

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Reimagining Social Darwinism through Partition Trauma: A Critical Study of Manto's *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht*

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**Abstract:** Saddat Hasan Manto, through the disturbing glimpses of Partition as depicted in his short stories *Khol Do* (2008) and *Thanda Gosht* (2015) challenges, and interrogates the ideological framework of Social Darwinism which promotes the idea of survival of the fittest and justifies the suffering of the weak, is critically examined in the context of communal violence and moral, ethical, societal collapse during the 1947 Partition of India. Through the psychological disintegration of Eshar Singh and the violated innocence of Sakina, Manto dismantles the glorification of power, aggression, and domination. His stories reveal that violence and competition do not mark strength or progress but lead to profound human and societal failure. By portraying emotionally and morally broken characters who survive but are not truly 'fit' Manto resists the dehumanizing implications of Social Darwinism and underlines the necessity of compassion, accountability, and the moral dimensions of survival. This study highlights Manto's use of literature as a counter-narrative to oppressive ideologies of religion and a voice for the silenced victims of history.

**Keywords:** Social Selection, Social Evolution, Natural Selection, Survival of the Fittest, Partition, Body

### Introduction and Review of Literature

Let us question that, if society runs and operated under the laws of nature as proposed by Social Darwinism where only the strongest survive and the weak are naturally destined to suffer and die, then why has humanity historically strived to build social contracts, legal systems, moral codes, and institutions of justice? The creation of civilization itself reflects a rejection of the brutal laws of state of nature present in the society. Thinkers like Rousseau, John Locke argued that people surrender certain freedoms to establish laws, order, and protection for all especially the vulnerable. Yet, during Partition of sub-continent, this social contract collapses, and manipulated ideological myths of power based upon religion disturbed the whole people living in the land of subcontinent. Therefore, the researcher is positioned to revisit, interrogate and test the deterministic and ideological foundations of social Darwinism by investigating Saddat Hassan Manto's short stories originally titled as *Khol Do* means 'Open It' (2008) and *Thanda Gosht* translated as *Frozen* (2015) which depict the extreme bodily, psychological, emotional, brutality and violence committed upon the human particularly women, during the partition event of subcontinent.

The discourses and narrative of Manto expose that how the violence committed upon vulnerable subjects was not a natural struggle for survival but a complete socially built, man-made ideologically fueled catastrophe. Through his humanistic portrayal of trauma and loss, Manto undermines the notion that violence and dominance are natural or justified, offering instead a scathing critique of systems that dehumanize individuals in the name of communal or religious identity. Let us see what the Social Darwinism is, and what it has done with the humanity; historically the term Social Darwinism has been taken from Charles Darwin's biological theory of natural selection, evolution of species on earth and in terms of society the same principles have been applied on human populations can be called Social Darwinism. In addition, the phrase survival of

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the fittest was firstly used by Spencer in 1864, after getting influence Darwin's (1859) *Origin of Species*. According to the definition of Britannica (2019) "Social Darwinism, the theory that human groups and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin perceived in plants and animals...the life of humans in society was a struggle for existence ruled by 'survival of fittest'" the theory, has historically been used to justify the acts of violences, colonial subjugation, racial and religious violence as outcome of natural selection. Gregory Claeys (2000) is of the view that, "what unites the various forms of Social Darwinism is the application of the idea of evolution to a higher social type on the basis of social competition between 'fit' and 'unfit' groups and individuals', whose 'fitness' or 'value' to society can be defined in a number of ways" (p. 230).

