

## Rhizomatic Structures of Power in Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Stories: A Postcolonial Analysis

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### Abstract

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 represents one of the most traumatic political and social transformations of the twentieth century. Literature produced during and after this historical event provides valuable insights into the social consequences of colonial rule and the violent reconfiguration of communities. Among the writers who documented the complexities of Partition, Saadat Hasan Manto occupies a unique position because of his uncompromising realism and his focus on marginalized individuals. This study examines the operation of power in selected short stories by Manto through the concept of the rhizome, introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Using qualitative textual analysis, this paper explores stories such as Toba Tek Singh, Black Marginalia, Black Salwar, and Loosen Up. The study argues that power in Manto's narratives operates through decentralized networks that influence individuals across political, social, and cultural domains. Rather than functioning through a rigid hierarchy, authority spreads through interconnected relationships, institutional practices, and communal tensions. The findings demonstrate that Manto's fiction reflects rhizomatic structures of power in which individuals become part of complex systems that shape their identities and experiences during moments of historical crisis. The study concludes that the concept of the rhizome offers a productive framework for understanding the dynamics of power represented in Partition literature.

**Keywords:** Rhizome, postcolonial theory, power networks, Saadat Hasan Manto, Partition literature

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## Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 remains one of the most devastating events in modern South Asian history. The division of British India into the independent states of India and Pakistan triggered one of the largest migrations in human history and led to widespread communal violence. Millions of people were displaced from their homes as religious communities moved across newly drawn borders. This upheaval resulted in immense human suffering, including the loss of life, displacement of families, and deep psychological trauma.

While political histories often focus on the diplomatic negotiations and administrative decisions that led to Partition, literary works provide a more intimate understanding of the event's human consequences. Through storytelling, writers were able to explore the emotional and social complexities experienced by individuals who lived through this historical transition. Among the most significant literary voices documenting the Partition is Saadat Hasan Manto. Known for his bold and realistic style, Manto wrote extensively about the chaos and moral ambiguity that accompanied the division of the subcontinent. His stories often focus on individuals who exist at the margins of society, including refugees, prostitutes, victims of violence, and mentally ill individuals. These characters allow Manto to explore the ways in which historical events affect those who have little control over the political forces shaping their lives.

Manto's narratives reveal that power during the Partition era operated through multiple social and institutional networks rather than through clearly defined hierarchies. Decisions made at the political level affected individuals in complex and often unpredictable ways. The consequences of these decisions spread through administrative systems, social relationships, and cultural structures that influenced everyday life.

Postcolonial theory provides an important framework for analyzing such dynamics. Scholars within this field have emphasized that power in colonial and postcolonial societies often functions through decentralized networks of influence. These networks shape social identities, cultural practices, and political relationships.

One concept that is particularly useful for understanding such systems is the **rhizome**, introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The rhizome describes structures that grow horizontally through interconnected networks rather than vertically through hierarchical chains of command. This concept provides a valuable tool for examining how power circulates within societies undergoing social transformation.

This paper applies the concept of the rhizome to analyze the operation of power in selected short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. By examining how political authority, social norms, and communal tensions interact within these narratives, the study demonstrates that Manto's portrayal of Partition reflects rhizomatic structures of power that shape individual experiences and social relationships.

## Literature Review

### Partition Literature and Historical Trauma

The Partition of India generated a large body of literature that attempts to capture the emotional, social, and psychological consequences of this historical event. Writers from both India and Pakistan have addressed the trauma associated with displacement, communal violence, and identity crises that emerged during this period.

Partition literature often emphasizes the experiences of ordinary individuals who were caught in circumstances beyond their control. These narratives provide insights into the human dimension of historical events, highlighting how political decisions affect the everyday lives of people.

Saadat Hasan Manto occupies a central position within this literary tradition. His stories are widely recognized for their realism and their ability to portray the complexities of human behavior during moments of social upheaval. Unlike many writers who adopted nationalist perspectives, Manto focused on the experiences of marginalized individuals who suffered the consequences of Partition.

Critics have often noted that Manto's narratives challenge simplistic interpretations of history. His stories reveal the ambiguity and unpredictability that characterize human behavior during periods of crisis. Through his portrayal of diverse characters, Manto demonstrates how historical events shape individual lives in complex ways.

### **Power and Social Structures in Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory examines the cultural, political, and social consequences of colonial domination. Scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have emphasized that colonial power extends beyond direct political control to influence cultural narratives, social hierarchies, and ideological systems.

