

One Partition many Confusions: Reading Manto's Masterpiece *Toba Tek Singh*

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Abstract

With the departure of the British, Partition wreaked havoc on the Indian subcontinent dividing its land and people on the parameters of religion. Millions lost their lives and millions were displaced during the chaotic time of Partition. To escape the swords of communal violence people across religions and borders resorted to both spontaneous and forced migration. People were lost in the confusions of their past and present identities. Manto's story Toba Tek Singh unfurls such an episode of pain and suffering felt by one of the marginalised sections of the societies – the lunatics. The proposed exchange of the lunatics after two or three years of the Partition created confusion among the inmates in Lahore Mental Hospital regarding the newly formed country Pakistan. On the other hand, one of the lunatics, Bishen Singh, is confused about the location of his native land Toba Tek Singh – whether it is in India or Pakistan. The paper intends to explore the world of confusion in the Lahore asylum and the resistance of Bishen not to accept the confusion of the borders.

Keywords: Partition, Migration, Separation, Asylum, Lunatics, Confusion, Motherland, Identity

After a long tussle of politics among the three prominent players – Indian National Congress, Indian Muslim League, and British Government – India was finally partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947. More or less all the three major players of the game of Partition were responsible for the reprehensible act of dividing the subcontinent based on religion and hurling millions of innocent people into the whirlpool of communal hatred, violence, and dislocation. People across borders were bogged down in innumerable appalling consequences of the Partition. The east-west movement of people started before Partition and continued after its realisation. There was no mention of exchange of population in the partition plan but people were to leave their native lands in search of a 'safer' place to escape the imminent blow of communal violence. Almost all the Hindu and Sikh families of Pakistan shifted to India and a huge number of Muslim families left India for Pakistan. Overnight they got a new national identity.

Partition not only divided the lands and people of the country but also the government assets between the two countries. Immediately after the Partition, both the governments decided to recover thousands of abducted girls and women so that they could be restored to their families. Both the countries took necessary measures to launch an exchange programme for the distressed girls and women. "In addition to the population at large, there were persons confined to custodial institutions in the two newly born countries that were left behind. Prisons and mental hospitals were two such main categories of institutions." (Kala 13) Prisoners were exchanged by 1948 but the question of the lunatics in the asylums of both the countries was raised after two or three years of the Partition. "It is as if the new countries had forgotten about them, and their fate, in a sense, ranked lower than the division of the materials assets of tables and chairs in the scheme of things. The number of patients received from Pakistan was less than half of the number expected. The rest had died during that period." (Kala 22) Sadat Hassan Manto's masterpiece *Toba Tek Singh* documents that very episode of the exchange of the lunatics. Manto tells how the news created much uproar among the inmates of Lahore Mental Hospital.

After the decision of the governments, a 'high-level conference' of the intellectuals from both the countries opined in favour of the transfer of the lunatics and a date was stipulated for the exchange. While Pakistan would hand over the Hindu and Sikh lunatics to India, India would send the Muslim lunatics who do not have families in India to Pakistan. As almost all the Hindu and Sikh families migrated to India, Hindu and Sikh lunatics had no option to remain in Pakistan. Manto remarks, "It's hard to be sure of the wisdom of the idea. (1) However, the news caused conundrums among the inmates of the Lahore asylum. Many of the lunatics are there in the asylum long before the whole debate around Pakistan and Partition came to the fore. Naturally, they are not in touch with the current political position of the subcontinent. After the Partition, they might have heard or read about it but they are not of sound mind to analyse and understand the complicated political calculation of land and people on the grounds of religion. The degeneration in the Hindu-Muslim relation of the subcontinent immediately before and after the Partition is also an unanticipated incident to them. In fact, they do not have any clear understanding of the fact that communal hatred and violence caused massive migration of people across the borders or loss of innumerable lives across religions. When a Muslim lunatic is asked what is Pakistan, he replies, "an area in India where razor blades are manufactured." (Manto 1) For the last twelve years, the lunatic reads *Zamindar*, a pro-Muslim League Urdu newspaper, which played a significant role to propagate the Pakistan Movement of the League. He is expected to have a clear idea of Pakistan but he too seems confused about the very location of Pakistan. After reading the newspaper he has at least come to know about the bloodshed caused at the time of the formation of Pakistan and ironically mentions it as a razor manufacturing hub. He says it is an area in India and here he is either confused about the location of the country or has a

satiric tone to say that Pakistan is formed within India. The razor in fact has cut the cord of communication among communities.

