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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Borders, Boundaries and Bedlam Define History in Saadat Hasan Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract

The paper explores the madness created by borders and the traumatic, bloody event of the Indo-Pakistan partition, in the discourse of the Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto's iconic and widely translated short story "Toba Tek Singh". Set in a mental asylum at Lahore, a couple of years after Partition, the story begins when the Governments of India and Pakistan decide to exchange, on the basis of religion, the lunatics lodged in the asylums of their respective countries. The situation becomes chaotic for the inmates: Hindu and Sikh lunatics are to be sent to India and Muslims to Pakistan. Geography has been changed and the question asked by the lunatics "How can they be in India a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?" articulates the absurdity of the political strategists of the time. The irony is clear: Who, then, are the actual lunatics? Among the inmates is Bishen Singh, whom everyone calls Toba Tek Singh, after the name of his native village. His bewildered, plaintive cry "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" resounds like a tragic refrain. To him, nothing matters, except that he doesn't want to leave the country where his village is located. The blow falls: Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan and he, a Sikh, must cross the border and move on to India. On the cold morning of the exchange of lunatics on the border, Bishan Singh refuses to move till with a loud, piercing scream, he falls down dead on no man's land that lies between the two countries, thus resolving with his death the dilemma that he could not endure in life. The paper, hence, articulates/debates/emphasizes the issue of sanity vs. insanity in a world that claims to be politically correct, even while everything in it goes absurdly and ruthlessly wrong.

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INTRODUCTION

Border studies as a subgenre in literature has proved to be a fascinating terrain, exposing the pain, conflict, and the terrible aftermath of human lives torn asunder by the fateful making of territories. As history has shown, borders can remain volatile and a constant source of tension, with no permanent resolution. A case in point is the Indo-Pak partition, the wounds of which are still far from being healed, for both the countries.

One striking fact stands out: it is not a mere boundary that divides India and Pakistan, it is their radically opposed ideology. India believes in a secular state where all religions are equal whereas the very origin of Pakistan is founded on the idea of a separate nation on the basis of religion. Therefore, despite the nations sharing linguistic, geographic, cultural and economic links, the relationship between India and Pakistan has always been fraught with hostility and tension and after independence, three major wars have been fought.

The holocaust of partition that tore the subcontinent into two parts, also haunted the lives and narratives of writers who were caught in the inhuman dilemma of that terrible moment of history. So much has been written on this subject that a whole genre of what is now known as 'Partition Studies' has become an integral part of classroom texts. Yet, in this entire body of literary work, Saadat Hasan Manto, the rebel, that 'wild child of Urdu' (as he is fondly known in the literary world), characterized by his moral aloofness, daring to lay bare the socio-political hypocrisy and break all taboos, remains one of a kind. And so it is that among all the stories of Partition that have been written by Indian as well as Pakistani writers "Toba Tek Singh" is unforgettable, and arguably, the most famous in its portrayal of the chaos resulting from the borders created to divide India and Pakistan. Chronicling partition and its aftermath of violence, despair and displacement, this story also proves how a writer like Manto can bring history alive in a way no historian can.

And yet, Manto's note of dread and despair marks the Indo-Pak border even today, evident in the aggressive military skirmishes and standoffs that continue between the two sides. The madness of it all remains unresolved; while the people of the two countries feel bonded by a common culture, with artists, sportsmen and traders visiting the other side of the border, yet the political tension remains unabated, due to which the Prime Ministers of the two nations still found it difficult to exchange pleasantries in the SAARC summit of 2014.

INDO - PAK PARTITION: THE HUMAN COST OF INDEPENDENCE

When the Independence Act 1947 of the Parliament of the United Kingdom stipulated that there would be an end in British rule in India on 15th August 1947, it also carried with it the declaration of the partition of the Indian subcontinent along sectarian lines into two new sovereign dominions: India and Pakistan. To the British Government, it was clear that the country was on the brink of a civil war. The northern sections of India, dominated by Muslims, now became the nation 'Pakistan' whereas the rest of the country, with a Hindu majority, became the Republic of India.