In American context, Richard Hofstadter (1992) asserts, "England gave Darwin to the world, but the United States gave to Darwinism an unusually quick and sympathetic reception." (p.5). Where Darwin had also been made an honorary member of the American philosophical society in 1869 and he had also been awarded with honorary degree by Cambridge. Peter Dickens (2000) quotes Karl Marx's line "it is remarkable how Darwin recognizes in beasts and plants his English society with its divisions of labor, competition, and opening up of new markets" (p. 29). Richard Hofstadter (1992) further talks about Sumner, saying that progress of civilization, depends upon the selection process; and that in turn depends upon the workings of unrestricted competition. Competition is a law of nature which "can no more be done away with than gravitation," (p.19) and which men can ignore only to their sorrow. William Graham Sumner believed that civilizational progress was dependent on the process of natural selection, driven by unrestricted competition. According to Sumner, competition is a law of nature, as fundamental and inescapable as gravity: "It can no more be done away with than gravitation" (p. 19). This ideology implies that only those who can compete, dominate, or adapt deserve to survive, a philosophy that justifies social inequality, neglect of the vulnerable, and even violence as necessary elements of progress. Spencer ([1892] 2009) states that when government acts to improve social sufferings of people, using poor laws focused to help the downtrodden, the result will be of great misery; "Blind to the fact, that under the natural order of things society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members . . . unthinking, though well-meaning, men advocate an interference which not only stops the purifying process, but even increases the vitiation, absolutely encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision, and discourages the multiplication of the competent and provident by heightening the prospective difficulty of maintaining a family." , (p. 151).

In relation to European colonialism, social Darwinism was used as a justification for the colonization of non-European nations, who were considered less powerful, and deemed less fit than the White Europeans. Racial deterministic arguments; like the rule of superior, white as civilized, and non-white as inferior colonial races. As for instance, the French political leader Jules Ferry (1832–1893) explicitly argued that "the superior races have rights over the inferior races" (Baumgart 1982, p. 89). After World War I, colonial powers justified their control through Social Darwinist ideas. In 1922, Baron F. D. Lugard claimed that the British Empire had a "dual mandate" to both advance 'subject races' and develop local resources for global benefit. He argued that colonized people gained from imported goods and the replacement of 'barbarism' with British law and order (Lugard, 1922, pp. 616–618). Halliday (1971) believes that social Darwinism existed in the ideology, defending 'free market economics and contrasting and opposing the interventionist state' It also aligns with laissez-faire ideology and stands in contrast to state socialism or collectivism. It reflects a form of individualism that resists welfare-oriented governance, arguing that natural selection in society has been weakened or halted by expanding bureaucracies and political parties focused on administering social welfare (pp. 390–391). Manto, however, exposes the moral, political, and religious bankruptcy of such thinking. In *Khol Do*, there is no competition, no triumph of the "fittest"; instead, there is raw survival, devoid of justice or meaning. Sakina survives not because of strength or superiority, but because of sheer circumstance and her survival carries trauma, not victory. Manto's story rejects the dehumanizing logic of unrestricted

competition, showing that when society blindly follows such principles, it sacrifices its humanity. Through his fiction, Manto insists that progress without compassion, and survival without dignity, is not civilization but collapse.

### Research Question

How do Manto's short stories *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht* encounter the ideological assumptions of Social Darwinism through their depiction of Partition trauma?

### Research Objective

To critically examine how Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht* challenge the glimpses of Social Darwinism by representing the emotional and physical trauma of sub-continent partition, thereby exposing the human cost of communal violence and resisting discourses that justify brutality as a natural struggle for survival.

### Discussion

#### Summary of *Khol Do* and *Thanda Gosht*

The short story *Khol Do* spins around Sakina, Sirajuddin, and social workers, Manto narrates that Siraj Din searches desperately for his teenage daughter Sakina after they are separated during the violent attack of mob in the times of Partition. He enlists the help of some young volunteers who claim they will find her. However, after finding her it is suggested that they also do rape with her. Later on, after many days, Sakina is discovered, traumatized and unconscious, near a railway track and brought to a hospital. When a doctor asks for the window to be opened, Sakina presumed dead instinctively loosens her salwar, revealing she has been repeatedly assaulted. Her reaction is not a sign of recovery but of deep psychological trauma. The story ends with her father rejoicing, that at least, his daughter is alive, unaware of what she has endured.

The story of *Thanda Gosht* revolves around Eshar Singh, a Sikh man who became the part of looters, during the partition of subcontinent. who comes back to his lover, Kulwant Kaur, but is emotionally distant and physically impotent. Disturbed, suspicious and restless, Kulwant full of sensuality accuses him of infidelity and stabs him in a fit of rage. As he lies failing, Eshar Singh confesses a horrifying truth, during a riot, he killed a Muslim family and raped a young woman, only to discover she was already like a dead woman, like a cold flesh, out of the trauma of her family members being killed by Eshar Singh.

