

A Reassessment of “Toba Tek Singh”, A short story by Saadat Hasan Manto

Sadat Hassan Manto (1912-55) was born at Ludhiana district in Punjab of the undivided India. He lived in India till 1948 before he left for Lahore in Pakistan. He was regarded as prolific Indo-Pakistan writer. Toba Tek Singh (1955) was a short story written in *Urdu*. The story depicts the human trauma of partition was at the time about a couple of years after the partition of India, of India in a lunatic asylum and their exchange at Wagah boarder check-post.

In this short story, Manto uses a third person narrator to tell a tragic story of the ignorant inmates of a lunatic asylum in Lahore on theme of identity, separation, trauma and confusion in the exchange of them after partition. Toba Tek Singh is a name of a place located in Pakistan. Bishan Singh who was from Toba Tek Singh is the main character of the story. Everybody calls him Toba Tek Singh.

The settings of the short story is mainly inside a lunatic asylum in Lahore and also at Wagah border check-post. The description of the lunatic asylum and the process of exchange of Muslim lunatic, and Sikh and Hindu lunatics between Pakistan and India happens a couple of years after the partition of India.

A brief story that did the rounds was that the exchange of the lunatic created quite confusion leading to funny developments. Discussions were on as to whether there were Pakistanis and Hindustanis among the lunatics. When asked what Pakistan was, one Muslim lunatic who read the daily newspaper *Zamindar*, replied that it was a place in India. Likewise, a Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh why they were being deported to India where they did not know the language of the people. The other lunatic responded that he knew the language of Hindostoras and he blamed India. Another Muslim screamed ‘Pakistan *Zindabad*’.

The entire inmates were not lunatics. A few of them were murderers whose families had managed to keep them at the asylum by bribing the officials to escape the penalty. They were ignorant of the news but they felt that there was a man called Quid-E-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah who created a Muslim country called Pakistan. They knew nothing about the location of Pakistan. Hence, they were confusing India and Pakistan. One inmate climbed on a tree and wished to live on the tree. After coming down from the tree he expressed unhappiness his Sikh and Hindu friends that they were about to leave him and go to India.

A Muslim Engineer has who never mixed with anyone, gave all his cloths to one of the attendant and ran into the garden. Another Muslim who took bath fifteen times in a day declared himself as Mohammad Ali Jinnah while a Sikh also

announced that he was Master Tara Singh. A Hindu lawyer was deeply worried if Amritsar where his beloved girl lived would form a part of India. Two Anglo-Indians were also worried if there would be a separate European ward or it would be abolished.

There was also a Sikh who had been there for the last 15 years and was seen to be standing without sleep all the time. When asked about his opinion his reply was “ *Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhayana the mung the dal of the laltain*”. He desired to know whether his home place Toba Tek Singh was in India or in Pakistan, but inmates had no idea of the Toba Tek Singh because they were very confused that Sialkot which was in India was now in Pakistan. His real name of the Sikh was Bishan Singh who hailed from Toba Tek Singh where he had his family land and property. Once in a month when his visitor came to meet him and he had the good sense to take bath and put all clean clothes on such occasions. His daughter who came occasionally to meet him was always weeping to see his father. He was always enquiring about the Toba Tek Singh without any proper answer. After the partition of India no one had visited him. Bishan Singh asked same question to a lunatic who consider himself a god. He replied that Toba Tek Singh was neither in India nor Pakistan because he was not deciding it as he was busy.

A few day before the exchange, one of his friends, Fazal Din by name, came to meet Bishan Singh and informed him that his family including his daughter have gone to India and he requested to covey his *salaam* to bhai Banbir Singh, bhai Raghabir Singh and bahain Amrit Kaur. Taking a gift from Fazal Din Bishan Singh asked where Toba Tek Singh was In India or Pakistan?.The replied of Fazal Din was “in India oh no in Pakistan. Bishan Singh unable to control his emotion started murmuring as usual as “*per the gur gur the annexe the bay dhyana the mung the dal of the Pakistan and India dur fittey moun.*”

The exchange of lunatics was on a cold winter day. Some lunatics refused to get down from the trucks, some began to run all the directions, some fought each other, some swore and sang. Bishan Singh also ran back but he was caught and tried to push him in Indian border, but he firmly stood and refused. As he was a harmless man he was left alone for time being, but just before sun rise Toba Tek Singh was found lying on a piece of no man land between the borders two countries.

The story describes the changing of physical and mental behaviours of the lunatics when their exchange between India and Pakistan based on religion or caste was under process. It is the view of the writer that it difficult to say whether the proposal made any sense or not. The story is to criticize the reason of partition, and aftermath crisis and human tragedies both in the newly created India and Pakistan. The story tells the plight of the lunatic who had nothing to say on the arrangements of exchange except the emotional and physical expression.

The character of Bishan Singh, a mad Sikh represented a group of people whose trauma was never been noticed. It appears that the Manto satirically compared the madness inside the asylum and what is so called sanity outside the asylum though the writer did not describe the madness outside the asylum as turmoil, hostility and sense of uncertainty. The writer had taken the mental asylum as a small society where inmates of different religions with different types of people were living together as a symbol of mini-country.

