

Problematic of Cartography: A Critical Study of Select Stories of Manto

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Abstract:

This paper explores the humanistic tendency of Manto who does not take any particular side between India and Pakistan. For him partition is just an insane act which happens to dislocate people not only from the place they live in but also from the people they have been attached to. This paper particularly traces the disdain of Manto towards the boundaries/cartography of the nation states that seem to have been drawn on communal bases.

Key words: Boundaries, Dislocation, Humanistic tendency, Insanity of partition.

*Toba Tek Singh*¹

I've to go and meet Toba Tek Singh's Bishan at Wagah

I'm told he still stands on his swollen feet

Where Manto had left him,

He still mutters:

Opad di gud gud di moong di dal di laltain

I've to locate that mad fellow

Who used to speak up from a branch high above:

"He's god

He alone has to decide – whose village to whose side."

¹ Written by Gulzar translated from Urdu, by Anisur Rahman.
Source: *Translating Partition*, Ed. Ravikant and Tarun K. Saint.

According to Khuswant Singh Indian literature can broadly be classified in pre-partition and post-partition categories. All scholars would more or less agree to 1947 being the defining point in the history not only of India and Pakistan, but also of narratives speaking of nation and national identity. However, it does not seem proper to reduce all of Indian literature under the two broad categories, and one only does so at the risk of deeming all-third-world-literature-is-necessarily-national-allegories rhetoric fit². Another concern that shall be quickly pointed out is the slipperiness of the categories, the texts may exist in contact zones of both pre-partition and post-partition; the partition narratives contrast post-partition realities with a more tolerant, pluralistic, multicultural society of bygone days. The partition narratives thus move back and forth in pre-partition Indian society. In and out, we would be considered with manipulation and rewriting of history on both the sides of the border. As Meenakshi Mukherjee has aptly argued elsewhere narratives and nation share an intricate bond, both formulate and consolidate each other. In case of Pakistan, the narratives that were to form its national identity emanate from, and after, the concrete reality of partition unlike India, in whose context nation(al) narratives existed before the partition too. The present paper attempts at analysing some of the non-violent 'partition narratives' of Sadat Hasan Manto to highlight the resistance offered to the idea of Nationalism. These texts do not represent the pillage, bloodshed, genocide and massacres in the wake of partition rather act as a pungent satire on the divisive politics of Jinha-Nehru, which led to the partition. Manto in his writings seem deliberately to stand aloof of the complicated question of nation and national identity; it can't be examined without considering the problematic of his geographical location: though promise of good life post-partition

² Aijaz Ahmad in his essay "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" strongly criticizes Frederic Jameson's idea that all third world literatures are necessarily national allegories.

pushed him to Lahore (Pakistan) but he felt a growing despair with the conditions in Pakistan. A major character from *Jinhe Lahore ni Vekhiya au Jamiya ni*³ can be evoked as the mouthpiece of Manto, "...aapko Lahore kahin aur nahi milega, jaise mujhe Ambala nahi mila..." (You won't find Lahore there as I couldn't find my Ambala here). For Manto it was difficult to strike peace with the situation around, the torn times are reflected in many of his stories but he does not say much about the usual violence that is usually attached to the partition in common parlance. His response to the partition is articulated in stories such as *Toba Tek Singh*, *Titwal Ka Kutta* and other stories. Stephen Alter in one of his essay, "Madness and Partition: The Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto" says:

No writer has been able to convey the violent ambiguities of communal conflict with as much force and conviction as Saadat Hasan Manto. Many of his short stories focus on the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947. Manto vividly recreates the anger and horrors of this period and the trauma of refugees uprooted and victimized by the delineation of arbitrary borders. As the characters in Manto's stories confront the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence murder, rape and mutilation-their only conceivable response is madness. (Alter 91)

Pakistan from the beginning betrayed the hopes of all those who crossed the border for a better life. Pakistan of early 1950s allowed a very less democratic space for art to flourish; state exercised a ruthless censorship, many of the migrated artists were in the banned list, including Manto. Manto was thoroughly disenchanted with the newborn nation: Pakistan. In his story *Toba Tek Singh* he under the garb of lunatics laughs at the policies of the government and its double standards. Syeda Saleha quotes Prof. Fateh Mohammad Malik:

³ A hindi play written by Asghar Wajjat.

There is only one possible interpretation of this story and that is the ideology of Pakistan, the Pakistan movement and the establishment of Pakistan which cannot be understood by lunatics like Bishen Singh.

Manto has not only parodied the decisions taken by the wise heads of his times, he has portrayed the lunacy of people who have exemplified the nationalistic tropes by creating boundaries and bars. Manto's artistic designation of delineating the grim realities of his times is quite symbolic. He has portrayed a world of lunatics that seem to be saner than the people living outside the world of lunatic asylum. From the beginning of the short story *Toba Tek Singh* Manto has been very critical and symbolic, "Muslim lunatics from Indian institutions should be sent over to Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistani asylums should be allowed to go to India"⁴. These people being the victims of partition have showed very reasonably and intelligently the resistance to the partition, when the news reached to them. The questions asked by the lunatics repeatedly carry an ambiguity, which needs to be justified and answered. Though for people living a rational and saner life, these people are mere commodities which need to be exchanged based on their religion, but for Manto these people are more rational and saner who possess the unconditional love and harmony among each other.