#### Reimagining Assumptions of Social Darwinism

Saadat Hasan Manto's *Khol Do* (2008) does not reflect merely the dark sides of partition of subcontinent 1947, however, Manto deliberately and persuasively paints the critical picture of Social Darwinism, which rests on human survival follows a natural law of 'the fittest' prevailing. As Britannica (2019) defines and concentrate on Social Darwinism, which assumes that in the times of chaos of human conflict, the stoutest, biologically or morally shall rise, therefore, the weaker body will fall. The current study rejects this ruthless argument by presenting a human world where survival is neither natural, nor noble, but humanly construction contaminated by the propagated violence, gendered vulnerability, and ideological cruelty. In *Khol Do* the character, Sakina's encounter reveals that 'selection' in human societies is not evolutionary, but willfully constructed by the political elites including colonizers based upon identity (religious, gendered, etc.) As for example Ahmed et al. (2024) state "they were the manifestation of nocturnal bodies, having segregation violence and oppression in their discourses which work to create disposable bodies within the society" (p.2247): In the current case she is not wounded because she is unfit to survive, but because she is a young Muslim woman a socially selected vulnerable target in a patriarchal and communal landscape. Her identity being Muslim marks her for violence, not nature. Manto uses this to expose how Social Darwinism collapses when applied to humans, where power and hate, created identity, not physical fitness, determine who suffers.

Sakina signifies; her survival is not a victory; it is a wound. Her final act of loosening her salwar in response to a male voice is a trauma-driven reflex, not an assertion of life. It reveals her body has internalized violence and submission. For Sirajuddin, this act becomes proof of life and cause for celebration, but Manto left the readers in extreme troubled, not relieved. This irony exposes that Manto's criticism of the pre-partition Indian society that celebrates survival without recognizing the cost at which it comes. Sakina's physical endurance does not make her strong, it highlights the depth of her suffering and the failure of social and political structures to protect her. Manto's character reveal the sub-continent society by exposing violence is legitimized through the ideological narratives, religious and patriarchal system all of which are used by social Darwinist principles used to justify who gets to survive or dominate. "The doctor who had turned on the lights said to Sirajuddin, 'What is it?' Sirajuddin managed only to say, 'Sir, I'm... sir, I'm... I'm her father.'" The doctor looked at the body on the stretcher. He checked its pulse and said to Sirajuddin, 'The window, open it!'" (p.45) Manto challenges Social Darwinism through a deeply disturbing yet symbolic scene that acts as a powerful condemnation of society's moral collapse. When the doctor instructs Siraj Din to "open the window," the unconscious and traumatized Sakina instinctively lowers her salwar a mechanical reaction born of repeated sexual violation. This moment, shocking and tragic, becomes Manto's most forceful critique of a world where the rules, laws, and moral systems that claim to protect humanity quietly recede in the face of brute violence and communal madness. It exposes the emptiness of institutional structures that supposedly safeguard the weak but in reality, enable their abuse.

What makes this even more powerful is Manto's role as a literary creator like a god of his fictional universe, he chooses not to let Sakina die. With his pen, he allows her to live not as a symbol of hope, but as a living testimony to the horrors of Partition, to bear witness against the violence carried out in the name of religion, honor, and nationalism. Her survival is not triumphant but accusatory, directed at those political and religious narratives of the subcontinent that turned ordinary people into instruments of slaughter. In doing so, Manto not only condemns Social Darwinism, which celebrates the survival of the 'fittest' but also exposes the moral and spiritual failure of a society that turns its back on the most vulnerable. Manto in Khol do narrates, when Siraj din says, "'She's alive, my daughter's alive!' The doctor was drenched from head to toe in sweat." (p.45) Manto's choice to keep Sakina alive is not just a narrative decision, it is a political and moral act of resistance. In a world consumed by the ideology of Social Darwinism, where only the physically strong or socially dominant are expected to survive, Manto disrupts this narrative by centering a silent, broken, and violated girl as the ultimate witness. Sakina does not speak; her body speaks for her. Her survival, marked not by empowerment but by trauma, forces society to confront the human cost of its ideologies. Through this, Manto asserts that literature can preserve voices that history, religion, and politics try to erase. By refusing to let Sakina die, he symbolically defies the logic of communal violence, which seeks to eliminate the "other" in the name of purity, honor, and strength. In essence, Manto rewrites the rulebook of who deserves to live and who doesn't, not based on power or fitness, but based on the capacity to feel, to suffer, and to expose truth. The pen, for Manto, becomes a weapon more powerful than any ideology. In keeping Sakina alive, he refuses to grant victory to violence and instead immortalizes her as a haunting reminder of a society that failed its most vulnerable, while those who orchestrated the chaos walked free behind the veils of political and religious righteousness.