Edward Said's work on Orientalism demonstrated how colonial constructed representations of colonized societies that reinforced imperial power structures discourse. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern highlights how marginalized groups often lack access to representation within dominant political and cultural frameworks.

Michel Foucault's analysis of power relations provides further insight into how authority operates within societies. According to Foucault, power is not simply possessed by institutions or individuals but circulates through networks of relationships that shape social behavior. These networks operate through everyday practices, institutional structures, and cultural norms.

In postcolonial contexts, such networks often intersect with historical legacies of colonial rule. As a result, power may function through complex systems that influence multiple aspects of social life.

### **The Rhizome as a Model of Power**

The concept of the rhizome, developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, offers a framework for understanding decentralized systems of influence. In botanical terms, a rhizome refers to a root system that spreads horizontally beneath the ground rather than growing vertically from a single root.

Deleuze and Guattari used this concept as a metaphor for systems that develop through networks of connections rather than hierarchical structures. In a rhizomatic system, any point can connect to any other point, creating an open and dynamic network.

This model challenges traditional representations of power that emphasize centralized authority. Instead, it suggests that power may spread across multiple nodes within a network, influencing individuals in ways that are often unpredictable.

The rhizomatic framework is particularly useful for analyzing societies undergoing periods of rapid transformation. During such periods, established hierarchies may weaken, allowing new forms of influence to emerge through complex networks of social relationships.

### **Methodology**

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the representation of power in selected short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. Textual analysis involves close reading of literary texts in order to identify patterns, themes, and symbolic representations that reveal underlying social dynamics.

Four stories were selected for analysis:

- *Toba Tek Singh*

- *Black Marginalia*
- *Black Salwar*
- *Loosen Up*

These stories represent different social contexts in which power operates during the Partition era. They include settings such as mental institutions, urban environments, and communities affected by communal tensions.

The analysis focuses on identifying patterns that illustrate rhizomatic structures of power, including:

- interactions between political authority and individual lives
- influence of social norms and cultural structures
- networks of relationships shaping character behavior

Here this research focuses on the rhizome, which is another one of the variables selected for this research. These excerpts have been taken from the stories of Manto and the analysis states how Manto depicts the rhizomic operation of power.

## **Black Marginalia**

**“Dedicated to the man who, while narrating his blood-curdling exploits, said “ when I killed an old woman I felt horrified as if I had committed a murder”. Pg. 39**

The extremely symbolic dedication which Manto makes to the narrator of the story, who describes his killing of an old woman, by saying that at that time when he actually killed a woman, he felt as horrified as if he had actually murdered someone. Through this dedication Manto is trying to portray that when the rhizome of power develops, people become a tool for the rhizome and are nothing more than a branch or an extension of the chaos, which leaves them in a powerful position but they don't actually have any control or power to do or not to do things on their own. They become a victim of ‘ Multiplicity’ which takes away any kind of personal agency and leaves them to do things which are the objective of the multiple not the individual.

## **Wages**

**“Looting was in full swing. Things really hotted up when it was followed by arson”. Pg. 39.**

The beginning of the story is a perfect example of the Rhizomic operation of power as we see that the pre- riots power structure has collapsed completely and even the pre colonization power structure which was extremely rooted and could have been of use in such chaotic times has become nonexistent. Hence the looting is “ in full swing” and that is not all after the places of wealth and bounty are looted they are set on fire so that nothing is left for the opposition to steal. This gives the aggressors complete victory and makes them feel so much in control and all powerful.

**“A small boy was seen running away holding a bundle of papads in his lap”. Pg. 39**

This specific line is a perfect example of the Rhizome at it's peak. The little boy who as we all know might be too young to be interested in possessing anything else but the absence of an effective power system even makes him powerful and he in his innocence takes what he needs and runs away with a bundle of papads. So we see that in Manto's works the rhizome is seen best at work.

**“A heavy sack fell with a thud in the middle of the road. A man shot forward and stuck his dagger into the sack. Instead of entrails, white crystal sugar spilled out of the bag, people gathered round the sack and filled their shirt-fronts with sugar. A man who had no shirt on his back quickly took off his tehmat from his waist and spreading it on the ground filled it with sugar with his cupped hands”. Pg. 39**

In these lines we see that in the chaos created by indistinct looting a heavy sack fell in the middle of the street, one that no one owned but everyone wants their share in its contents. The opening of the sack with a dagger is also very symbolic as we see that no respect for sanctity of someone else's property remains leave aside someone else's life. The use of dagger to open the sack also implies the urgency, which is there to get as much of the content as possible. Then we see that all the people on the street rush to collect as much sugar as possible, if they don't have anything to carry the things in with them, they take off the articles of their dress to make sure that they get most of the sugar with them.