CROSSING OVER INTO CHAOS

In February 1947, it was announced by the British government that India would gain independence by June 1948. The then Viceroy of India, Lord Mountbatten, tried to facilitate an understanding between the Hindu and Muslim leadership but to no avail. Hence, partition seemed inevitable and so Mountbatten agreed to the formation of two separate states, changing the date of independence to August 15, 1947.

Border lines had to be drawn, and boundaries were to be fixed. This was the biggest challenge faced by the British government. Though a crude border had already been drawn by the former Viceroy of India, yet it was necessary to decide exactly which territories were to be allotted to each country. In order to accomplish this, the British formally appointed Sir Cyril Radcliffe to chair two Boundary Commissions - one for Bengal and the other for Punjab. Each commission had two representatives from the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, with the final decision being that of Radcliffe. It was a difficult border to draw, and the dividing line, named as Radcliffe Line, passed right through village and homelands, especially in Punjab, which was cut into two, the division being a neat one between Lahore and Amritsar. The forced human migration that followed was one of the biggest tragedies in history. As it turned out, on "the sub-continent as a whole, some 14 million people left their homes and set out by every means possible — by air, train, and road, in cars and lorries, in buses and bullock carts, but most of all on foot -- to seek refuge with their own kind." Many of them were slaughtered by an opposing side, some starved or died of exhaustion, while others were afflicted with "cholera, dysentery, and all those other diseases that afflict undernourished refugees everywhere". [Read & Fisher, p.499] Estimates of the number of people who died range between 200,000 (official British estimate at the time) and two million, with the consensus being around one million dead. "Ten million of them were in the central Punjab. In an area measuring about 200 miles (320 km) by 150 miles (240 km), roughly the size of Scotland, with some 17,000 towns and villages, five million Muslims were trekking from east to west, and five million Hindus and Sikhs trekking in the opposite direction. Many of them never made it to their destinations." [Read & Fisher, p.497]

MANTO'S STORY "TOBA TEK SINGH"

In fact, if ever there was a time that history went mad, it was during the Partition of 1947. At Wagah border, stands a memorial which reads, "Dedicated to all those who died in the madness of Partition." In Manto's story, the discourse

of madness emerges at different levels of signification, making it a powerful satire not only of Partition but also of the political decision-making that brought it into being. Alok Bhalla says that "there is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the Partition and the horror it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment" It is this sense of bewilderment, the tormenting feeling of being trapped in an inhuman dilemma, which lies at the heart of the story "Toba Tek Singh". As Khalid Hasan says, "What he (Manto) finds incomprehensible is why they (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs) turned on each other with such savagery at a time which should have been their greatest moment of joy: independence from alien rule". And that is why, in his story "Toba Tek Singh", Manto raises questions without offering any judgment of his own, which is again so typical of his perspective of life.

Set in a mental asylum at Lahore, the story begins a couple of years after Partition when the Governments of India and Pakistan decide to divide, on the basis of religion, the lunatics lodged in the asylums of their respective countries. The irony underlying the satire is poignant: Are such 'absurd' decisions made by 'sane' political strategists? When the inmates of the asylum become aware that the Hindu and Sikh lunatics are to be sent to India and the Muslim lunatics in India are to be transferred to Pakistan, they raise a question "How can they be in India a short while ago and now suddenly in Pakistan?" Geography has changed, suddenly and arbitrarily, and the situation turns chaotic for the inmates. Manto doesn't moralize, yet his matter-of-fact, cold-blooded narration of the reaction of the inmates at the mental asylum turns into a most scathing indictment of the socio-political climate that led to the holocaust. Referring to the decision to exchange the lunatics of the two countries, the text is unforgiving in its irony:

Whether or not this was a sane decision we will never know. But people in knowledgeable circles say that there were many conferences at the highest level between bureaucrats of the two countries before the final agreement was signed and a date fixed for the exchange.

