

TOBA TEK SINGH: AN EVALUATION

Zeba Mehdi

zeba.mehdi@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper proposes to evaluate Saadat Hasan Manto's short story 'Toba Tek Singh' on the basis of its comparison between lunatics living in asylums and the so called sane people roaming outside. The period immediately following the partition was very violent in nature. The exchange of the population that took place after the partition led to mass killings and mass displacement. People were forced to leave their motherland and led to a new nation created by a few sane leaders. The insane people living in the asylums were also to be transported on the basis of their religion. The lunatics, however, out rightly rejects the idea of the population exchange and seem saner than even the sane population outside which was killing each other on the basis of religion. Through the characters in the asylum, Manto satirizes the whole idea of dividing a nation into two on religious basis. The story also presents an insight into the heart and psyche of the lunatics; their true love for their motherland, and their clear rejection of the shadow lines created by sane leaders that separate them from their motherland.

Partition of British India was brought about in 1947 on the basis of religious demographics. The result was an enormous displacement along with violent clashes that took lives of hundreds of people on either side of the dividing line. The violent nature of the partition created a very suspicious and hostile atmosphere between India and Pakistan and the same haunts both the countries until now. This partition became the theme of a number of books written on India. The partition writers basically deal with the incredible suffering of the people caused in some areas through exchange of population. The writers bring into light the human tragedy endured by people on both the sides of the newly created borders. Most of the partition writers share themes of dislocation, horrors of adjustment in a new nation, and bewilderment. Manto's stories present to the readers that in madness had become the guiding metaphor in the period immediately following the partition. And this utter madness is clearly seen and very effectively used in "Toba Tek Singh."

Toba Tek Singh is one of the stories that clearly reveal a terrible awakening of barbarism in society. The sense of awe and wonder prevails all around. It is a short story, originally written in Urdu, by Saadat Hasan Manto, a Kashmiri who moved to Karachi in 1948. His works have been translated into many languages. His art is universal in nature. His themes, characters, and their sufferings reflect that side of the society which is extremely

dangerous. If literature is a mirror to society, Manto deliberately unfolds the brutality during partition. The nicely woven story, Toba Tek Singh, revolves around the effects of partition on a particular portion of the population; the population that lives in asylums and which is considered insane. Manto, through this story, puts forth a very intriguing reality. The insane population which is considered lunatic and incapable of thinking, actually seems saner than most of the so called sane population. The lunatics in the asylum live more harmoniously than even their sane counterparts. These lunatics out rightly reject the idea of leaving their motherland. They do not acknowledge the shadow line created between them and their homeland by a few sane and responsible people.

The story begins with the decision made by both the governments of India and Pakistan in 1950 to exchange the inmates of lunatic asylums, who were living there like prisoners. Saadat Hasan Manto, in the story, talks of an asylum in Lahore in Pakistan. The decision shocks the inmates and they are unable to comprehend the whole situation.

The protagonist of the story is Bishan Singh, a Sikh, who lives in Lahore until partition. He had gone mad fifteen years earlier and was visited by his family once in a month, but when the riots broke out they stopped coming to meet him. He is called Toba Tek Singh by the other inmates at the name of his village. When Toba Tek Singh comes to know about the inmate exchange programme to be carried out he gives a very negative response to it and shrugs it with a sheer disbelief. A bald man with swollen legs as he is always seen standing spouts gibberish and refuses to sleep. He is often heard uttering codswallop:

“Upper the gur gur the annex the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain”

“Upper the gur gur the annex the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the Government of Pakistan”.

His family members have stopped visiting him. He repeatedly asks his inmates as to where his village has gone after the partition; in India or Pakistan. One day an old Muslim man, who used to be his friend, visits him but Bishan Singh is not able to recognize his old friend. Singh is informed by the visitor that his family has safely migrated to India. But it does not seem to interest or satisfy Singh, he is concerned only about Toba Tek Singh, his village.

“Where is Toba Tek Singh?” asks Singh in bewilderment.

The reply adds to the confusion,

“In India...no, in Pakistan.”

The whole atmosphere of the asylum is mystified. Nobody, may he be Hindu or Muslim, is able to understand the need of the partition. They shudder at the very thought of their exile from the motherland forever. Their anti-division agreement seems not to agree to the nuances of the situation.

One Muslim lunatic, who has been reading the newspaper daily for the last 12 years, is once asked by his friend,

“Maulvi Sahib! What is Pakistan?”

He replies,

“It is a place in India known for making cut-throat razors.”

The discussion that ensues in the asylum very categorically states the worthlessness of creating two nations out of one. The lunatics have a very negative impression of the countries created by so called sane men. The other land holds no worth for them. They have been living in the asylum in harmony irrespective of their religion. The decision of the population exchange has brought a tumult in their lives. Unlike the sane people outside, who are rushing out of the 'enemy' country, these insane people would love to stay in their own motherland. Each and every character in the asylum declares emphatically that it is his land and no government can snatch it from him. The characters mock at the absurd decision of the sane politicians to divide the population on the basis of religion.

The exchange of the inmates takes place on a chilling winter evening. Hindu and Sikh lunatics are taken in a bus to the border to be transported to the Indian side. At the border, Bishan Singh gets down from the bus and asks an official about his village. The official tells him that it is still in Pakistan and that Bishan Singh has to leave his village 'Toba Tek Singh' forever. The information leaves Singh disheartened and he vainly tries to run back to his place. Manto here writes,

"Hearing that Bishan Singh turned, and ran back to join his companions. The Pakistani guards caught hold of him and tried to push him across the line of India."