The change of behaviour of the lunatics was of the human nature while the arrangement of exchange of lunatics was associated with political and religious ambition. An underlying idea is that even the lunatics did not agree the decision taken by the politicians and bureaucrats. Bishan Singh was not allowed to go to his home only because he was a Hindu, but he was firm not to cross the border till death even he was forced to do so. In between the extreme situations he stood so firmly that he died under no one's orders to a land which was neither in Pakistan nor in India. The mad man could take a decision which he somehow managed to perform. When even lunatics with their natural instinct felt against the partition and their exchange, and then what would be the anguish and suffering of exchange of population on the basis of religion. The feeble voice of lunatics, though reasonable and sentimental were never been heard. The story depicts the plight of such simple and ignorant people whose physical and mental conditions were neglected.

Q. A Critical Analysis of Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hasan Manto.

A 1955 publication by twentieth century colonial Indian-Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto, Toba Tek Singh is an engrossing and profound short story about the relationship between India and Pakistan, a satire on the idea of partition. Manto, known for his daring representation of distressed state of Indian partition in his stories has set the stories amid the time of partition between India and Pakistan. Originally written in Urdu language, the story deals with the inmates of the "lunatic asylum at Lahore." The characters and the setting are tools of reflective reality of the contemporary time of distress and chaos. With a tinge of autobiographical memory, Manto uses the mental asylum as a picture of miniature of the world where people of different caste and religion dwell and face the psychological trauma and imbalance. The main character of the story, Bishan Singh, is symbolic of the pain and trauma of displacement. In addition to him, the fellow inmates of the asylum are the partition refugees who suffer from mental illness but are seen to appear saner than the outer world of political chaos and governmental rift.

The first two paragraphs of the story give an introduction about the time when the story is set and the plot that follows. The two paragraphs foreground the time of exchange and the circumstances under which the “governments of India and Pakistan” came upon a pact of exchanging the lunatics of the counter religion of the respective countries, i.e., India and Pakistan. It is in the third paragraph that Manto brings into the story the dilemma of the time of exchange and the theme of mental illness. The asylum is the representative symbol of the whole continent and madness a metaphor for trauma that people and refugees went through. The forceful movement of people is evident of the “tough job” and the “pure bedlam” when the people were reluctant to migrate from their native places for the mere reason of their religion of birth. The border lines are arbitrary and artificial. The lunatics show a more humanistic aspect of the society where the governmental aids are nothing but pure politics.

While the story is a piece of fiction, it is imbued with light of the real exchange in the year of 1950 when the Hindu and Sikh patients from Pakistani asylum were moved to India and the Muslim counterparts moved to Pakistan. Thus, the Asylum of Lahore showcases the big picture in small confinement. The madness of these inmates of the asylum is more about the madness of partition violence than their personal impairment. The trauma of partition appears to be so absurd that it has a profound psychological impact on these inmates, in particular, and the sufferers of the partition, in general. The ruthlessness prevailing in the humankind is the cause of the uncertainty and loss of sense of belonging and disturbed identities. The character of a Sikh lunatic interrogating about the exchange with a fellow Sikh offers a speculative insight on the insignificance of demarcation on basis of caste and religion.

“Sardarji, why are we being deported to India? We don’t even know their language.”

The above words also throw a light on the innocence of people who are caught in the web of political world and suffer a loss of identity when try to align with the outer world of chaos. Manto shows underlying righteousness of these lunatic inmates of the asylum with the words that “Not all the inmates were insane.” The innocence of their minds and hearts deny them any influence of the outer world. “They had only a vague idea about the division of India or what Pakistan was. They were utterly ignorant of the present situation.” Another reason for their ignorance is the lack of literacy among them and the absence of their reach to media, “Newspapers hardly ever gave the true picture...” The only thing they were aware about was some “Quaid-e-Azam” who had made the state of Pakistan. But “they were all at a loss whether they were now in India or in Pakistan.” The inmates are distressed with their loss of identities and belongingness: “I don’t want to live in India and Pakistan. I’m going to make my home right here on this tree.” All the outer chaos of partition is displayed in the hubbub in the asylum

when the Muslim lunatic proclaims himself to be Jinnah and Sikh lunatic to be Tara Singh. The induced violence symbolizes the communal riots amid the times of partition. Moreover, the absence of psychiatrists in the asylum shows Manto's criticism of the partition by emphasizing the diplomatic government and bureaucratic procedures.

Manto's use of easy style and language with words like "zamindar," "bloody Indians," "Sardarji" keeps the reader involved, and the use of omniscient narrator keeps the story intact. However, the main conflict is shown with the character of Bishan Singh who utters "gibberish" words and is interrogative about his town Toba Tek Singh. While his attachment of Toba Tek Singh implies his identity and belongingness, his mutterings represent the amalgamation of varied religions, languages, and thoughts, all mixed without balanced proportion. "It was all so confusing!" However the coming of Fasal Din gives an idea of hopeful humanity. The division of Gods, separation of love, the inability of communities to take the decisions et al is all represented by Manto with his own suffering and confusion.

The action reaches the peak when Bishan Singh gets mad over the situation of his Toba Tek Singh and refuses to go to any place, but sit stiff between the two borders and claim this nameless land his place of belonging as "no power on earth could dislodge him." The last paragraph of the story evokes pity and despair to the humanity criticizing the insignificant border lines made by humans to separate the people who belong to no religion but to religion of humanity and their birth. The psychological trauma of such partitions tear the belongingness of people apart and disturb their identities which Manto was always against of and thus criticized in his works. The narrator ultimately refers to Bishan Singh as Toba Tek Singh. It is the place that belongs to him and not him who suffers for psychological belongingness. Saadat Hasan Manto thus succeeds in posing a satire on loss of psychological equilibrium of people during partition and relationship between the governments.