Manto challenges the core of Social Darwinism through Thanda Gosht as well, as it is believed that survival through aggression and dominance reflects natural superiority; by presenting a character whose acts of violence result not in triumph but in psychological collapse. For instance, "Eshar Singh took off his turban and looked at her, his eyes begging for understanding and comfort" (p.254). Eshar Singh, a Sikh man who participates in the communal violence of Partition, appears physically strong and dominant: he murders six members of a Muslim family and abducts a young girl during the riots. "Eshar Singh labored to open his eyes and stared at Kalwant Kaur, her whole-body quaking with rage. 'She was dead . . . a corpse . . . a hunk of cold flesh'" (p.258) after listening to Eshar Singh, Kalwant Kaur trembles, when he attempts to rape the

girl, he discovers she is already dead her body cold like 'thanda gosht' (cold flesh). This moment becomes a profound turning point. His strength, his identity, and his masculine pride dissolve into shame, guilt, and impotence. He is unable to be intimate with Kulwant Kaur afterwards, as the trauma of the incident haunts him entirely. This is where Manto subverts the Social Darwinist ideal: Eshar survives, but he is spiritually dead. He is not the 'fittest' he is the most broken. Through Eshar Singh, Manto shows that brutal survival achieved at the cost of others' lives leads to internal decay, not evolution. Thus, Manto's message is clear: societies built on competition, hatred, and communal violence do not advance humanity they reduce it to cold, lifeless flesh. In this way, Thanda Gosht serves as a fierce literary rejection of Social Darwinism's celebration of strength without morality. Throughout the narrative of Thanda Gosht, Eshar Singh appears deeply disturbed, his mind consumed by the weight of his past actions. "Look how your face has changed. Eshar Saiyan, by Wahe Guru, something is fishy here" (p.254) Although Kulwant Kaur attempts to seduce him, his inability to respond is not due to physical incapacity alone, it is the result of the psychological scars left by the communal violence he participated in. The same man who once wielded his kirpan to kill and abduct is now emotionally and spiritually hollow. His trauma renders him incapable of intimacy or connection, showing that his earlier acts of violence, sexual act, looting, abduction did not make him stronger or more dominant, but instead fractured his psyche. This emotional paralysis reveals Manto's rejection of Social Darwinism's glorification of the "fittest." Eshar Singh may have survived, but he is not victorious; he is haunted, emasculated, and broken. By portraying a man consumed by remorse, unable to enjoy love or life after committing horrific acts in the name of communal identity, Manto shows that true strength lies not in dominance, but in moral accountability, a concept completely at odds with the brutal competitiveness endorsed by Social Darwinism.

## Conclusion

The study concluded that the characters, in confrontation with the ideological violence of Social Darwinism, the select stories; Khol Do and Thanda Gosht employ as thoughtful literary testaments to the societal failure of a world governed by the principles of "survival of the fittest." The select stories expose that when the Indian society abandoned empathy in favor of competition and power, they relapsed into the moral state of anarchy. Manto does not simply describe the cruelty and brutality of Partition, rather he cross-examines the philosophical fundamentals that allow such brutality to look 'natural' or justified. Through Sakina's violated and raped body that still responds to command, and Eshar Singh's spiritual and psychic decay, in the face of his own brutality, Manto unveils the hollowness of strength without conscience. If Social Darwinism preserves struggle and domination as inevitable laws of life, Manto responds by exposing the existential void such a belief creates a world where humanity is reduced to flesh, and survival becomes a curse rather than a triumph. In this sense, Manto's select stories are not just glimpses of resistance; it is reclamation. It repossesses the possibility of meaning of moral order, and of human dignity in a world shattered by ideologies and identities that privilege strength over justice. He compels the researcher to ask: if nature is cruel, must we be? And if not, then literature becomes the space where human beings remember what society forgets that we do not live simply to outlast others, but to outlive cruelty through memory, responsibility, and truth.

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