No one in the asylum has any clear idea about what is happening, and their panic reinforces the madness of it all. When a Sikh lunatic asks another, "*Sardarji*, why are we being sent to India? We cannot speak their language.- The *Sardarji* retorts, "I know the lingo of the Hindustanis. Hindustanis are full of *shaitani* (mischief), they strut about like Bantam cocks".(110) One can almost see Manto smirk as he exposes the ridiculous jingoism masquerading as patriotism. Another lunatic, a Muslim, yells the slogan "*Pakistan Zindabad* (Long Live Pakistan)" so forcefully that he knocks himself down senseless. The irony grows as the text brings forth the discourse of bewilderment:

No one knew where this Pakistan was or how far it extended. This was the chief reason why inmates who were not totally insane were in a worse dilemma than those utterly mad—they did not know whether they were in India or Pakistan. If they were in India, where exactly was Pakistan? (Manto,p.111)

Sick and tired of this talk of Pakistan and India, a poor Muslim inmate gets "madder" than before and climbs up a tree, refusing to come down, saying, "I do not wish to live either in India or Pakistan; I want to stay where I am, on top of this tree."(Manto,p.111)

Political leaders of the time, whom the rebel Manto held in great scorn, had earned his ire and so the text refers to a fat Muslim named Mohammad Ali, who had been a leader of the Muslim league in Chiniot. One fine day, he declares himself to be Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Muslim League leader who sought a separate land called 'Pakistan' for Muslims. Another inmate, a Sikh, proclaims himself to be Master Tara Singh, a Sikh leader of the time. When the two begin to abuse each other, they are declared 'dangerous' and put in separate cages. Obviously, Manto has a dig at the leaders and strategists of the time who were responsible for dividing the country. The central protagonist of the story, Bishen Singh, popularly known as 'Toba Tek Singh' (so called after the name of his village) that he loves dearly, is introduced at this point in the text. Bishen Singh stands out as a solitary figure in the asylum:

The Sikh never slept, either at night or in the day. The warders said that they had not known him to blink his eye in fifteen years. (Manto,p.113)

He never lies down and very rarely, leans against a wall to rest. Bishen Singh's gibberish is ironic: "*0 pardi, good di, anekas di, bedhyana di, moong di dal of di lantern*" which he, significantly, changes to "*moong di dal of the*

Pakistan Government" and later to "*of the Toba Tek Singh Government*". The change of words highlights Bishen Singh's sense of bewilderment, and his plaintive cry "Where is Toba Tek Singh?", resounds like a tragic refrain in the entire history of Partition. For Bishen Singh, there is only thing that matters: he will live only in the country where his native village is located. Therefore, with a concerted effort, he sets out to get this extremely important information. At first, he asks one of the lunatics who calls himself 'God', whether Toba Tek Singh is in India or Pakistan. 'God' doesn't answer because, apparently, he is too busy! As the times are troubled, Bishen Singh's family doesn't come for the regular meetings with him. Instead, his old Muslim friend Fazal Din comes and informs him that his family has safely crossed over to India. But Bishen Singh's mind is elsewhere; he asks him the question that is haunting him all the time "Where is Toba Tek Singh?", and when his friend gets confused and replies "In India. No, in Pakistan"(Manto, p.116), Bishen Singh walks away, venting his fury in his usual gibberish, but with a surprise twist:

*O pardi. good good di, anekas di, bedhyani di, moong di dal of the Pakistan
and Hindustan of dur phithey moonh (Pakistan and India may go to hell!) (*
Manto,p.116)

The scene of the cold morning when the exchange of lunatics is to take place, is no less ironic. Taken in buses that are driven to the border, the lunatics become almost uncontrollable because they can't understand why they are being uprooted. All are in a state of panic, and start abusing, as well as tearing off their clothes, crying or roaring with laughter. In this entire bedlam, all kinds of slogans are raised with equal fervour, "Long Live Pakistan" or "Death to Pakistan". At last, when Bishen Singh's turn comes to be handed over to the Indian authorities, he asks the officer the same haunting question that looms large over his very sense of being "Where is Toba Tek Singh? In India or in Pakistan?" The officer laughs loudly and says "Of course , in Pakistan" (Manto,p.117). On this final confirmation of his worst doubts, Bishen Singh goes running back to Pakistan. Pakistani soldiers try to push him back towards India but to no avail. "Toba Tek Singh is on this side"(Manto,p.117), he cries and starts yelling out the old gibberish "*O pardi, good good di, anekas di, bedhyani di, moong di dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan*"(Manto,p.117) signifying the complete association in his mind of the native village with Pakistan.

