of cathartic burst takes over the text. The unknown event that has affected Ishar to the point of social, mental, and biological castration occurs. Ishar describes this event in fits, and the text is riddled with ellipses. The issue of erectile dysfunction faced by Ishar presents the multiple layers of disturbances caused by the Partition. Ishar tried to rape this unknown, silent and unnamed victim, and in turn, he got castrated (psychosexually). In his book, *The Colours of Violence*, Sudhir Kakar gives an interesting account of such castration-related violence entangled within Partition testimonies. According to Kakar, violence, like the castration of the male victim, is to render your enemy unable to reproduce. Still, on even more profound levels of the psyche, this kind of violence is invented or included in narratives because of the male anxiety about going through castration. Hence, the phenomenon of “doing unto others” occurs (35). But this understanding begs the question of how Ishar is the one who is getting castrated. The answer is found within the text: Ishar’s remorse. Out of two Ishar, the one that existed before the event of metamorphosis castrated the Ishar, that is now suffering from a post-traumatic disorder. The anxiety of being castrated can only be solved by castrating the other, and destructive plasticity other the self from itself—an “ontological refugee” is born (Malabou 24).

Another victim who is literally othered from this discourse of ontological non-existence of the story is the deliberately silenced teenage girl in the narrative. All Manto discloses is the girl’s age, and that she lived with six men who Ishar killed with his dagger (Manto, “Cold Flesh” par.37). The event determined through the dagger is the sexual assault and the killing of the silenced victim. The deliberate silencing of the victim points towards the trope of “speechless horror”, which is common in trauma fiction (Balaev 153). The dagger itself presents a kind of justice in the narrative as Ishar is later killed by it. The overt presence of the dagger throughout the narrative becomes an unfortunate signifier for the reader, almost like an unanswered call to justice for the victim. This act resembles Cathy Caruth’s idea of a crying wound (1-9). The wound continuously wants relief and screams for it, only to be left without any cure or remedy. Ishar’s survivor guilt is left without treatment, yet the silenced victim gets her justice through the death of Ishar’s masculine subjectivity and, at last, the biological end of Ishar. Borrowing from Spinoza’s understanding of this issue, Malabou writes that this is a “partial death resulting from a mysterious metamorphosis of the body and affects” (33).





Although the progressive circles claim to recognize the institutional injustice faced by the transgender community and its historical abandonment by society, a particular degrading reality remains: their absence in statistical data. Considering the pivotal role that statistics play in informing policies an Here, the silenced victim and her metamorphosis are portrayed through her corpse's objectification as a piece of meat, which takes the shape of Ishar himself, as Manto writes, "Kulwant Kaur placed her hand on that of Ishar Singh which had become even colder than ice" (emphasis added) (Manto, "Cold Flesh" par.42). Through the absence of Ishar's previous self, the reader observes the crime.

Moving from "Cold Flesh" to "Open It!" the metamorphosis of the collective is portrayed through multiple silencing and disruptions. Firstly, there is Sirajuddin, who is left alive in an event he cannot begin to comprehend. He is "left" alive because there are clear signs of survivor's guilt in his consciousness. When compared to Ishar, Sirajuddin's plight is explained step-by-step in "Open It!". Around the start of the narrative, Sirajuddin is told to be "numb" (Manto, "Open It!" 74). Malabou has given this numbed self or a flat state much thought. In a complex manner, this numbness is achieved through a disruption in cerebral lesions—an injury caused to the brain is responsible for such traumatic existence. Malabou writes, "An individual's history is cut definitively, breached by the meaningless accident, an accident that is impossible to re-appropriate through either speech or recollection" (28-29).

Sirajuddin also suffers from this numbed state because of a meaningless accident. When he tries to remember the events to find the traces of his daughter, all he can encounter is the killing of his wife (Manto, "Open It!" 74). There seemed to be a lack of emotions, even in remembrance. This self that the reader witnesses is not yet indifferent to his plight. He still remembers his wife's brutal death and worries about his daughter. Events on the train are still fresh in his mind, and only the numbness settles at the start of the narrative. The metamorphosis starts to settle later in the story when Sirajuddin starts a round of questioning that includes questioning everything around him. At the same time, the only constant that remains is Sakina herself. Later in the story, the metamorphosis of Sirajuddin is completed when he is indifferent to Partition, and all he remembers is Sakina.

The numbness that Manto burdened Sirajuddin at the beginning of the narrative now seems visible by its mechanical assertion. Sirajuddin asks the volunteer about Sakina, describing her mechanically on an ordinary day, and they would assertively reply to him. The description of Sakina by Sirajuddin is put as "She is fair and exceedingly pretty. She takes after her mother, not me. She is about seventeen, with big eyes and dark hair. She has a beautiful big mole on her right cheek" (Manto, "Open It!" 75). As a subject of Partition, Sakina is left to be described as an inanimate object, mechanically.

