

Fictive Testimony and Genre Tension: A Study of ‘Functionality of Genre in Manto’s ‘Toba Tek Singh’

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Abstract

Toba Tek Singh by Manto is one of the finest short stories that capture the mood and the anxiety of the partition while still being satirical and ironic. This short story poses problematic questions when it is called a 'fictive testimony'. This article attempts to deal with the problem of genre classification and how this genre category needs to be understood without being completely ignored. A genre label is not seen here as a final verdict about what the text should be or a cage within which a piece of literature is once and for all locked. Rather, it tries to look at the genre label as that which highlights a function of the text thereby reiterating the fact that a work of literature stands beyond the genre categorisation. The label 'Fictive Testimony' is therefore interpreted as underlining a function that the short story serves to accomplish – giving voice to the voiceless.

Keywords: genre, fiction, testimony, partition

1. Introduction

Every writing with a genre label attaches a certain ontological status to the text that sets out to define and clarify what that particular writing is about. This understanding of genre labelling as clarificatory and not merely classificatory is a step forward concerning the study of genre and its implications in the text. Within this framework, autobiographical narratives have always had a problem with attaching a genre label. In the book “Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting Life Narratives” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson attempt to define a list of ‘fifty-two genres of life narrative’ which Couser understands to be the proliferation as a result of critical interactions with the various autobiographical forms that existed before (Couser, 2021, p. 64). Whether to call each of them genres or sub-genres is another debate altogether, but this exhaustive list is not the end of it. Particularly, with regard to the partition literature, the term ‘fictive testimony’ is often used by the writer T.K Saint who seeks to define this new genre in relation to writers like Manto, Intizar Hussain, and many others.

This combined usage of fiction and testimony to denote a text is unique and contradictory in its usage. Before going any further, Couser’s comments on how we identify a genre are helpful in beginning to understand the problem. Genre, he says could be defined based on the (i) formal aspects like that of a sonnet which is expected to have a particular number of lines, metre, and rhyme scheme or (ii) referencing to the content and style like that of the epic where it is supposed to be lofty or (iii) the 'subject' about whom the text is written like in the case of autobiographies where the 'subject' is the author himself while in the case of biography, the subject is different from the author (Couser, 2021, p. 62). All life-writing narratives, according to him, fall under this third category where it is based on the ‘subject’ around whom the text revolves. ‘Testimony’ does fall under life writing narratives and it is one of the 52 genres classified by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson.

1.1 *The Non-fictional and the Autobiographical*

Any important event in history will have its own ways of getting expressed in the literature and probably will resonate in the literature that is to be produced in the coming centuries as well. There could be historical records of the

event with particular importance to the date and year of the event which gets recorded in the archives. There could also be fictional works such as novels, poems, drama, and other non-fiction writings such as autobiographical narratives. These autobiographical narratives are often categorized under non-fiction writing for it is supposed to tell the truth of the event. Though this referential value of autobiographical narratives is a significant marker that distinguishes it from other kinds of writing, this has been debated across centuries. The truth of fiction and the fiction of autobiographies have all been long-discussed issues. Aristotle, in his ‘poetics,’ values poetry over history and says that history is about what happened but poetry is about what might happen according to the law of probability and necessity (Aristotle, 1996, p. 14). In the late 20th century when there were discussions about the theory of autobiography, Philip Lejeune proposed what is called the autobiographical pact which is a contract between the author and the reader where the reader is assured that it is written by a real person and that “the author, the narrator and the protagonist must be identical” (as cited in DiBattista & Wittman, 2014). Amidst all these arguments, here is a genre that combines ‘fiction’ and ‘testimony’ in its very label. The aim of this paper, nonetheless, is not to debate or discuss the fact-fiction dichotomy. It only focuses on questioning the function of the genre label ‘fictive testimony’ with particular reference to Manto’s ‘Toba Tek Singh’ and explores how it moves away from being an autobiographical narrative though the term ‘testimony’ denotes one of the kinds of autobiographical narratives. This article, however, will draw from a variety of discussions on testimony, its truth, and its fictitious quality to understand the genre label.