One Sikh lunatic asks another Sikh, “Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don’t even speak their language.” (Manot 1) Actually, the questioner is doubtful about the necessity and relevance of the exchange programme. He cannot accept that they should be sent to an alien land where people even do not speak their language. His love for his motherland and mother tongue is well perceived in his tone. It is not easy for a grown up man like him to sever all the connections with his motherland. The man is born and brought up there and imbibes innumerable memories of the land. Apart from land, language is one of the prime factors to make a person feel comfortable to live in a particular place and people always love to be with the people who speak the same mother tongue. He wants to be with the place, which is his motherland and its people who speak his mother tongue. But he is ignorant of the fact that the country had been divided on the basis of religion and Hindus and Sikhs of West Pakistan are no longer safe with their Muslim neighbours and Muslims of east feel insecure in the company of the Hindus and Sikhs. To the people who demanded a separate homeland, religious affinity was more important than land and language. The lunatic is now confused about the logic of such an absurd decision to exchange them across borders. However, the Sikh lunatic to whom the question is directed says he can speak Hindustanese, a Hindi-Urdu language of the people of North India and Pakistan. As people of Pakistan also speak the language, he has no problem to speak it in North India. One thing, which he does not like is the nature and behaviour of the people of North India as they are ‘wicked’ and always bear an arrogant attitude. Unlike the first Sikh, this man has no problem with language but with the people. It’s definitely a confusing state for him because the people with whom he will have to spend the rest of his life are not suitable but their language is.

A stable sense of identity and its relation with its social and civic surroundings is integral to mental health. Identities and affiliations of human beings are wonderfully diverse. Identity can be personal, social, cultural, gender-based, geographical, religious, linguistic, ideological and so on. While the way we think and feel undoubtedly shapes our identity, identity in turn also influences our being, thinking and feeling. Critical to one’s identity is rootedness – to a geographical location, to a family, to a social milieu. (Sarin 2)

It is not that all the inmates are lunatics as most of them are murderers. They would have been sentenced to death if their families did not keep them there in complicity with some corrupt policemen. Unlike the lunatics, they are aware of the cause and effect of Partition. “But of the real facts, even they were in the dark: the newspaper explained little to nothing and their warden was ignorant and illiterate. They remained confused even after much

discussion.” (Manto 2) They have heard the name of Jinnah and his role to make a separate Muslim homeland called Pakistan but the cloud of confusion regarding the newly formed country still shrouds them. Scanty information in the newspaper has made them ignorant of the present position of Pakistan and their ignorance invites more confusion. “Where it was, what its shape and size were – of these things they knew nothing.” (2) As they do not have clear idea about the location of the border between the two countries, they do not know whether they are now in India or Pakistan. They are not mentally ill like the lunatics but somewhere they are also lost in the confusion of their present location – whether they are in India or in Pakistan. “If, India then where was Pakistan? And if Pakistan, how was it that they had ended up here, despite never having moved and having been in India only a short while ago.” (2) Such is the confusing ambience of the asylum after the Partition. No amount of discussion among the inmates of the asylum can dispel their confusion.