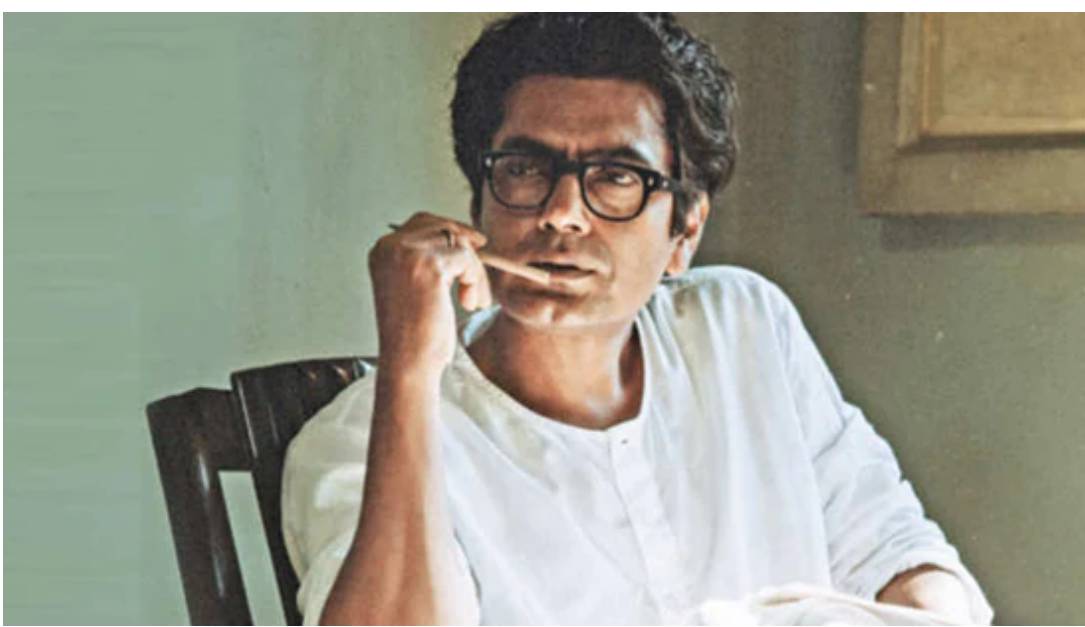
There is an automated series of events in which Sirajuddin is stuck until he enters the hospital tent. Sirajuddin's metamorphosis is shown in full completion when Sakina's plight is unknown to him, and he is portrayed as smiling by watching her daughter move. In a moment of black comedy, Manto writes, "Old Sirajuddin screamed with unbounded joy" (Manto, "Open It!"76). The enthusiasm shown by Sirajuddin can be wrongly read as he is joyful as his daughter is at least alive. The reading of this story in this light would absolutely fail due to the ever-presence of plastic forces of trauma surrounding the narrative.

Another metamorphosis that works in "Open It!" is collective. As previously mentioned, the mohalla of pre-partition India was ruptured by Partition, and new social orders took their place. One of these formations was communal loyalty. Since the Indian collective identity was tainted with religious separation and mass communal killings, sticking with your own seemed a safe option. This is where Manto, in a cynical manner, penetrates this newly formed space. As Kamra rightly writes, the reader is "lulled" into believing this was a state of safety when Sakina was found by the Muslim volunteers (122). Forming these communal loyalties is only possible when there has been a kind of destruction in the public harmony of the being. Manto successfully shocked the reader, as he again assumed the reader's stance towards their own and the other. The breaking of social order does not stop at mohallas or the formation of communal loyalties. Sirajuddin also experiences a moment of "happiness" at the end. The traumatic action of Sakina, the complete loss of agency portrayed by her lifeless body, which could have traumatised any being—which did traumatise the doctor—was seen as a triumphant victory for Sirajuddin. There is a disruption in Sirajuddin's understanding of joy and sorrow. Apart from Sirajuddin, Sakina is a site of violent and destructive plasticity. As a woman, the being went through layers of traumatic experiences. Her self is so damaged that when the deictic order of the doctor, "Open It!" was uttered, she understood it as a command to undress. The breaking of pragmatic structures symbolises how deeply the Partition affected its unwilling participants, yet also refers to a complete societal breakdown.

Continuing with Sakina, her actions are entirely mechanical yet not in her possession. This inexplicable phenomenon can be understood through the idea of Scholium given by Spinoza. The concept means that life and death can be defined as an agreement between the body and its motion (Malabou 31). Life is when this agreement between the body and its movement is fulfilled, while death is the autonomous movement of body parts, disrupting the harmony between body and motion (Malabou 31). Sakina's response to the male doctor's command was to undress as the "nature" of the being had changed entirely. In Spinoza's and Malabou's understanding, Sakina has already died. Even Manto placed markers for this reading, "Sakina's body stirred ever so faintly on the stretcher.