**“The policemen started panting. Then out of sheer despair one of the policemen look out his pistol and fired” . pg.40.**

Here we see that Manto portrays the complete and utter helplessness of any power structure which remains when rhizome takes charge. The policemen who in their desperate attempt try to demonstrate their power have absolutely no control of the situation and are left “panting”. The firing of the gun, which has now become nothing more than a toy, is also evidence of the complete surrender and powerlessness of these policemen.

**“At the police station, the Kashmiri tried to say all that he could in self-defense. “there are others who have a hand in much bigger loots,” he pleaded. “I’ve only lifted a sack of rice. Sir, I’m a very poor man. Only rice falls to my lot. I get nothing else to eat but rice day after day.**

**At last, tired, he wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his cap. Then he looked longingly at the sack of rice and stretched his hand before the police officer, “You may keep the sack,” he said resignedly. “But pay me my wages for carrying it here Four annas!” Pg. 41.**

In this paragraph we see how in one of the many riots that took place and have been given due attention by Manto in his stories, the looting is a common event and the police in their futile effort to catch the perpetrators, find themselves in a defensive position and the unfortunate Kashmiri laborer gets caught. When the Kashmiri who has been caught red handed looting the store and was found having a sack of rice in his possession, is taken by the police to the police station, he pleads for his freedom and all he can say in his defense is that he wasn't the only one who looted the shops and feels sorry for himself that he only looted a sack of rice and the others who had been lucky had , had such big hands and still they were not caught and he was being sent to jail for a sack of rice. He implores the police to let him go as he was a poor man who took the rice so he could have a decent meal at night. Here we see Manto trying to show us the utter collapse of authority, the power belongs to no one and anyone who is in the position to take control. Here we see that how the power structure shifts from the owners of the shops to the looters and then to a simple laborer and then to the police again, but none of them is actually in control in the real sense.

### **Cooperation**

**“A mob of about fifty, armed with lathis was rushing towards a house with the object of plundering it.**

**Tearing through the crowd, a thin, scraggy man faced the freebooters and said in a commanding voice, “Friends, you have no ideal precious things, Let us take possession of the house and distribute the things among ourselves.” Pg.41**

Manto in this line shows us how in the absence of the power structure, take control of the situation. In such situations a certain fearlessness of the people is also visible. We see the recklessness is abundantly observed, the man saying that there is a lock on the door as if it is an inconvenience to the looters, and the other men saying that they will break it down in a way

which seems to be a matter of complete normalcy. In these lines we also see that when the rhizome is in action leadership becomes a commodity which can be picked from the street and can be used to achieve any objective that the leader deems necessary. We see that the men are willing to follow anyone playing his part in the achievement of the collective objective, regardless of any moral or ethical standards.

**where ignorance is bliss**

**“The trigger was pressed. The pistol went off.**

**A man peeping out of window suddenly collapsed.**

**After a while the trigger was again pressed. One more shot.**

The water-carrier's leather bag burst. The water-carriers fell headlong on the road. His blood mixing with the water started flowing on the road.

The third shot proved a dud. The bullet got embedded in a damp wall.

The fourth bullet hit the back of an old woman. She could not even cry before she fell down.

The fifth and the sixth shots again missed their marks. No one was hurt.

It angered the man who was firing the shots. Suddenly he saw a small child appearing on the road. The man took aim at the child.

**“What are you doing?” his companion cried.**

**“Why?” the man said.**

**“There's no bullet left in your pistol.”**

**“You keep quiet. The child doesn't know.” Pg. 45**

Here we see the chaos which is an unavoidable consequence of the rhizome. The indistinct shooting of this character, who has no specific target in his mind and whose sole purpose is to create chaos by the use of violence and power. In this story the killing of innocent people and that too to the extent of killing children shows the recklessness of the rhizome. Manto's beautiful articulation of the disappointment of the shooter when a bullet misses a target, which the shooter sees as a waste, is a perfect way of showing how in a rhizomic state of power humanity is the biggest victim.