2. Testimony and the Importance of Genre Label

The word testimony literally means “an act of bearing witness legally or religiously” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 206). While considering the familiar religious form of testimony, the religious person amidst others in the congregation testifies about how he/she was a witness to the workings of the God he/she believes in. Here, the aim is to increase the credibility and spread the ‘truth’ of the existence of their God that had done wonders in their life. The truth element here is the notable part. Hence when the religious leader calls for people to testify, he/she signals indirectly to the crowd that they are about to hear a ‘true’ story from one of the attendants of the congregation who had had a personal experience with God himself. There are always possibilities for such a testimony to be manipulated and the people could be made to falsely testify. However, the impact that the listeners have when they are told that they are listening to a true story is the concern.

2.1 Testimony in Literature

In literature, testimony as a genre is used to testify a “group’s oppression, struggle, or imprisonment, to claim some agency in the act of narrating, and to call upon readers to respond actively in judging the crisis. Its primary concern is the sincerity of intention, not the text’s literariness” (Beverly, as cited in Smith & Watson, 2001). The second defining factor is that “it is told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the event” and the unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (Beverly, as cited in Smith & Watson, 2001). The third main focus is that there is an “affirmation of the individual self in the collective mode” (Beverly, as cited in Smith & Watson, 2001)

The “sincerity of intention” mentioned above is similar to what Schmitt and Kierkegaard quote from the work “Sincerity and Authenticity” by Lionel Trilling in their essay, where the author differentiates sincerity from authenticity. Because one is in a place to express himself with others, sincerity in expressing the truthful self is important which is why he prefers sincerity over authenticity (Schmitt & Kjerkegaard, 2016, p. 556).

While talking about the pain and trauma, the individual becomes representative of all others in that same country or social group. Gayatri Spivak rightly calls this genre the “genre of the subaltern” (as cited in Laub, 2001, p. 2) where the need for agency amidst oppression and struggle becomes its central concern. In addition to this, for testimonies to become the site for expressing one’s trauma, language becomes important and without “language” the “experience is nothing” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 6). However, she also acknowledges that “trauma emerges in the narrative as much through what cannot be said of it as through what can” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 46). Therefore, articulation becomes essential while still being aware of the limits of the language. It is within this tension that testimonial narratives are born.

Earlier in Western History, it was the aftermath of the holocaust that led to a flood of testimonial narratives. Some of them were oral testimonies that provided parallel heart-drenching histories to the original historical records.

2.2 Labelling the Literary Genre

M.H Abrams in his ‘Glossary of literary terms’ says “the genres into which works of literature have been classified at different times are very numerous, and the criteria on which the classifications have been based are highly variable” (Abrams, 2015, pp. 149-150). Couser also shares a similar view when he says that the criteria with which membership is determined changes from genre to genre and that it cannot be seen as fixed, stable, and rule-bound (Couser, 2021, pp. 62-63). This makes it clear the fact that defining the boundaries of a genre is always subject to revision and

reconsideration. However, it can't be denied that a genre label conditions the reader's mind about what to expect when he/she picks up a literary work to some extent.

As mentioned earlier, if a certain kind of writing is labelled 'testimony,' it is expected to be true and nothing else. This promise of truth in a narrative (testimonial narrative, in this case) makes the reader emotionally involved with the experiences of the author. Schmitt and Kierkegaard call this the "reciprocity stage" where the readers get into the autobiographical mode and begin to reflect upon their own life stories though not publishing them (Schmitt & Kierkegaard, 2019, p. 570). When the reader is told that whatever he/she reads is true, he/she additionally involves in the experiences of the author. If it was labelled fiction, the text would probably be appreciated for its aesthetic achievement and the author's extraordinary literary capability.