When the murderers are so much confused with the position of Pakistan, the lunatics cannot be expected to have some concrete idea about Pakistan. Amid the confusion, one lunatic does something extraordinary when he climbs up a tree and delivers a speech concerning the problems of India and Pakistan. He is not eager to descend and declares from there, “I neither want to live in India nor in Pakistan. I’m happy in this tree.” (Manto 3) The man is torn apart by India and Pakistan and his morality does not permit him to be supporter of a particular country as few years ago he belonged to a country, which has now become two. He does not want to be in any of the two portions because he does not support the division of the country. Either he wants to be in one country or none of the two as the whole thing of India-Pakistan confuses him. The leaders of the time divided the country based on religion without the consents of millions of common people like the man on the tree. When he comes down from the tree after a rigorous persuasion of the guards, he starts weeping on the shoulders of his Hindu and Sikh friends. Partition divided the people of the subcontinent in the worst possible way and now the inmates of the asylum are being divided on the same formula of religion. He cannot bear the pangs of separation from his Hindu and Sikh friends because for the lunatics the asylum is itself a complete world of them and the sense of togetherness gives them an unspeakable pleasure of the head and heart. It is true that the lunatics do not have the capacity for sound judgment a normal man is expected to possess but they too have some emotions and feelings and well realise the pain when they are hurt. But the time was too cruel to spare them and their feelings. Gulzar writes in his novel *Two*: “This arrogant, conceited history strides ahead with her head in the clouds and never looks down. She does not realize how she crushes millions of people beneath her feet. The common people. She doesn't understand that one may cut a mountain in two, but people? It's hard task, Bhai to cut one people into two. They bleed.” (Gulzar 20-21)

One of the lunatics is an M.Sc. and worked as a radio engineer before coming to the asylum. He generally loves to spend his days in silent walking in the garden. One day he suddenly strips off his dress and resumes walking. The way he discards the clothes

somewhere indicates his antipathy to the garb of the so-called civilisation, which failed to resist the bloodshed and displacement in the name of religion. The barbaric incidence of communal violence shocked him in such a way that he becomes confused about the meaning and utility of a civilised world. The amount of human misery and loss of lives the world witnessed during the time of Partition undoubtedly paints one of the darkest chapters in the history of the modern world.

Muhammad Ali belong to West Punjab and was a dedicated Muslim leaguer in the past. He is in the habit of bathing fifteen to sixteen times a day but suddenly he stops it. One day he adds 'Jinnah' to his surname and declares him to be Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Seeing 'Jinnah', a Sikh roars that he is Master Tara Singh and soon a brawl starts between them. Ultimately, the authority of the asylum tags them as dangerous inmates and they are separated. It has a fine metaphor of Muslim-Sikh conflict and their separation during Partition. The influence of the leaders of the time were immense on their supporters and even after the completion of Partition, their personality cult remained active among their followers. Two lunatics are impersonating their leaders and instantly become belligerents. Though Tara Singh and Jinnah did not engage themselves in fighting, their followers did and as a result, Sikhs and Muslims became each other's enemies during the time of Partition. Both the inmates are confused between their present identities of being lunatics and the illusory identities of their leaders of being political adversaries.

A Hindu lawyer from Lahore lost his sanity after getting setback in love from a Hindu girl of Amritsar but he cannot forget her even in the asylum. When he comes to know that the country was divided and Amritsar is in India, he starts abusing the leaders of all communities who took the decision and thereby divided him from his beloved. The border divided millions and the man is ill fated to be one of them. It is true that the girl does not love him but the border created a mental block for the man who still loves the girl. In fact, he cannot accept that he is now a Pakistani and the girl is an Indian. When opportunity comes to go across the border, the man refuses as he thinks that Amritsar is not professionally viable for him. Here the man stands confused between emotion and economy. He does not want to go to Amritsar risking earnings and this makes him a man of economy. When he expresses his anger at the leaders for separating him from his beloved, he becomes a man of emotion.

Two Anglo-Indian lunatics are worried at the departure of the British because it may deprive them of the special kinds of foods they are getting in the asylum. They also doubt that the European ward of the asylum may be eliminated and if it is done, they will have to be shifted somewhere. The confusions of the minority community of the Anglo-Indians are understandable especially after the departure of the British.

