



Unveiling The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Violence: A Comparative Study of Saadat Hasan Manto's "The Assignment" and R.K. Narayan's "Martyr's Corner"

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Article Info

Received: 31 Aug 2025,

Received in revised form: 30 Sep 2025,

Accepted: 05 Oct 2025,

Available online: 10 Oct 2025

Keywords— violence, trauma, psychological impact, Manto, Narayan, Partition, social displacement

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative reading of Saadat Hasan Manto's "The Assignment" and R. K. Narayan's "Martyr's Corner" to explore how two distinct narrative registers—Manto's blunt realism and Narayan's restrained irony—represent the psychological and emotional consequences of violence. While Manto frames violence as immediate, dislocating, and dehumanizing, Narayan shows its quieter aftermath: social dispossession, prolonged humiliation, and the slow erosion of self-worth. Through close textual analysis informed by trauma studies and narrative theory, the paper argues that both authors reveal complementary dimensions of violence: the raw psychic rupture of sudden terror and the enduring, domestic wounds that alter ordinary life. Reading these stories together highlights how South Asian fiction confronts both public catastrophes and the private, often invisible, costs of social upheaval.

Introduction

Violence, whether spectacular or quotidian, leaves traces that extend well beyond physical wounds. Literature has a unique capacity to register those traces—to show how events that appear external to the self become internalized textures of fear, shame, and altered subjectivity. Saadat Hasan Manto and R. K. Narayan, writing from different social milieus and literary traditions, both attend to the psychic afterlife of violent events. Manto's narratives, forged in the crucible of Partition and its immediate horrors, foreground the intensity of trauma; Narayan, whose Malgudi stories are often noted for their quiet domesticity and gentle irony, attends to the long-term social consequences of violence that

are less spectacular but equally injurious. This article juxtaposes "The Assignment" and "Martyr's Corner" to trace how these authors depict the psychological and emotional topography of violence and to show how different literary strategies map different forms of injury.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Saadat Hasan Manto has largely centred on his unflinching representation of Partition and its psychological aftermath. Sudha Tiwari emphasizes that Manto's stories such as *Khol Do* and *Toba Tek Singh* expose the absurdity of communal hatred and the lingering trauma it generated (Tiwari 45). Similarly, Soma Das notes that Manto's

narratives register “cosmopolitan humanism,” portraying violence not through ideological rhetoric but through lived experience of fractured identities (Das 102). Critics argue that Manto’s technique—his clipped dialogues, stark realism, and detached tone—mirrors the psychic disorientation of victims and survivors. R. K. Narayan’s fiction, in contrast, is often read for its understated irony and the everyday moral struggles of middle-class South Indians. Dipankar Roy highlights how *Malgudi Days* bridges local traditions with universal themes of loss, resilience, and irony, noting that the “ordinary becomes extraordinary in Narayan’s prose” (Roy 87). Mohd Musta Hsin Ali’s reading of *Martyr’s Corner* demonstrates how Narayan employs dramatic irony to critique social structures: Rama, a humble vendor, becomes an invisible casualty of communal unrest, revealing the subtle cruelty of systemic violence (Ali 56). Narayan’s restrained style produces what critics call “quiet tragedy,” in which psychological injury is shown not in spectacle but in gradual dispossession. Comparative studies of Manto and Narayan remain limited. While Manto is placed within the trauma of Partition and Narayan within the cultural fabric of *Malgudi*, few scholars have analyzed them together as complementary voices on the psychological and emotional impact of violence. This paper addresses this research gap by examining how both authors, through distinct narrative strategies, depict trauma, resilience, and the slow erosion of dignity in the face of violence.

