Toba Tek Singh: A Study of the Representations of Partition Truths in South Asia

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The World War II has brought in a significant change in the way we look at the nation states and the democracies in the world. In today's world the nation states and the democracies increasingly share a commonality in the patterns of their behaviour towards communities that they purport to serve. Ideas of nation and democracy have started creating their own critiques by themselves. The Western model showed signs of self-reflexive absurdity when it tried adapting itself to South Asian polity as a consequence of Western colonial intervention.

The subsequent events in the Indian subcontinent, of Partition, its annulment and re-Partition are the most substantial illustrations of the deficiency of the Western model, the most abysmal harvest of which was reaped by the West when Great Britain and Ireland came to blows and saw fractures that turned truths of nationhood and democracy on their heads. An Urdu writer like Sadat Hasan Manto reviewing the partition of 1947, serves to collapse the borders between imaginary spaces at a time when two distant places were trying ironically to construct borders in much the same way. In his short story "Toba Tek Singh", first published in an Urdu magazine *Savera*, Manto creates what can be called an extended "Imagined Community", whose psychological bearings evince an underlying pattern that tends to defy civilizational constructs of nation and democracy. This paper is an attempt to read "Toba Tek Singh" in the context of the South Asian upheaval, further it tries to show how the diffusion of barriers in literature is affiliated with the psychic dissolution of the big "Other."

Manto locates his story 'Toba Tek Singh' in a lunatic asylum and thus takes the theme of Partition to the world of the insane giving prominence to the political absurdity of the Partition itself and at the same time lodges a reminder of disapproval against the powers that be, who take such crucial decisions as splitting a country into two, without ever thinking of the penalty. Partition of the subcontinent into two separate geographical entities was that devastating event in its history that changed not only its physical boundaries forever but also distorted the lives of its people in an irrevocable manner. The horror, the madness, the bestiality, the violence, arson, looting and rape that followed in the wake of the

political decision was unprecedented. Suddenly, overnight, all those secure walls of a shared tradition, shared culture, shared history collapsed. People of different communities, who till then had led a harmonious and peaceful co-existence, now turned into foes. Reason was the first casualty and fear and then rage were its firstoutcome. Neighbours who till yesterday would have died for each other now thirsted for one another's blood simply because they belonged to different communities. Scenes of senseless carnage were witnessed everywhere. A communal frenzy, a hypnotic obsession with violence overtook the people on both sides of the dividing line.

The story begins in the manner of a historical narration and the opening line itself places it in its historical context: 'Two or three years after Partition it strikes the government of Pakistan and Hindustan that even as they had exchanged ordinary prisoners, so they should also have an exchange of madmen as well' ('Toba Tek Singh'**). The style is that of newspaper reportage but the tone is mock-serious, dispassionate and somewhere along the line a hint has been placed about the absurdity of it all when Manto takes the theme of Partition to the lunatic asylum. Whether it was right to exchange madmen or not, no one knew, but the decision made by 'those who know best,' ('Toba Tek Singh'**) after some high level meetings had been held on both sides. No one thought of asking the madmen what they wanted. Probably because lunatics cannot make out what is right for them. Only madmen who still had their families living in Hindustan were allowed to stay and the rest had their fate sealed. As for Hindus and Sikh madmen, the question of staying did not arise as there were no Hindu families living in Pakistan so all would have to be dispatched.

Thus in two short paragraphs, Manto sets the tone of the story and displays the scene of action with a strong suggestion that the madhouse we are about to enter is in fact going to emulate the world outside. The omniscient narrator remains distanced from the scene and records objectively the events subsequent to the proclamation of the decision. Though grounded in a particular historical context and begun in a deceptive style of reportage, we must notice the difference that will gradually emerge between the rendering of history through a chronicling of facts and through a fictionalization of the same. The irony and satire at play become effective devices for exposing the atrocious reality of the historical situation.

In 'Toba Tek Singh' the lunatic asylum becomes a microcosm of the world outside and Manto focuses on the anguish of one man to bring out the trauma and tragedy of dislocation and exile faced by those countless

others who were forced out of their hearths and homes. Even in the world of these madmen the realization of a division of their country has gradually percolated through. This small world is peopled by men belonging to the various communities of the subcontinent and the narrator gives us short, though vivid, descriptions of the same. Thus, there is a Muslim madman who has been religiously reading the Urdu daily *Zamidar*, there is the Sikh madman who wants to know why they are being sent to Hindustan when they cannot even speak their language and there is again that Muslim madman who is overtaken by a nationalist fervor while bathing and shouts 'Pakistan zindabad' only to slip and fall and pass out. The madman who climbs a tree to deliver a two- hour lecture on 'the most ticklish matter of Pakistan and Hindustan' lends poignancy to the plight of those who were now forced to make a choice. Thus he declares 'I want to live neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan. I had rather live on this tree.' The fact that he is a Muslim is revealed only when he is persuaded to come down and hugs his Hindu and Sikh friends because they would soon be going away. This implies that he must be a Muslim for he will stay back.