If that literary work fails to meet the expectations created by the genre label, then there are serious consequences. James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces" first published in 2003 was sold under the memoir label. It was told to be the experiences of the author as a 23-year-old drug addict. After the book was featured on the Oprah Winfrey show, the book sold a massive number of copies. Soon after, it was found that large portions of the text were fabricated and only a small portion of it is his true experience. In fact, the matter was taken up legally and the author and his publisher were asked to pay refunds to their readers. This incident shows the seriousness of the issue – of attaching a wrong genre label to the text. However, one crucial thing to notice here is that, concerning the stories of Manto, it was not he who gave a label to his writing but the later critics.

2.3 To What Extent Is Testimony Factual and Referential?

Identifiably, there are two places where testimonial narratives might deviate from the verifiable truth. Leigh Gilmore clarifies in her introduction that though telling a testimonial narrative can give them "a therapeutic balm of words" it is quite distressing and that is why they "move away from the autobiographical forms" while still dealing with the "central questions of autobiography" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 7). Since it is part of the healing process, the healing lies in the "assertion of creativity" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 24), and therefore testimonial literature sometimes "cannot meet the strict standards of evidence" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 24). The focus here should be the "ability to write beyond the silencing meted out by the trauma" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 24).

Felman and Laub (1992) report an incident where a woman was asked to share her experience in Auschwitz for a video archive. As she started narrating the event, at one point, she went on to say that she saw four chimneys going up in flames. Later when these videotapes were analysed, some historians claimed that the detail was inaccurate as there was only one chimney that was blown and not all four. Since this recollection was not correct, they claimed that her account of the Auschwitz event cannot be taken as truth (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 59). To argue if this 'misremembering' was intentional or unintentional is to completely misunderstand the psychology of the survivors. Instead, this needs to be understood differently, like the psychoanalyst who replied to the members saying that one shouldn't be looking at the number of chimneys that were blown. She is valued for being a witness and "testifying the reality of an unimaginable occurrence" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 60). Here, the idea of referentiality when it comes to actual testimony gets nullified because the very nature of testifying a reality of unimaginable intensity cannot be empirically, verifiably true with regard to things like the number of chimneys that were blown. That is why though testimony aims to record the truth that is otherwise not recorded when looked for verifiability to the level of numbers the aim of 'testimony' is never achieved. Hence, in both the cases of assertion of creativity and misremembrance, the possibility of the narrative being fictional strikes the readers.

A rationalistic approach to this problem raises two important questions. First, how can fact and fiction exist simultaneously (Schmitt, 2015, p. 134)? Second, if testimonial literature itself deviates from evidential and factual truth, how should one understand the genre 'Fictive testimony'? At this juncture, rather than asking what 'fictive testimony' is, it becomes more relevant to ask what function of the text gets highlighted by the genre label. It is here that the focus of the genre question shifts towards a functional one.

3. Generic Potential and the Fact/Fiction Dilemma

Couser has previously emphasised the need for looking at the "function over form in reconsidering genre" (Couser, 2021, p.62). This, according to him, can help understand how "particular genres encode or reinforce particular values in ways that may shape culture and history" (Couser, 2021, p.67). To validate this claim he gives the example of Walden, where the "ideological implications" cannot be understood "without some sense of its generic complexity" (Couser, 2021, p.67). One's attempt to understand the genre of Walden is to understand "its social and political action" (Couser, 2021, p.67).

A similar way of looking at the genre can be found in Morson's article "Bakhtin, genres and Temporality". He says that for Bakhtin "genres...are ways of seeing the world" (Morson, 1991, p. 1087). He also adds that every great work and

genre has potential, even for the “future generations to tap”, and to fail to understand that potential is to fail to understand Bakhtin (Morson, 1991, p. 1088). Great writers have always been aware of that and so was Dostoevsky. “Faced with the nineteenth-century questions and able to set Menippean satire and the realist novel into dialogue, he conceived of Polyphony” (Morson, 1991, p. 1087). Therefore, on one hand, there is the emphasis on the potential of genres and on the other, there is the emphasis on the epoch which in some way makes this dialogue possible. And this way of making a dialogue is how one response to the changing experiences of the age.