Manto’s “The Assignment”: Violence as Rupture and Moral Disintegration

Saadat Hasan Manto’s “The Assignment” is situated in the tumultuous landscape of Partition, where identities were violently redefined and moral boundaries blurred. Manto does not romanticize the past nor glorify human suffering; rather, he strips away the veneers of civilization to expose how fragile morality becomes in the face of communal violence. His characters are placed in extreme circumstances where survival, loyalty, and betrayal intersect, producing ethical dilemmas that test the very core of human values. Psychologically, the story depicts violence as a rupture that fragments individual identity. Victims and witnesses alike are destabilized by fear, paranoia, and

disillusionment. Manto’s narrative technique—short, clipped sentences and abrupt tonal shifts—mirrors the internal disorientation of trauma. The result is a textual landscape that feels unsettled, echoing the emotional instability of the characters themselves. Violence here is not a distant political abstraction but a force that directly invades the psyche, leaving scars that cannot be healed. One of the most striking aspects of “The Assignment” is how Manto portrays moral disintegration. Characters who once lived by ordinary ethical norms are compelled to act in ways that betray their humanity—whether through opportunistic survival, betrayal of neighbours, or complicity in cruelty. This reflects what trauma theorists call moral injury, where individuals lose faith in their own ethical integrity. In this sense, Manto’s narrative becomes a mirror of Partition society: the social fabric itself tears apart, and with it, the capacity to uphold trust, compassion, and solidarity. Moreover, Manto uses irony to heighten the sense of moral collapse. The most brutal acts are often described in understated, almost clinical language, forcing readers to confront the casualness with which violence becomes normalized. The story suggests that once violence infiltrates everyday life, it reshapes not only actions but also perceptions: neighbours become enemies, strangers become threats, and survival replaces empathy as the dominant instinct. Ultimately, “The Assignment” demonstrates how violence annihilates continuity—of memory, morality, and communal belonging. For Manto, the Partition is not merely a historical rupture but a psychological and emotional cataclysm that reveals the darkest corners of the human condition. His story becomes both testimony and warning: that once unleashed, violence leaves behind not only dead bodies but also fractured identities and disoriented minds.

Narayan’s “Martyr’s Corner”: Violence as Dispossession and Quiet Humiliation

.R.K. Narayan, a master of subtle social realism, often examines the quiet but profound tensions that shape human experience. In *Martyr’s Corner*, violence is not portrayed in its overt, sensational form; instead, Narayan emphasizes structural and psychological violence, which manifests as dispossession—the loss of material,

social, or moral space—and quiet humiliation, the internalized shame and subordination experienced by his characters.

1. Violence as Dispossession

Dispossession in Martyr's Corner can be understood on multiple levels:

- **Material Dispossession:** Narayan's characters often experience the stripping away of property, livelihood, or economic stability. While not always enacted through physical aggression, this form of violence destabilizes their social existence. For example, when individuals or communities are rendered powerless against social hierarchies or bureaucratic systems, they experience a silent expropriation of agency.

- **Psychological Dispossession:** Beyond tangible loss, Narayan highlights how social expectations, family pressures, or cultural norms deprive characters of their autonomy. The protagonist's inner life often reflects a gradual erosion of self-confidence, signaling that violence need not always be physical to be impactful.

- **Cultural and Moral Dispossession:** Characters may feel alienated from their own values or ethics due to societal expectations or injustices. Narayan portrays this through subtle narrative strategies, showing the tension between personal desires and external impositions, which produces a sense of existential dispossession.

2. Violence as Quiet Humiliation

Narayan is particularly skilled at revealing humiliation as a form of understated violence

- **Interpersonal Humiliation:** Characters often endure shame or embarrassment in social interactions. This may occur in professional, domestic, or communal contexts, reflecting a form of non-physical coercion that undermines dignity.
- **Internalized Oppression:** Quiet humiliation often becomes internalized, leading characters to blame themselves for circumstances beyond their control. Narayan's subtle depiction shows how self-doubt and guilt operate as invisible instruments of violence.
- **Symbolic Humiliation:** Objects, spaces, or social symbols may act as reminders of subordination, such as living in a neglected

house, inheriting a marginal social role, or participating in rituals that reinforce hierarchy. This creates a persistent psychic tension akin to violence, although it remains socially invisible.

3. The Interplay of Dispossession and Humiliation

Narayan often links dispossession and humiliation:

- Loss of property or status frequently triggers feelings of shame or social inadequacy.
- Characters may respond with passive endurance, showing Narayan's interest in the psychological consequences of violence rather than overt heroism or revolt.
- The subtlety of these experiences highlights Narayan's critique of society: that ordinary lives are shaped by soft but pervasive forms of coercion, often normalized and invisible.

