

Narrating India
Karin Brøndsted (ed.)
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THE RETURN

by Saadat Hasan Manto

Saadat Hasan Manto's life was one of many greatly influenced by Partition. Manto (1912-1955) was an Urdu-language short-story writer as well as a film and radio scriptwriter and a journalist. His stories are often very dark and pessimistic and focus mainly on Partition, its impact on people's lives, and the resulting collective madness. In 1947, he no longer felt at home in Bombay (Mumbai), where he had lived and worked in the film industry among other fields, so he left for Pakistan.

Manto struggled to make a living,

and he was an alcoholic – but one with a fantastic mind. His translator, Khalid Hasan, has said of Manto:

“He began to drink during the day and in his later days would walk into a publisher's or editor's office, ask for some paper and something to place under it and in an hour or so produce a perfect story or sketch in return for a fee that varied between fifteen and thirty rupees. Then he would go out and buy himself liquor, often the lethal, local variety.”



Saadat Hasan Manto

BEFORE YOU READ

01

Get a geographical overview: Where are Amritsar and Lahore located? Look it up.

02

What is a 'dupatta', and what role does it play in the Indian and Pakistani woman's dress? Look it up.

03

What are 'salwars'? Look it up.


The Return

The special train left Amritsar at two in the afternoon, arriving at Mughalpura, Lahore, eight hours later. Many had been killed on the way, a lot more injured and countless lost.

It was at ten o'clock the next morning that Sirajuddin regained consciousness. He was lying on bare ground, surrounded by screaming men, women and children. It did not make sense.

He lay very still, gazing at the dusty sky. He appeared not to notice the confusion or the noise. To a stranger, he might have looked like an old man in deep thought, though this was not the case. He was in shock, suspended, as it were, over a bottomless pit.

Then his eyes moved and, suddenly, caught the sun. The shock brought him back to the world of living men and women. A succession of images raced through his mind. Attack . . . fire . . . escape . . . railway


injured såret, kvæstet
regain consciousness komme til bevidsthed

suspend hænge op (i reb eller snor)

succession række

mill mase rundt

station . . . night . . . Sakina. He rose abruptly and began searching through the milling crowd in the refugee camp.

He spent hours looking, all the time shouting his daughter's name . . . Sakina, Sakina . . . but she was nowhere to be found.

prevail være fremherskende

Total confusion prevailed, with people looking for lost sons, daughters, mothers, wives. In the end Sirajuddin gave up. He sat down, away from the crowd, and tried to think clearly. Where did he part from Sakina and her mother? Then it came to him in a flash – the dead body of his wife, her stomach ripped open. It was an image that wouldn't go away.

Sakina's mother was dead. That much was certain. She had died in front of his eyes. He could hear her voice: 'Leave me where I am. Take the girl away.'

The two of them had begun to run. Sakina's dupatta had slipped to the ground and he had stopped to pick it up and she had said, 'Father, leave it.'

bulge udbulning

He could feel a bulge in his pocket. It was a length of cloth. Yes, he recognized it. It was Sakina's dupatta, but where was she?

carriage vogn
rioter urostifter, oprører

Other details were missing. Had he brought her as far as the railway station? Had she got into the carriage with him? When the rioters had stopped the train, had they taken her with them?

All questions. There were no answers. He wished he could weep, but tears wouldn't come. He knew then that he needed help.

A few days later, he had a break. There were eight of them, young men armed with guns. They also had a truck. They said they brought back women and children left behind on the other side.

He gave them a description of his daughter. 'She is fair, very pretty. No, she doesn't look like me, but her mother. About seventeen. Big eyes, black hair, a mole on the left cheek. Find my daughter. May God bless you.'

mole modermærke, skønhedsplet

The young men had said to Sirajuddin, 'If your daughter is alive we will find her.'

recover få tilbage

And they had tried. At the risk of their lives, they had driven to Amritsar, recovered many women and children and brought them back to the camp, but they had not found Sakina.