In both these cases, there is a certain social/political function that is given importance when a genre is studied. The combination of fiction and testimony here could also be taken as an attempt where the text is made to serve a certain function. It is a dialogue between fiction and testimony so as to respond to the changing experiences of the epoch. But that poses a serious ethical problem. At the level of its name, it seems more than a mere blending of genres. It creates in readers the fear that Hamilton expressed when he said that in an increasing desire to ignore the boundary between fact and fiction, there is a possibility of 'distortion of truth' (Hamilton, 201). Leigh Gilmore also shares the same idea where she accepts that she is sensitive towards “claiming as fact works about trauma that are fictionalised” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 145). But as discussed in the previous examples of assertion of creativity and misremembrance, it should be considered a testimony of an unimaginable occurrence.

This also applies to Manto’s stories, particularly to ‘Toba Tek Singh’, making it testimonial in some sense. His work there was to capture the intensity of human experience, an unimaginable occurrence during the partition of India, and not exactly about the number of people that were transferred from the mental asylum. (Though the transfer of the mentally ill people after partition did really happen). Manto testifies to a political, and cultural scenario that shook the country with its large-scale violence and displacement of people.

4. What Makes Toba Tek Singh, The Short Story, A Fictive Testimony?

This short story was first published in 1954 and Manto did not give it any genre label. At best he might have called it a short story. Nowhere did he call it a testimony nor did he use any one of those fifty-two variants of life narratives to label it. All that he wrote was, according to him, a short story. This same thing applies to Dostoevsky as well. It was not a conscious process by which he made the two genres have a dialogue. Manto had no previous plans about which part of his story should be true and which parts of his story should be fictive.

In his essay “Why I Write”, he says that he takes his stories from his pocket and does not spend time thinking about what to write. Unlike most writers, he does not look for a calm and serene place to write. He sits in the midst of his house and writes while still responding to the demands of the household. Though the impact of partition changed the playful tone of his stories, it is quite evident that Manto could never have thought of combining truth and fiction before he began writing his story. However, as critics and readers emphasise, the need for genre distinction and clarification still persists. Though Couser initially regretted contributing the term ‘autopathography’ to the 52 types of autobiographical narratives for various reasons, he also says that this need to demarcate and differentiate shows the “inescapability and the utility of genre terms and genre analysis” (Couser, 2021, p. 65).

With that being established, the term ‘Fictive testimony’ requires explanation. Pandey in his work ‘Remembering Partition’ says that “such ‘fictive’ testimony often stems from the desire to retrieve voices that for all practical purposes had been silenced” (as cited in Saint, 2019, p. 171). T.K Saint goes on to argue that some of the best pieces of writing that capture the horrors of partition are fictive testimonies. Nevertheless, the authors themselves were quite aware of the limits of fictive testimony, as the very genre tries to meddle with and form interesting relations to factual reality. Manto’s stories seem to in some way “necessitate the reinvention of the mode of testimony” with his extraordinary use of techniques like the “paradox and ironical denouement” (Saint, 2019, p. 178). This answers Hamilton and Gilmore’s concern about the truth being distorted. The writers of fictive testimony, according to Saint, are quite aware of the limits of the genre, and Manto’s “ironic response to the moral catastrophe of partition and atypical forms of witnessing” indicates his awareness of the genre (Saint, 2019, p. 177).

The story ‘Toba Tek Singh’ portrays a ‘mad’ witness to these horrendous happenings of partition. The character Bishen Singh (also called Toba Tek Singh which denotes the village he comes from) is an “atypical witness figure” just like any of Manto’s figures are (Saint, 2019, p.181). The same is the case with the holocaust in Auschwitz where “a true or a complete witness is an impossibility since the dead who have seen it all cannot speak” (Saint, 2019, p. 181). So there is a need for a “proxy witness” where the character is made to speak on “behalf of those who cannot bear witness themselves” (Saint, 2019, p. 181). Bishen Singh is one such character.