The story *Toba Tek Singh* is a very powerful satire on the both nation and nation builders. Manto's originality and simplicity of writing lie in the fact that from the beginning of the story the readers do not find any direct traces of being it as a powerful satire. Manto's another story *Tetwal Ka Kutta* (The Dog of Tetwal) deals with the same thematic concern similar to *Toba Tek Singh*, where Bishan Singh is caught in the identity crises. The story is much more satirised on the notion of super-

⁴ Toba Tek Singh, translated by Tahira Naqvi.

patriotism, the story is about a dog that is caught between the two borders of Pakistan and Hindustan. The pathetic situations in the story arise when the dog is being fired and shot under the name of nationalism. The dog was asked repeatedly about its national identity prior to its death. Moreover, the poor dog was given an ineffective chance to prove his nationality. The last scene portrays the helplessness of the dog very pathetically:

Terrified, the dog turned the other way. One of its legs had become useless. On three legs it had just about managed to drag itself a few steps in the other direction when Jamadar Harnam Singh aimed and fired. The dog fell dead on the spot. Subedar Himmat Khan expressed regret. "Tch tch...the poor thing became a martyr!" 'Jamadar Harnam Singh took the warm barrel of the gun in his hand and said, "He died a dog's death." ⁵

Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* in first place portrays how people who claim to be rational 'change' the geographies within nights. Manto by insisting that places have to be named, as it is a name than identify the place. The places that used to be identical with a specific name until yesterday, are now confronting with the identity crises. Manto has parodied and criticised the 'wise' people, who aim to build separate nations on the base of religion. For Manto, this aim rather involves splitting peace and harmony from within the human souls. Edward said in one of his essay "Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories" writes,

"Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power. Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents".

⁵ "The Dog of Tetwal": *Translation from Urdu by Ravikant and Tarun K. Sain.*

After independence and formation of Pakistan the names of many places were changed and the history was manipulated to voice the nation(al) narratives. The lunatics in the asylum of *Toba Tek Singh* are confronted with the bewildering but inescapable question of history and their encounter with new territories: What is Pakistan? “One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection: ‘The name of the place in India where sharp razors are manufactured.’ His answer may still need to be decoded on both sides of the border.

In stories like and *Tetwal Ka Kutta* Manto has attempted to portray the first skirmishes of the developing India-Pakistan confrontation which rely on hatred and nationhood. True, Manto had no patience with the hypocrisy of his times and he used to pen down the grim realities. He draws his characters to reflect themselves in the readers mind, no matter be it ‘a dog of Tetwal or the anonymous lunatics’.

Quite often, in his stories he puts questions to himself that he wanted his readers to address. The questions are concerned with the identity of people, the identity that is thrust upon them on basis of their religion, and the identity that is defined by a line drawn on paper over a night. In the story of *Toba Tek Singh* the religion hardly matters for the lunatics, for they don’t even remember their names. Such questions run through Manto’s another story *Tetwal Ka Kutta* where the people on the border who are supposed to fight for their nation, have lost their morale to such extent that they even question a dog’s nationality. Manto’s short stories show an attempt to try and figure out what is it that really happened to the people of both the nations, when they split into different geographies and identities.

Toba Tek Singh is a catchy story of Manto that is charged with the individual’s identity crisis. However, the story is set in a madhouse but the use of madness in Manto’s

artistic artistry gives it a metaphoric meaning for sanity. The opacity of the decision of partition is not even acceptable for the lunatics in the asylum. Through these lunatics Manto has delineated the madness of sane people which makes the mad people (in the madhouse) more insane. They got trapped in the confusion of Pakistan and Hindustan. The lunatics, in the asylum of Lahore, stand as an epitome of a harmonious community that is governed by a world, without any overarching tropes of nationhood and religious differences. A small community of theirs is an indirect satire on the sane society whose trifle rationale makes them actually saner than the lunatics in the madhouse. Bishen Singh exemplifies a world without the bars and boundaries, who wants to live his life neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan. These national boundaries are identities that have been attached with him without seeking his consent that is why he keeps on resisting; he wants to go back to Toba Tek Singh, form where he belongs and which gives him his identity. Manto , thus proclaims the lunacy of the splitting the nation on the basis of religion, through his mouthpiece Bishen Singh, who would rather prefer to die in no man's land than make a choice between Hindustan and Pakistan. Thus, the death of Bishan Singh at the wagah border stands as a metaphor of doom and curtains for both the nations.

Indeed Manto is the master of Urdu short-story and his greatness was also familiar to the literary circles of other language. Manto has experienced the trauma of partition and he has penned down the situations of his times though his artefact. The Urdu critic Salim Akhtar has stated:

Manto had the courage to face bitter truth, to analyze it and to express it openly. He fought all his life for the right to speak the truth. He endured not only the censure of religion and the courts but also, eventually, the rejection of his fellow progressives. Still, he remained on his path. (Akhtar 1)

Manto, no matter at what cost, gives an artistic touch to every glimpse of his times. He was been jailed and ridiculed for telling these grim realities. Every short story of Manto delineates a vital truth of his society about the suffering of partition and separation of human bodies. For Manto, drawing partition, borders, lines, parameters, maps, insiders, outsiders under the name of nationalism and free nations is a quite sham and paradox. Nation splitting and nation making involves the anxiety and pain of naming places that were other places until yesterday. The theme of his stories is loss of memory and the death of imagination, which perfectly manifests the chaos after the partition. The narrative strategy of Manto provides the reader a space to go beyond the inhuman effects of such traumatic experiences. Manto's experience with such traumatic experience has shaped his consciousness of his generations beyond borders. It is his deep introspection of the burning situations and conditions of the partition and its effects that he has given literal shape in the form of short stories. The way Manto has written his stories makes him very distinctive from other short story writers writing on partition. His stories not only carry an objective note of grim realities of partition but an element of satirical and ironical sensibility of the partition.

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