On their next trip out, they had found a girl on the roadside. They seemed to have scared her and she had started running. They had stopped the truck, jumped out and run after her. Finally, they had caught up with her in a field. She was very pretty and she had a mole on her left cheek. One of the men had said to her, 'Don't be frightened. Is your name Sakina?' Her face had gone pale, but when they told her who they were she had confessed that she was Sakina, daughter of Sirajuddin.

confess tilstå

The young men were very kind to her. They had fed her, given her milk to drink and put her in their truck. One of them had given her his jacket so that she could cover herself. It was obvious that she was ill at ease without her dupatta, trying nervously to cover her breasts with her arms.

Many days had gone by and Sirajuddin had still not had any news of his daughter. All his time was spent running from camp to camp,

1 looking for her. At night, he would pray for the success of the young men who were looking for his daughter. Their words would ring in his ears: 'If your daughter is alive, we will find her.'

Then one day he saw them in the camp. They were about to drive away.

5 'Son,' he shouted after one of them, 'have you found Sakina, my daughter?'

'We will, we will,' they replied all together.

reply svare

The old man again prayed for them. It made him feel better.

10 That evening there was sudden activity in the camp. He saw four men carrying the body of a young girl found unconscious near the railway tracks. They were taking her to the camp hospital. He began to follow them.

unconscious bevidstløs

He stood outside the hospital for some time, then went in. In one of the rooms, he found a stretcher with someone lying on it.

stretcher bære

15 A light was switched on. It was a young woman with a mole on her left cheek. 'Sakina,' Sirajuddin screamed.

The doctor, who had switched on the light, stared at Sirajuddin.

'I am her father,' he stammered.

20 The doctor looked at the prostrate body and felt for the pulse. Then he said to the old man, pointing at the window, 'Open it.'

prostrate henstrakt, liggende

The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord that kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs.

grobe famle

cord stærk snor

garment klædningsstykke

24 'She is alive. My daughter is alive,' Sirajuddin shouted with joy.

The doctor broke into a cold sweat.

WHILE YOU READ

01

What has happened to Sirajuddin in the beginning of the story?

02

What has happened to his wife?

03

Why does Sirajuddin have his daughter's dupatta in his pocket?

04

How do the young men treat Sakina when they first 'catch' her?

05

When Sirajuddin asks the young men if they have found his daughter, they merely reply: 'We will, we will.' (p. 48, l. 6) Have they actually found her at this point? Support your answer.

06

Why do the men not tell Sirajuddin when they have found his daughter?

07

How can "open it" be interpreted? Who does the doctor talk to, who reacts and why? (p. 48, l. 19)

08

Comment on the doctor's and the father's reactions, respectively.

AFTER YOU READ

01

The original Urdu title of the short story is "Khol do" which means "open it". Discuss the English and the Urdu titles: which one do you like better? Support your answer.

02

Why is it significant that Sakina loses her dupatta?

03

Could it be argued that the father stopped to pick up the dupatta and therefore lost sight of Sakina? If so, what is the significance of that?

04

Comment on the sentences: "The old man again prayed for them. It made him feel better." (p. 48, l. 7)

05

At the end, does the father realize what has happened to his daughter?

06

Does the reader realize what has happened to Sakina?

07

When the young men find Sakina we are told that she is treated well. And the end, this turns out not to be the case. What is the effect of this dramatic change of events?

08

The young men bring back women and children every day. Why have they not brought back Sakina?

09

Are the young men who find Sakina evil? Discuss.

10

In the documentary, *India's Daughter* (about the gang rape and consequent death of the woman Jyoti in 2012), one of the rapists says: "When being raped, she shouldn't fight back. She should just be silent and allow the rape. Then they'd have dropped her off after 'doing her', and only hit the boy." Comment on this statement in connection with "The Return".

11

Comment on women's conditions in the story.

12

Discuss the themes of this story.

13

What kind of India is portrayed in this story?

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Make a reading of this text based on gender criticism (see 'Gender Criticism' on page 334).

Make a reading of this text based on historical criticism (see 'Historical Criticism' on page 330)