Bishen Singh was a prosperous landlord and was leading a happy life in his native land Toba Tek Singh but one day he lost his mind. His relatives brought him to the asylum

and they would visit him every month until the whirlpool of Partition upset everything. He had no sense of time, day, week, month, and years but he would instinctively know when his friends and relatives would come to visit him. On the day of his meeting with his friends or relatives, he would bathe and dress well. If they asked him anything he would not talk to them or would repeat his absurd sentence – “Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di bedhayana di mung di dal.” He could not recognise even his own daughter who was regularly visiting her father and would shed tears seeing him in such a condition. However, they stopped visiting him after the panic and pandemonium of Partition and Pakistan. He is there in the asylum for the last fifteen years and during that period surprisingly the man never slept. He occasionally reclines against a wall to take some rest. Because of his standing habit, his legs have swollen up but he will not lie down for a moment. He is in the habit of often uttering his absurd words.

Now he is quite interested to listen to the discussion about India-Pakistan and the lunatic exchange but never puts forth his opinion. He is confused about the actual location of his native place Toba Tek Singh. He asks everyone whether it is in India or in Pakistan but everybody in the asylum is confused about its location.

“Whoever tried to explain would slide into confusing speculations that if Sialkot, which had once been in India, was now in Pakistan, who could say whether Lahore, which was in Pakistan, would not tomorrow be in India? Or that all of India would become Pakistan? And who could say with any conviction that one day both Pakistan and India would be wiped off the face of the earth?” (Manto 5)

The inmates of the asylum are not sure about the present location of any place because the chaotic Partition has upset every village, town, and city. “Playing British god . . . the Radcliff commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards.” (Sidhwa 140) Cyril Radcliff who had never been to India and had no practical knowledge of the complex demography of the subcontinent had only five weeks to draw the borders of India and Pakistan and thereby to decide the fate of millions of Bengalis and Punjabis. The expediency and urgency of the time demanded him to be a ‘hedge cutter’ and in the process, he could have made some mistakes in distributing the districts between India and Pakistan. This created confusion regarding the cartographical position of a certain piece of land.

Day by day with the rise in the India-Pakistan debate and discussion in the asylum, Bishen becomes impatient to know where Toba Tek Singh is and the query becomes so frequent that it changes his name from Bishen Singh to Toba Tek Singh. He now misses his friends and relatives who would bring sweets, fruits, and clothes for him. He is waiting for them because only they can tell him where Toba Tek Singh is as they too belong to the same place. But nobody comes to meet him and resolves the confusion. One of the lunatics claims to be God. When Bishen Singh asks him where is Toba Tek Singh, he says it is neither in India nor in Pakistan because he has not passed any order for that. Bishen earnestly requests him to give the order so that the confusion regarding Toba Tek Singh can be over. God says

he is busy and has to pass other orders before Toba Tek Singh. Bishen stamps him as a Muslim god and accuses him to be biased against the Sikhs. Here too Bishen Singh becomes confused about the neutrality of god. One day one of Bishen's Muslim friends Fazal Din comes to meet him and informs Bishen that all of his family persons went to India and he helped them as far as he could. He is happy that now Bishen is also going to India. Fazal brings sweets for him but Bishen shows no interest and gives it to the warden. He asks Fazal where is Toba Tek Singh – in India or in Pakistan. Fazal first says it is in India and then says it is in Pakistan. It confuses Bishen and he expresses his resentment in his absurd words.