Bishen Singh refuses to budge, despite all kinds of persuasion and coercion on the part of the officers present on duty:

Bishen Singh planted himself on the dividing line and dug his swollen feet
into the ground with such firmness that no one could move him.
(Manto,p.117)

Finally, the officers decide to ignore him for the time being because he is 'soft' in the head while they are 'responsible' officers of the law, who have been given a task to perform, that is, of completing the exchange of lunatics. Bishen Singh, however, resolves the dilemma on his own, when his weird cry rends the sky and as people reach him, they see

the man who had spent all the nights and days of the last fifteen years
standing on his feet, now sprawled on the ground, face down. The barbed
wire fence on one side marked the territory of India, another fence marked
the territory of Pakistan. In the no man's land between the two barbed-wire
fences lay the body of Bishen Singh of village Toba Tek Singh (

Manto,p.117)

And thus it is that an insane man, through his own death, ends the dilemma that he could not endure in life; the 'mad' Bishen Singh does make the final choice in a world governed by decisions taken by 'sane' people.

Significantly, Manto himself had gone through this pain of homelessness and when he summed up his feelings about Bombay and his trauma at leaving for Pakistan because of the Partition, he said "I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was my homeland — India or Pakistan?"(as cited in Hasan,2007,xi). Indeed, this was one crossing over that did not come easy at all and therefore, in the final year of his life, seven years after Partition, Manto wrote "Toba Tek Singh" and forever rests his case. Manto is relentless, so brutal that he is shocking. He was a man who had seen the complete chaos of a devastated moral order; he could neither forget nor forgive. And so his stories are ruthless, forcing us to face the ignominy of inhuman rage that ravaged human lives on both sides of the border, in a time when no moral or political reason was available.

Yet, is the chaos of partition really over? Perhaps it never will be. Indo-Pak border continue to be volatile: in addition to a ruthless, violent partition, the two nations have been through the wars of 1965, 1971(the Bangladesh liberation) and the Kargil war of 1999. And let us remember that two out of these three wars (1965, 1999) have been over the Kashmir issue, which remains unresolved even today. Despite the commitment of the two countries to realize an agenda of peace, their efforts have been marred by periodic incidents of terrible violence such as the bombing in 2007 of the *Samjhauta Express* (the name means “compromise”), an international train started in 1976 from New Delhi that crosses the border to reach Lahore, and especially the India Parliament attack in 2001 and the terror attacks on Mumbai in 2008. A special Delhi-Lahore bus, known as *Sade-e- Sarhad* (Call of the Frontier) was launched in 1999 to foster a friendly relationship and facilitate members of the families, divided during Partition, to visit their relatives across the border. On its inaugural run in 1999, the bus had carried the then Indian Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vazpayee to be accorded a warm welcome by his Pakistani counterpart Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The bus service did not stop even after the Kargil war broke out in the latter part of 1999. However, the attack on Indian Parliament in 2001 led to the suspension of this service because of extreme political tension on both sides of the border. Notwithstanding the fact that the path is more rough than smooth, attempts did continue to escalate the peace process and since 2011, some progress has been made in areas of trade, transportation and liberalization of visa regulations. Significantly, programmes of art, culture and sports have always tried to nurture a better sense of understanding between two nations that actually share almost seventy years of enmity. There is a realization on both sides that mutual trade can boost the economy and therefore, peace is better than war. In as recently as the oath-taking ceremony of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, the Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was specially invited and welcomed as a guest. However, the fierce exchanges of fire between the armed force of the two countries deployed on the borders soon after this event, proved once again that resolution is far out of sight. And while the world watches this hostility between two nations that were once one, Saadat Hasan Monto continues to give us a painful but honest perspective of what the politics of borders can do to human lives and civilization.

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