He keeps asking his fellow lunatics where the place ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is and if he does not get a satisfying answer “his enquiries became more urgent” (Manto, 2012, p. 6). He once asks this question to another lunatic who believed he was a god. When he replied by saying that ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is neither in India nor in Pakistan because he has not given the order yet, Bishen Singh becomes furious. He explodes with a gibberish utterance which he does every time he gets

uncomfortable and angry. This urgency and restlessness of the character are partly because of the impact of the political tensions outside. Yet another instance where two of the lunatics declared themselves to be Muhammed Ali Jinnah and Master Tara Singh, the Sikh leader clarifies that though being mad they were not politically unaware.

Likewise, each of the lunatics with the little news they get about the outside world responded to partition differently. One of them who did not understand if he was in Pakistan or India climbed a tree saying that he neither wants to live in India nor Pakistan and that he is happy living in the tree. These strange claims by the lunatics give the readers a perspective of how things would have been for them. It shows their inner tension about the political chaos and their tender minds struggling to understand that. These are characters that fulfil the necessity to speak on behalf of those “who had been silenced, whether the dead and the insane or the stigmatised women” (Saint, 2019, p. 214). If not for them, their voices would forever be buried and unheard.

A rule that Manto’s story seems to overstep is that of the need for a first-person narrator in testimonies who should have been a direct witness. The short story is told in the third person and Bishen Singh and other patients are shown to be the witness. Bishen Singh is merely a fictional creation and can be seen “both as a mirror to the general displacement suffered by so many as well as a more specific portrayal of Manto’s own personal experience” (Jokinen & Assadullah, 2019, p. 92). The testimony here is given by fictional characters who are mad to some degree but also go through experiences of an identity crisis. The fact that there is an individual who represents the suffering of the group, which is one of the characteristics of the ‘testimony’ is still present. But that person who testifies is a fictional creation. This marks a significant movement away from the original autobiographical form ‘Testimony’ to ‘fictive testimony’. Bishen Singh’s death is captured thus in the story:

“...There behind barbed wires, was India. Here behind barbed wires, was Pakistan. In the middle on a nameless piece of earth lay Toba Tek Singh” (Manto, 2012, p. 10)

A lack of sense of belonging and the terror of partition is represented through Bishen Singh who dies with a ‘scream’ that night. The bewilderment, anxiety, and lunacy that these mad characters express vividly seem to capture the time of partition. Though this character did not cast a shadow at the time of his death, “the figure of the ‘mad’ witness has cast a long shadow in literary representations of the partition” (Saint, 2012, p. 58). So this short story becomes a fictive testimony when the aspects of proxy witness and self-consciousness on part of the author regarding the limitation of such an attempt are brought to the forefront.

5. Conclusion

This kind of testimonial narrative, where the character speaks for somebody who cannot speak for himself may not be new. But by calling this short story a fictive testimony, it clarifies the function that this particular piece of writing serves to accomplish and it adds value to the story. In other words, the ascribing of a genre label is seen as an attempt to clarify a function of the text. This kind of view does not negate genre analysis but at the same time does not get caught in the definitive and limited focus on genre categorization alone. Genre purity is what is abandoned and not genre distinction. Therefore, it was Manto’s work of literature that came first and it was then given a genre label. It proves that genre expressions are, sometimes, not a conscious choice.

To conclude, it is quite improbable for any writing to be completely true or completely fictional. Even in testimonial narratives, looking for referentiality and verifiability is sometimes problematic. The combination of fiction and testimony here, though not consciously, was to address the questions of this century just as Dostoevsky did to address the problems of the 19th century. The aim of fictive testimonies here was to give a voice to the voiceless. As cliched as it sounds, can anybody ever be a voice of the voiceless is another debate that stands outside the scope of this research. But here, the fact that that becomes the function of the text which gets highlighted with the assigning of a new genre label broadens our understanding of genre categorisation and liberates the text from being singularly defined by the genre label assigned.

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