Bishan Singh's act of trying to go back to his people and his homeland highlights the necessity of being linked with one's land and people. The concept of 'watan' played a vital role during the trying time of partition. The unity in the asylum stands against the demarcation of the 'shadow lines'. These lines are arbitrary in nature, drawn in favour of the leaders, and politicians. A common man has never gained anything from such divisions. Common people have always been brutalized emotionally and physically by such lines of division.

Bishan Singh is not at all ready to cross over to India because his homeland is in Pakistan. He does not recognize the shadow line that divides him and his village. He keeps standing at a place between India and Pakistan as a harmless man that he is. The exchange continues. It is quite dark by this time but Bishan Singh refuses to budge. Just a little before dawn, he screams and collapses to the ground. Bishan Singh's death strongly reprobates the division.

The story ends with the death of Toba Tek Singh whose body is lying in a no man's land. Singh dies neither in India nor in Pakistan for he never accepted these two countries. He belonged only to his homeland. The message that ricochets from all sides is that he is not ready to recognize the lines drawn by a few sane leaders. The majority of the people were not even allowed to put forth their views on such an important decision about their lives. A few people sat, discussed among themselves and forced the exodus leading to wide spread violence intensifying animosity between the people of two religions.

The subsequent developments reveal hidden animal instinct in human beings as well and that is 'the survival of the fittest'. The exodus and violence catapulted by the partition resulted in mass massacre, loot and establishing supremacy. People who were already depressed at having to leave their homeland were further subjected to tortures and killings. Millions of people were displaced and thousands lost their lives making it very relevant to

question the decision of partition itself. The insane population in the asylum including Bishan Singh seem to be saner than the sane population outside which was busy in killing each other in the name of religion.

Saadat Hasan Manto's style of writing is very realistic. He writes in the pseudo-nostalgic line and tries to live the harmonious cross-border relations. Through the lunatics' refusal to leave the country, the writer stresses the existence of humanity and brotherhood. The spreading thirst for each other's blood denounces the harmonious relationship once they have had. The lunatics' trauma vividly supports regionalism. Their birth place is more important than their religion. The fact symbolizes the worthless segregation of the masses on the basis of religion. First comes humanity, then religion, not vice-versa.

It seems Manto has had an urge for normalization of the situation. He has got the basic instinct of dealing with the neglected part of society. His protagonists are generally prostitutes, mentally insane, criminals, poor people and beggars. He proves his immense love for humanity by dealing with the down-trodden people. He analyzes contemporary crisis very sharply. He portrays the terrible crime and bloody partition in an immortal way. This satirical story sometimes takes a humorous turn. The funny statements of the asylum lunatics fill the atmosphere with positive vibes. But it just serves as innuendos because the reality is very harsh.

The absurd and arbitrary division of the two countries left the inmates in utter confusion. Toba Tek Singh is a very bitter reality put forth in a very ironic way. It crystallizes the entire turning point in the life of Bishan Singh in particular and the entire society in general. Bishan Singh's refusal of going to India solidifies and concretizes the concept of one's homeland, which has a very emotional attachment and intense longing for roots. Manto projects how a person develops a strong relationship with the place he has been born in and brought up in. It is an unconscious human psyche, deeply engrained in one's mind. The dislocation and exile from the motherland alter the lives of people. The uprooted ones bear the pain the whole life.

The story mirrors the anxieties of the lunatics and those of the sane people through the inmates. The bloodshed and exodus in large number is nothing other than prevailing madness. The mental asylum inmates were sane as compared to the so-called sane killing each other in the name of religious identities. It was unbelievable how the partition decision distorted the Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, which suddenly turned into a rage of fanaticism and blind faith against each-other.

The confusion in the minds of the inmates highlights their fear of adjusting in another country. A Sikh inmate says:

"Sardarji, we cannot speak their language".

This statement clarifies that their linguistic identity was being uprooted and a new identity was about to be forced upon them.

A mad man climbs a tree and firmly states:

"I do not want to live in Hindustan nor Pakistan,

I am going to make my home right here on this tree".

This action of the inmate represents the contemporary man's desire for freedom and neutrality regarding supporting any particular ideology. Most of the people have not supported the division but follow the majority. The fear inside wins over the brutality spread outside.

Bishan Singh's death in the end symbolizes common man's protest and rebellion against the division of borders, mankind, and brotherhood. The partition was the result of sheer madness and inequality. The Bishan Singh's non sensible talks symbolize lack of communication between the leaders and the masses. The madness created by confusion was more than the prevailing madness. Madness is the metaphor for sanity. Bishan Singh's death condemns the partition. Bishan Singh, a Sikh lunatic, is a part of the marginalized society. The marginalized segment of the society is always neglected. In the story, this section emerges with a new line of thought. The lunatic section of Lahore asylum mocks at the exchange of the population of the countries. The question raised by Bishan Singh, "Where is Toba Tek Singh" is an expression of witticism, which provides humour to the whole action of population exchange on the religious grounds. Is it really possible to segregate the masses on the basis of their religion? Have we succeeded in doing that?

Manto has been a voice to all working people below poverty line. He even refused to accept partition and demands a secular and humanist society. His works have been banned due to the subject matter and disreputable characters. The violence shown in his works disturbs the readers.

The partition in 1947 has demarcated the people on the basis of religion and still this demarcation exists, though not with a blind fervour, yet with incomprehensible dimensions. The bloody partition has resulted in prostitution, destitute childhood, and instability. Manto eternalizes the pain of partition only as a human being. In this process, he was shattered many a times. Being a meliorist, he always tries to amend the society. As a realist, he attacks the darker side of the society where marginalized segment is always looked down upon. Manto undoubtedly follows the path of a philanthropist.

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