Two things are happening here simultaneously. On the one hand there is a note of protest in this madman's declaration that he would rather live on a tree than be forced to make a choice between two parts of the same country. This dissent simmered in the hearts of most common people who were driven out from their homes when sudden political decisions were thrust on them. Thus gradually we see the madhouse becoming a microcosm of the exterior world. We have a similar situation here as that in the world outside. A political decision has been made without consulting the people concerned and it has been thrust upon them leaving them with no choice but to submit. This note of disapproval appears again when the young Hindu lawyer from Lahore 'heartily abused all the Hindu and Muslim leaders who had got together to have Hindustan divided'

The second noteworthy fact which emerges from the protest of the madman who prefers to live on the tree, is located in the manner in which he embraces his Hindu and Sikh friends and begins to cry. At this point Manto writes: 'his heart grew heavy at the very thought that they would leave him and go away to Hindustan.' For him they are still his friends and it does not matter that they are not Muslims. We might well ask ourselves who in fact is mad here — the madmen in the asylum or the sane men outside the madhouse? Humanity seems to be still intact in this madhouse, in these madmen. Ironically the mad seem to be saner than the so called sane predators prowling the streets in the world beyond the confines of the asylum. The 'madmen' in the madhouse still value friendship

despite differences of religion or community.It is the apparently sane people who have gone berserk and are killing their friends and neighbours. It is the sane who are saying that the place that has been your home since birth is no longer your home.

Confusion about their status is now widespread in the madhouse. The suddenness of the change is underlined because even those madmen who were not completely mad were at a loss as to where they actually were at that moment. They knew that a person called Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was known as Qaide Azam, the great leader, had created a separate nation for Muslims and had named it Pakistan. But where it was and what is its geographical dimensions, no one was sure. Manto is highlighting here a very important aspect about the gap between decision makers and the affected people. For the political leaders it was easy to run a dividing line through the country and have clear cut physical boundaries drawn between Hindustan and Pakistan. But for the common people the words remained mere territorial abstractions. For them home was where they had been born, lived and would have died had history not played such a cruel trick.A travesty of the political struggle in the outside world occurs when a Muslim madman from Chiniot declares himself to be the Qaid e Azam only to have a Sikh madman promptly turn into Master Tara Singh and challenge him. Both, writes the narrator, are removed to solitary cells as bloodshed seemed imminent. If only it were possible to have done the same in the real world, a lot of bloodshed could have been avoided which resulted from real life political confrontation. This seems to be the implied observation.

Manto next gives us some information from Bishan Singh's past and informs us how he came to be there in the mental asylum. This ferocious looking though mild mannered and harmless Sikh had been a wealthy landlord in Toba Tek Singh, a small town in Pakistan about hundred fifty kilometers South-West of Lahore. We are told that his wits had tripped suddenly and his family had brought him to the asylum, all tied up in chains and had him locked up in the madhouse. Now he listens attentively whenever there is a discussion about the formation of Hindustan and Pakistan and about 'their imminent transfer from one to the other.' When asked for his opinion he replies in the same meaningless gibberish but gradually 'the green lentils of the lantern' get replaced at first by 'the green lentils of the government of Pakistan and subsequently by 'of the government of Toba Tek Singh.' It is at that moment that the other madmen start asking him where this Toba Tek Singh was. How could one be certain where it was now for such were the times that one moment Sialkot was in Pakistan and

the next instant it was in Hindustan? How could anyone tell where a place was when the next instant it could be transferred like a plastic block. The chaos and confusion evident in the actions of these madmen is merely a reflection of what was actually happening in the larger world outside.

The omniscient narrator then proceeds to give us a short glimpse into the past telling us about the only times when Bishan Singh would almost as if wake up from his general trance to prepare for his 'visitors' i.e. his family members and friends who would come once a month to inquire about his well being, bringing him sweets and fruits from home. This was the only time when this 'frightful looking' Sikh would clean and scrub himself, oil and comb his hair nicely and would wait for his visitors all dressed up. If at any time of the year he was asked what day it was he would have been unable to tell. But 'he always knew unprompted and exactly when it was time for his family to come and visit.' With the Partition of the country, however, their visits had come to an end and the narrator tells us that 'now it was as if the voice of his heart which had earlier signaled their visits to him had fallen silent.' From the general, the focus has now shifted to the particular and individual. Manto is now going to work towards highlighting the trauma of dislocation and exile through the anguish of this one man and he moves towards it step by step. He begins by first creating a basic desire to know which side of the dividing line one's place of origin now existed. So the need to know where Toba Tek Singh was intensifies in the heart and mind of the mad Bishan Singh. He now waits for his visitors especially because he is certain that they would be able to tell him where Toba Tek Singh was for he was sure they themselves hailed from that place.