With lifeless hands, she slowly undid the knot of her waistband and lowered her shalwar” (emphasis added) (76). Sakina’s silencing is deliberate, but her autonomous actions are incredibly loud. The self is avoided in the case of Sakina; as Malabou writes, “The result of the metamorphosis is precisely a being in flight” (16). Sakina’s reaction is an action of flight but not from something but from fleeing itself. The only way to escape destructive plasticity is to withdraw from the possibility of flight and become a form of fleeing (Malabou 11). Sakina’s actions are but actions of flight. The complete and utter metamorphosis of the being due to destructive plasticity. An existence that resembles Spinoza’s partial death.



*Actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui portrayed the character of Manto in his biopic.*

Lastly, two less noticed and focused victims are in both texts. Kulwant in “Cold Flesh” and the doctor in “Open It!”. Both identities also function under the forces of destructive trauma. Also, both were witnesses to traumatic experiences. Kulwant was subjected to a trauma testimony, while the doctor encountered Sakina’s trauma in a non-linguistic manner more immediately than Kulwant.

In Malabou’s understanding, metamorphosis is destructive, and no reformation is possible. All that is left to be constructed is a new being or a nation-state in the context of Partition. It is not born from the debris of the destroyed identity of some forgotten utopian India but forms a new being from scratch, a new set of countries moulded by trauma. Even the recurring idea of a pre-partition Utopian India seems to be out of this destructive plasticity itself. Dominick LaCapra also talked about the idea of trauma in great detail and talked about the motif of utopia before the event of trauma. He writes,

Avoidance of this anxiety is one basis for the typical projection of blame for a putative loss onto identifiable others, thereby inviting the generation of scapegoating or sacrificial scenarios. In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security or identity, which others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made “us” lose. Therefore, to regain it one must get rid or eliminate those others—or perhaps those sinful other in oneself. (707)

The terms “absence” and “loss” are put into injunction by LaCapra where he argues against the conflation of the two. A conflation of these variables, according to him, would result in a state of melancholia.

This conflation is very much visible in Manto’s writings. But to achieve the putative state or to eliminate the other has the idea to act or be an agent in some form. Manto’s writing is devoid of such agency, and this helplessness entails the traumatic experiences of his characters. LaCapra’s idea that absence creates a fear of nothing—no thing as its object of anxiety can be contested entirely through Malabou’s explanation (707). Malabou’s idea points toward a finality devoid of fear, madness, and sorrow. All these acts to feel become signs of agency; hence, the subject is devoid of that (27). All the subject becomes is indifferent to their survival.

Ultimately what is observed through Malabou’s idea is that the individual and the collective identity of the subcontinent is stuck in a state of melancholia where the equation of “us” and “them” is deeply rooted. These nationalistic and political issues to this day influence the political sphere of both the countries in contemporary times.

### Conclusion

The research was conducted to investigate the creation of new destructive personal and collective identities in the case of Partition. The methodologies used by the researcher were destructive plasticity and traumatic absence and loss. The theories were employed in Manto’s “Cold Flesh” and “Open It!” as they belong to the immediate partition genre. The research found that these stories work as trauma testimony on both personal and collective levels. The Partition acts as a ubiquitous presence in these narratives. It is not a timeline-defining event but rather a violent split of the timeline in the history of India. The looming quality of Partition in both short stories presents a reality that is also present in the identities of contemporary India and Pakistan. The characters, the reader and Manto himself feel Partition’s presence without him mentioning it overtly. It is there, and it creates its presence.

After this presence, there is the metamorphosis of social and personal identities. The character of Ishar Singh is the main focus of this analysis. Ishar’s characteristic as a masculine brute went through a metamorphosis in his masculinity. Ishar’s masculinity goes through the process of emasculation. This emasculation is seen as a psychic and biological castration when he experiences erectile dysfunction. Manto has used this metamorphosis very visually in “Open It!”. Sirajuddin’s whole transformation from a confused self to a mechanical self and finally to a self that is unknown, unbothered, and indifferent to social structures around him is displayed in front of the reader. This metamorphosis is multi-layered in Sakina, who has become a subject incapable of fleeing the Partition by becoming a form of fleeing herself. She is so othered by the Partitioned society that she now exists outside pragmatic references.

LaCapra’s theorising is done in the light of agency that Malabou finds utterly absent in the traumatised self. Because the temptation of conflating absence and loss is so much, the only form of relief for Malabou’s destroyed beings becomes this conflation itself. Hence, the researcher concluded by favouring the conflation of loss and absence in Partition and permanent identity creation through destructive plasticity.

### Note

1. The researcher has capitalised “Partition” in the paper to identify it as an accident recorded by the subcontinent. Other than that, there have been other partitions, and their connotations differ from the Partitions of India and Pakistan.





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Bilal Khan is a student at EFLU, in the MA Literary and Cultural Studies program. He has done his undergraduate in BA English (Hons.). His interests lie in continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, cultural studies and semiotics. His opinion is that philosophy and literature are inherently connected and should be seen as two branches that cannot exist without one another. In this ideology lies the basis of all his critical engagements.

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