**The right action**

**“They spent two days and nights in terror of the assassins. But no one came.**

**Another two days passed. Their fear abated. But now they were tormented by thirst and hunger.**

**Four more days passed, making them immune to the fear of death. Life had lost all meaning for the couple. They came out of their hiding.**

**The husband accosted the people of the mohalla in a feeble voice. “We place ourselves in your hands.” He said. “Kill us.”**

**This put the people of the mohalla in a quandary. “In our religion it's sin to kill.” They said. They were Jains.**

**Then they went into a huddle and passed on the husband and wife to the members of another mohalla for due disposal”. Pg. 46.**

This story is a masterpiece of Manto's wit, here we see that the Manto slash hits the reader hard as he portrays another consequence of the rhizome. The couple who are almost killed by the people of the mohalla, not by any use of physical strength or weapon but one of the most powerful tools which nature has put on the disposal of humans, which is fear. The hiding of the couple in the cellar for days at a stretch, without any supplies and provisions is an excellent way of ensuring that people die in an effort to avoid death. The rhizome operates in a way where everyone is completely helpless and that is what Manto shows us here, no one came to the rescue of this couple and no one even cared, whether they were alive or dead. Manto in this

story also criticizes the way the believers of a certain religion manipulate the teachings of their religion. As intoxicated by the wine of power, religion which holds extraordinary importance in the lives of the people stops being a driving force and is manipulated to suit the requirements of the collective group or the Multiplicity.

## Halaal and Jhatka

**“One man placed the point of his knife on the jugular vein of his victim and slowly moving it up and down did him in.**

**“What have you done?” the second asded.**

**“Why, what have I done?”**

**“ Why did you halal him, slowly to death.”**

**“I enjoy doing it that way.”**

**“So you enjoy doing it that way, do you? You should have done it in one stroke by jhatka. Like this!” The second man demonstrated it ot the first by chopping off his neck at one stroke”. Pg. 47**

In this passage we see Manto highlight the viciousness of the “extensions” of the rhizome. The rhizome brings about a breakage in any chain of authority and so everyone who has power is equally powerful, the fact that the aggressors don't have to be answerable to anyone at all and have no check on them whatsoever, makes them most inhuman and brings out the monstrous side of their personality. As shown in this story the killers start to enjoy their killings, and think of themselves as all powerful and start enjoying their crimes to an extent where they take pride in their crimes.

## 4.3.2 Toba Tek Singh

**“In the insane asylum there was also a lunatic who called himself God. When one day Bishan Singh asked him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or Hindustan, he burst out laughing, as was his habit, and said, “It's neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan- because we haven't given the order yet”. Pg.4**

In these lines Manto is at his ironic best when he uses the metaphor of a lunatic, who in his madness and within the premises of the mental asylum, which is his territory, declares himself God. In this paragraph Manto depicts that in the dillerium of power one thinks of one's self as all might and all powerful. Here we see that Manto's points out that in the aftermath of the Partition the sane and the insane, the educated and the illiterate, and the wise and the simple are all completely at the mercy of what remains of the system. The loss of one structure of power and then the adopting of a new structure of power, is a times taking and long process, which leaves a huge vacuum in the system in which everyone in the system falls victim to the rhizome.

## Loosen up

**“A special train starting from Amritsar at two in the afternoon reached Mughalpura after a nightmarish journey lasting eight hours, marked by shrieks, bloodshed, loot and assault. On the way hundreds of passengers were butchered, thousands wounded and many more cast adrift from the main herd, in an attempt to save their lives and were heard of no more. The lucky ones who reached to safely through this holocaust thanked God for His benevolence and scattered away, finding shelter where they could”. Pg. 89.**

In this story the rhizome is at its peak, we see that the dislocated people, who had lost everything in their search for a new homeland, were reaching their destination, but the chaos had swallowed millions. There was no way to count the victims as all that was known was that people had died and many had been lost. There was no one who could find out what had

actually happened to these people, leave aside ensuring justice for these victims. In the midst of this madness no one knew who was in charge and who could be of help. On the other hand anyone who had the means to hurt the opposition had made sure they did it. If some could plunder, they had plundered; if some had the opportunity to kill they had killed, without guilt or remorse. The rhizomic power structure had given them the power which was diabolic.