Gradually this need to know drives Bishan Singh to a madman in the madhouse who calls himself 'Khuda' or 'God.' Bishan Singh's question only makes the 'Khuda' laugh with a loud guffaw and say that Toba Tek Singh is neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan, 'for we haven't passed our orders yet! From the general, the focus has now shifted to the particular and individual. Manto is now going to work towards highlighting the trauma of dislocation and exile through the anguish of this one man and he moves towards it step by step. When Bishan Singh is not answered by this 'khuda' about where Toba Tek Singh was he immediately launches into his gibberish which interestingly includes few new words in it. This time he says 'Opar di rumble tumble di annexe of the thoughtless of the green lentils of Wahe Guruji da khalsa and Wahe Guruji di Fateh and God Bless him who says Sat Sri Akal!' The narrator tells us that what he probably meant to say was that 'this God was the God of the Musalmans and would surely have

heeded him had he been the God of the Sikhs instead.' The significance of this apparent nonsense lies in the fact that even in the madman's perception the comprehension of new margins is filtering in. The God who refuses to answer must be from the rival camp of the Musalmans according to Bishan Singh. In the paragraph that follows, about a Musalman friend of Bishan Smgh, who now comes to meet him and bring him favourable news of his family having safely, crossed the border. This man is Fazaldin, who also lives in Toba Tek Singh and had been Bishan Singh's friend for years. He now tells the latter how he had done whatever he could to help his family to escape. All had crossed over but the slight hesitation before taking the name of Roop Kaur, Bishan Singh's daughter, speaks volumes for what the girl might have endured. It is in suggestive strokes like these that Manto avoids definitiveness and limitation and also the perverse indulgence in violence so evident in writings about the Partition. This device opens the floodgates as it were for the readers to imagine the horrors that the innocent girl might have faced. When Fazaldin haltingly adds '... she too... is very well' the words ring hollow for they are immediately followed by the information that 'she too had gone with them.' Speaking of her in past tense can only mean one thing that the girl is probably lost to her family now either through abduction or death or both combined.

What we see emerging from this short exchange is different perceptions about the same place. For Fazaldin, Toba Tek Singh is right where it always was because being a Muslim he will not be thrown out of his home. He will continue to live in Toba Tek Singh where he always has. Thus the question whether it is in Pakistan or Hindustan has probably not occurred to him. The situation however, changes drastically for the person who will be driven out of his home on the basis of his different faith, different religion. Therefore it is crucial for Bishan Singh to know which side of the dividing line is Toba Tek Singh now, for if it is in Pakistan then he will lose his home for ever, to be thrown into the oblivion of uncertain and unknownenviron. Fazaldin is incapable to answer his friend and calls upon him the latter's wrath who leaves muttering, 'Opar di rumble-tumble di annexe of the thoughtless of the green lentils of Pakistan and Hindustan and shame on the lot of you.' Bishan Singh's apparent nonsense seems to be getting increasingly politically conscious. Not only have the two difficult boundaries of Hindustan and Pakistan interjected into his perception but he is holding both equally accountable for the fate of people like him. Thus his angry mutterings about 'shame on the lot of you' are almost analogous to an authorial intervention where Manto seems to be speaking through this crazy character that is much wiser than the sane.

The last section of the story is a logical evolution of the plot. Having tailored us with the situation Manto is now going to work towards a climax and then a decision. In the preceding sections Manto has been able to bring out the passion of feelings that a man can have towards the place where he belongs and comes from. Even though Bishan Singh has been locked up in the asylum for the past fifteen years, yet it is crucial for him to know where TobaTek Singh lies now; here or there, in Pakistan or Hindustan and he asks the same question to the concerned official when the Hindu and Sikh madmen are taken to Wagah, the border between the two countries for an exchange with those Muslim madmen who wait on the other side to be transferred to Pakistan. This time, however, Bishan Singh gets a definite answer and the official laughs and says that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan. The description that follows is almost heart rending even though the narrative tone remains dispassionate and detached. Like aensnared animal Bishan Singh refuses to go to the other side and runs back to where his friends were. When the Pakistani policeman catches hold of him and tries to lead him back to the other side he starts yelling at the top of his voice, 'Opar di rumble-tumble di annexe of the thoughtless of the green lentils of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan.' As Alok Bhalla rightly observes: 'in this last incantation are encoded all the slogans which were used to beguile and befool a people into believing that they had religious identities which were also national identities.' (186). The two however are divided here because though Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan yet Bishan Singh cannot be a Pakistani since he is a Sikh, notwithstanding the fact that all his life he has lived in Toba Tek Singh. This is the very crucial question being implicitly asked in the apparent gibberish of the mad Bishan Singh.

Bishan Singh refuses to be coaxed into believing that Toba Tek Singh will be moved where he wants it to be moved. He runs and stands steadfastly at a spot in the middle of the two countries refusing to be stirred. The narrator observes that since he was a harmless enough fellow, the officials let him remain where he was and carry on with the rest of the measures. It is just before daybreak that everyone hears a piercing cry coming out of Bishan Singh. The man, who had stood on his legs day and night for all of fifteen years spent in the asylum, now lies face down on the ground. On one side of him lay Hindustan and on the other lay Pakistan. 'In the middle on a strip of no man's land lay Toba Tek Singh.'

South Asia has been particularly prone to mass displacement and relocations, owing to its varied geographical settings as well as socio-political factors. The partition exodus of India, has left a deep void in the human psyche. In his death Bishan Singh succeeds in avoiding the exile that stares

him in the face. In his death too he is able to determine where Toba Tek Singh lay for him. The individual and the place unite into one.

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