Ultimately, the day of transfer comes and on a brumal day all the Hindu and Sikh lunatics of the asylum are brought at the Wagah border. It is really a tough job to handle the lunatics as most of them are not eager to cross the border and start making hue and cry at the border. "Most of them were not in support of the exchange because they could not understand why they were being uprooted and forced to go somewhere else." (Manto 9) Not only the lunatics but millions of people of the subcontinent were perplexed to hear the decision of Partition as they were also not eager to leave their native lands. But the situation compelled them to move towards an alien land with uncertain future in hands. Here the lunatics are resisting to cross the border as they were feeling quite comfortable in the asylum with other inmates and do not want to be separated from them. Moreover, their transfer also means a severance of ties from their motherlands. Some of the lunatics understand the meaning of their transfer and start sloganeering for and against Pakistan and soon a riot like situation is about to occur among some Sikh and Muslim lunatics. The sloganeering lunatics are perhaps those murderers who were kept in the asylum to skip the gallows. However, when Bishen Singh's turn comes and his name is being registered on the other side of the border, he asks the official of the Indian side where is Toba Tek Singh. When the official says it is in Pakistan, he jumps back to Pakistan side. Pakistani officials try to persuade him that Toba Tek Singh is in India but he will not listen to anyone. Nobody applies force to send him across the border as he is a harmless man. He firmly stands in the middle of the border for the whole night. At dawn, he yells so high that it will crack the sky. When the officials rush to the spot, they find him fallen face down. "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 10)

Bishen was quite curious to know whether his motherland was in India or in Pakistan. No one can tell him where it is and he becomes quite confused about its location. It is quite surprising that his friend Fazal Din who is not confined within the four walls of any kind of captivity fails to give Bishen right answer at the first attempt though he is expected to be a man from the same place Toba Tek Singh. Actually, it is obvious that Toba Tek Singh was in India before the formation of Pakistan but after Partition, it went to Pakistan. Fazal Din instinctively says to Bishen that it is in India because by then he seems not be accustomed to

its new Pakistani identity. On the other hand, the officials at the border deliberately confuse him. First, he is told the truth but seeing his obstinacy not to go to India leaving his motherland behind in Pakistan, they lie him that it is in India. Bishen is again confused and decides to remain in no man's land. Jennifer Yusin again remarks:

Toba Tek Singh, in other words, is at once in Pakistan and India – for it is the present cartographic reconfiguration that locates Toba Tek Singh in Pakistan and it is the past memory that suspends it in India. The geography of the village is the same as before the borders are drawn but the process of nation-building and mapmaking results in a new, unalterable conceptualization of the meaning of that geography.

When Bishen fails to resolve the confusion regarding the location of his native land Toba Tek Singh, he decides to stand in no man's land rejecting both India and Pakistan. The man is not concerned about his earlier nationality of pre-Partition time and his post-Partition 'modified' nationality. All he is concerned about is his motherland and he simply wants to go there. He does not want to be in India or in Pakistan because any kind of national identity will not satisfy him until he gets back his motherland Toba Tek Singh. The simple village man of Punjab discards the notion of a national identity and mapmaking in which the political leaders of the subcontinent took great interest. On the other hand, he is ready to accept any of the two national identities only if his motherland is there. In this sense, cartographical identify is second to his native identify. In the words of Jennifer Yusin:

And yet the borders, which were drawn to establish new homes, did not, as Bishan's confusion regarding the location of his home village conveys, necessarily make it clear where home was, where the new nation began and ended, and thus who was who under the new national banners. Instead the borders became the painful scars of trauma inscribed into the landscapes of neighboring nations whose identities became complexly and inseparably bound to each other.

His stubborn presence, piercing scream, and later death there in no man's land all register a strong negation of the division of the people and their lands.

Bishen is a representative figure of the millions of the Partition victims who were confused about the actual location of their native place – whether it was in India or Pakistan. "The inevitable result, particularly in the most contested districts in Punjab – Lahore, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur and Jullundur – and in parts of Bengal, was dire confusion about which places were in Pakistan and which places were not." (Khan 126) In Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* the subinspector says, "I am sure no one in Mano Majra even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Hindustan and Pakistan." (Singh 24) Being a migrant himself Manto well understands how much it is confusing to find

one's native land in the chaos of Partition and the story *Toba Tek Singh* is somewhere a search of the roots of the author also. Many like him and Toba Tek Singh found themselves squeezed between the old and new national identities and sought relief in the no man's land – sometimes physically and sometimes mentally.

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