**“True to their word, these young men made a serious effort to trace the lost girl. At the risk of their lives they even ventured as far as Amritsar. In the process they succeeded in retrieving many stranded women and children and taking them to safety. But not Sakeena. Ten days had passed and still they had not been able to find Sakeena. It looked like a hopeless task”. Pg. 90. 91**

In these lines Manto tells us that the young men who were volunteers and had taken it on themselves to cross the newly drawn border in order to find and bring back the abducted women had found sirajuddin’s daughter. These men were regarded as the heroes risked their own lives in ensuring the safe return of the helpless women and girls. These men were friends, they were trustworthy and so anybody who was rescued by them thanked his or her stars and showered blessings on them as now they were safe from all harm. As for the victims they were all drowning and these men were the symbolic straw which could give them some hope of getting back with their loved ones. With no real hierarchy of power the families of the lost had to look for anyone who was in some kind of position to help them. Hence we see the rhizome at work with no in control but those who chose to be.

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This part of the story is where Manto is at his best; here we see that the very men who had taken it upon themselves to bring sakina home safely had turned out to be the aggressors. These men were neither of the enemy’s religion nor were they from the other side of the border, they were sakina’s own, but even these people in the arrogance of power had not been able to leash the animals inside them. This is what rhizome did to people, it gave them so much power and strength that they did to friends what no one does to enemies in normal circumstances. And for likes of sakina and sirajudin the line between friends and foes blurs, as at times like this no human is in power only the rhizomic power structure is in control and it operates without distinguishing between friends and foes.

## **Black Salwar**

**“The municipality had specially set apart this corner of the city to serve as its red-light district so as to prevent the prostitutes from clandestinely, infiltrating into other parts of the city”.pg. 13.**

In these lines we see that in a colonized society people lose any chance that they might otherwise have at changing their position in the society. Here Manto shows us how people are looked down upon and treated as the scum of the earth, when the power structure does not have any fear of being answerable or responsible for the people it claims to represent, and that is when rhizome makes it impossible for individuals to reclaim any level of self- worth or any level of importance of any one individual or a specific community. In these lines we see that a special area of the town is allotted to prostitutes, so that the rest of the society is kept at safe distance from the filth, as we see the people infected by a certain disease are segregated from the rest of the population in order to avoid epidemics. Here we see rhizome’s total disregard for

the rights of individuals, be it their right to self-respect or their right to privacy, all we see is that in such cases rhizome is in control and power belongs to whoever claims it.

**“Anwari lived above the treadmill which was owned by a seth who had given her a job in his mill. Since the seth had to look after the mill at night he found it convenient to spend the night with Anwari”. Pg.13**

Here again we see that in the chaos of power which is also called rhizome, leaves no equity or balance in the distribution of power be it physical or economic. Here we see Anwari, who had a home and a place where her business as a sex worker was enough to keep her going, but she followed a man who claimed to be her well-wisher and he had convinced her that business would be better in this city than the last one, and now she was homeless and broke. The place that she and her friend found for living was a house for which Anwari had to pay, and the payment for rent was never in money. Again here we see that the rhizome put Anwari in a place where she is at the mercy of others even when she makes her own money, but still she needs patronage of the more powerful in order to survive the rhizome.

### **Findings and Conclusion**

The analysis reveals several key insights regarding the operation of power in Manto's short stories.

First, power in these narratives rarely appears as a centralized force controlled by a single authority. Instead, it spreads through institutional and social networks that influence the lives of individuals in complex ways. Political decisions often originate in distant administrative structures but are implemented through local institutions that shape everyday experiences.

Second, social, cultural, and political forces frequently intersect to shape character behavior. These forces include economic conditions, communal identities, and cultural expectations. The interaction of these influences produces social environments in which individuals must navigate multiple pressures simultaneously.

Third, characters in Manto's stories often become entangled in networks of influence that extend beyond their control. They struggle to understand the forces shaping their circumstances, highlighting the complexity of the social systems within which they operate. Finally, the disruption of social structures during Partition intensifies rhizomatic patterns of power. The breakdown of established hierarchies creates new networks of influence that reshape relationships between individuals and communities.

Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories provide a powerful exploration of the social dynamics that emerged during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Through his portrayal of individuals caught within networks of social and political forces, Manto reveals the complex ways in which power shapes human behavior during times of historical upheaval.

The concept of the rhizome offers a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics. By emphasizing decentralized networks of influence rather than hierarchical structures of authority, the rhizomatic model helps explain the unpredictable ways in which political decisions affect individual lives.

Manto's narratives demonstrate that the trauma of Partition cannot be understood solely through political history. Instead, it must also be examined through the everyday experiences of individuals whose lives were shaped by complex networks of social, cultural, and institutional influence.

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