4. Stylistic Features Reinforcing the Theme

Narayan's style strengthens this thematic focus:

- **Understated narrative tone:** By avoiding sensationalism, he mirrors the quiet nature of the violence he depicts.
- **Focus on ordinary life:** The mundane settings emphasize that dispossession and humiliation are routine, systemic, and socially sanctioned.
- **Character-centred narration:** By exploring the internal responses of characters, Narayan exposes how violence functions psychologically, making the invisible pain palpable to the reader.
- **Comparative Perspective** While overtly violent literature dramatizes physical or political struggle, Narayan's approach aligns more with psychological realism:
- His depiction of dispossession and humiliation resonates with themes of structural violence discussed by sociologists like Johan Galtung, where social structures produce harm without direct physical assault.
- Compared to writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, who depicts Partition violence through graphic rupture and moral collapse, Narayan's violence is subtle, slow-burning, and socially embedded.

Comparative Perspective: Two Modes of Psychic Injury

A comparative study of R.K. Narayan's *Martyr's Corner* and Saadat Hasan Manto's *The Assignment* reveals the diversity in literary representations of psychic injury, demonstrating how external circumstances—social, cultural, or historical—reshape human consciousness in profoundly different ways. While both authors explore the consequences of violence and marginalization on the psyche, their approaches diverge sharply in intensity, method, and psychological outcome. In Narayan, psychic injury is portrayed as subtle, cumulative, and socially mediated. Characters in *Martyr's Corner* endure dispossession, social marginalization, and quiet humiliation, experiences that are neither sudden nor overtly dramatic but insidiously persistent. This slow accumulation of psychological stress gradually undermines self-esteem, autonomy, and moral confidence, producing a form of internalized oppression that leaves deep, enduring scars on the mind. Narayan's narrative style, marked by understated realism and a focus on ordinary life, mirrors this slow, pervasive shaping of consciousness, emphasizing the quiet coercion of social norms and cultural hierarchies. The psychic injury his characters endure is largely invisible to the outside world; it manifests internally as self-doubt, resignation, and emotional suppression, highlighting the enduring power of structural and cultural forces to engineer the psyche over time. Manto's *The Assignment* presents psychic injury as immediate, forceful, and traumatic, reflecting the catastrophic impact of Partition on human lives. Characters in Manto confront sudden violence, betrayal, and displacement that shock their moral and emotional frameworks, leaving them psychologically destabilized. Unlike Narayan's slow, socially embedded pressures, Manto foregrounds abrupt trauma that fractures identity and moral orientation, producing acute fear, grief, and existential disorientation. The psychic injury in Manto's narrative is overt and socially visible, often manifesting in emotional breakdowns, moral confusion, or extreme behavioural responses. His stark realism and unflinching depiction of communal violence underscore the intensity of this trauma,

emphasizing that psychic injury can result not only from everyday social pressures but also from historical catastrophes that violently disrupt individual and collective consciousness. In Manto, the mind is forcibly reconfigured by external chaos, leaving little opportunity for gradual adaptation, in contrast to the enduring, quietly internalized suffering depicted by Narayan.

The comparative perspective highlights a spectrum of psychic injury in literature, demonstrating that the human mind can be shaped and damaged through multiple mechanisms. Narayan's approach emphasizes the slow, internalized engineering of the psyche, showing how ordinary social structures, cultural expectations, and subtle humiliation can gradually erode confidence, agency, and moral stability. Manto, on the other hand, focuses on the acute, shock-induced disruption of consciousness, revealing how sudden historical violence produces immediate psychic rupture and moral disorientation. Together, these works illustrate that psychic injury is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather a complex interplay between external circumstances and internal responses, ranging from slow, invisible erosion to rapid, dramatic destabilization. By examining these contrasting modes, readers gain insight into the multifaceted ways literature captures the fragility, resilience, and vulnerability of the human mind, demonstrating that psychic injury can emerge from both the quiet pressures of everyday life and the sudden shocks of historical violence, each leaving indelible marks on consciousness that shape thought, emotion, and moral perception.

CONCLUSION

Manto and Narayan offer two rigorous but different testimonies about the psychological and emotional costs of violence. Manto forces readers to witness the raw fractures of terror and moral collapse; Narayan invites readers to recognize the slow burns of social dispossession and shame. Together, their stories challenge any single, reductive account of what violence does to human hearts and social fabrics.

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