

Deconstruction of Sane/Insane Binary: Analysis of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract

Toba Tek Singh is a famous short story by a Urdu Writer Saadat Hasan Manto depicting the exchange of inmates of mental asylum between India and Pakistan after partition in 1947. The story depicts the phenomena of partition from the eyes of lunatics. The consequences of partition were devastating and long lasting. The history is filled of bloodshed, violence, massacre, rapes, killings, migration and displacement from homeland in the name of religion. India and Pakistan both countries suffer the uncountable wounds and agony of the deadliest political move of partition. The inmates in the mental hospitals are declared by psychiatrist and society unfit to live in society so they have been quarantined in various hospitals in India and Pakistan. The 'sane' people declared them 'insane' based on their beliefs and knowledge as Foucault analysed in *Madness and Civilisation* and they do not have choice but remain cut off from general public. The paper will discuss the story in the light of Derrida's critique of binaries. As story unfolds and we come across the responses of the lunatics of Lahore mental asylum regarding partition, Hindustan, Pakistan and their exchange. The inmates Hindu, Muslim, Shikh and even Anglo-Europeans register their reactions. The madness is prevalent in everyone but those who claim Sane seems insane and Insane seems sane. Manto uses madness as a tool to mirror the madness of the outside world. Those behind the bars and those facing the bars. The line of demarcation has been erased by the politicians involved in partition and people reacting in the most beastly way to the political verdict of partition on the basis of religion.

Key Words: Partition, Violence, Mental asylum, sane, insane, Manto, Madness, Derrida, Foucault

"Society is what decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up."

--- Ken Kessey

Saadat Hasan Manto is a famous Urdu writer of short stories and radio plays. Before migrating to Lahore (Pakistan), he was working as a journalist for journals and script writer for Bombay Talkies in Mumbai (Bombay). After partition in August 1947, he lost his job and he decided to leave Mumbai, his beloved city and in January

1948 went to Lahore. He witnessed the chaos of riots, killings of Hindus, Muslims and Shikhs in the name faith and country. He wrote his short stories on the harsh realities of Bombay from 1934 to 1947. The characters in his stories are workers, labors, prostitutes, pimps from night life of Bombay (Mumbai) as he has had firsthand experience of these people as he used to live in Kamathipura, red light area of Mumbai. When other sophisticated writers were writing about Bombay of limelight he

throws light on the dark side of Bombay through his realistic and humanistic stories. The suffering, poverty, helplessness, exploitation of women are the major concerns of his writings. He himself suffered poverty and ill health throughout his life. He shows concern about the happiness of a common man. A person struggles too hard to make both ends meet and yet he doesn't get enough food to feed his family or get good shelter.. So he waged war against so called bourgeoisie with his pen. He produced 22 collections of short stories, a novel, five series of radio plays, three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches.

His short stories are held in high esteem by readers and critics. He wrote about the people who didn't have voice. He was the voice of the voiceless. He unmasked the other side of Mumbai, about that society no one dared to talk about. He is best known for his stories about the life of Bombay and stories about partition. Nandita Das in 2018 has made a biopic titled *Manto* on the life of Manto, in which an actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui enacted Manto. Joseph Walsh a film critic has said in an article about the film *Manto* "Saadat Hasan Manto chronicled Bombay life in all its ugly beauty – until sectarian horrors were unleashed on the streets he loved. A new biopic by director Nandita Das retells his stories." And in an interview Nandita Das says. "His empathy was very deep for those that exist on the margins of society – especially for women and sex workers – and no one in India was writing about that at the time." Nandita Das concludes her interview with present relevance of Manto in these words "She concludes: "This period of Indian

history is very significant. It defined India and Pakistan as it is today. Manto was the conscience of society. And if he were writing what he wrote back then, it would probably be banned."

Manto wrote exclusively about the chaos that prevailed, during and after the Partition of India in 1947. He started his literary career translating the works of Oscar Wilde, Victor Hugo, Chekov and Maxim Gorki. His first story is about Jalianwala Baug massacre titled 'Tamasha'. His earlier works showed a marked leftist and socialist leanings, later on he portrays the darkness of the human psyche, as humanist values declined around the Partition. Manto faced trial for obscenity six times and charged once. His final works show the helplessness and hopelessness of man and his inability to cure the situation. So it becomes the work of satire that looms on the verge of dark comedy as we see in the story *Toba Tek Singh* which is taken for the analysis.

What is Toba Tek Singh? The simple wh-question has two simple answers. First, it is name of a place now in Pakistan famous for his good quality produce of oranges. The town and district is named after a Sikh religious figure Tek Singh. Legend has it that Mr. Singh a kind hearted man served water and provided shelter to the worn out and thirsty travelers passing by a small pond ("toba" in Punjabi) which eventually was called Toba Tek Singh, and the surrounding settlement acquired the same name. And second, a title of a short story written in Urdu by Saadat Hasan Manto, published in 1955 and translated in English by Frances W. Pritchett. Ironically the Sikh character in a story who is one of the inmates of mental asylum in Lahore because of madness is from Toba Tek Singh who has much more affinity to his birthplace where he is 'zamindar', owner of much more fertile land

and rich person. He was declared insane and relatives of him admitted to him this asylum. Time has stopped for him. He is almost from last fifteen years in the asylum.

And we put second question What The short Story Toba Tek Singh is about? to the second answer of first question then we have plenty of answers. Because second question is literary. And in literature we do not have finite answers to any literary question. The text of story is always open. As Roland Barthes has declared the death of the author in his famous post-structuralist's r essay *Death of the author*. So it is open to all. Open to all readers to read in any manner they wish to read. The Writer has no hold on the text or reader any more.

The scholars Tahir Jokinen, and Shershah Assadullah tried to link Manto's illness and alcohol addiction to his prolific writings. He had been sent to asylum to cure his addiction but in vain. His cause of death on 18th January 1955 at the age of 43 is heavy drinking leading to Cirrhosis of the liver.

“Toba Tek Singh” was written after Manto's time in hospital and was clearly influenced by his experience; perhaps even the choice to write about a mental asylum was a consequence of his hospitalisation. In a context where mental illness was commonly regarded as abhorrent and shameful, Manto's explicit engagement with the theme would have been unusual but powerful, emphatically drawing attention to the madness of partition.”
(1)

It has been found in the field of art that many artists suffer from some or other mental issues, which were the sources of

their creative outputs. Plato a Greek philosopher had serious objections on Poetry as it was considered as the product of writer's frenzy so not good for education purpose. In an Introduction to Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation*, Jose Barchilon said:

“Folly is so human that it has common roots with poetry and tragedy; it is revealed as much in the insane asylums in the writings of a Cervantes or a Shakespeare, or in the deep psychological insights and cries of revolt of a Nietzsche”(2)

Many eminent creative personalities with mood disorders are Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Henry James, T S Eliot, John Keats, Allen Edgar Poe, R W Emerson, Vincent Van Gogh and many more. These people have been through mental turbulence in their creative years some of them committed suicide for society they were mad or on the verge of madness but their works are full of sanity. Samuel Becket a famous playwright of absurd theatre said, “We all are born mad. Some remain so.”

The short story under scrutiny *Toba Tek Singh* is a list of responses of ‘insane’ people to the decision of partition and exchange of them on the ground of their religion by ‘sane’ people. The so called sane people were actively involved in riots, killings, murders, rapes, and burnings of the property. Jeff Carvin is very pessimistic about humans. He says, “I think a human animal is far more wild and unpredictable and dangerous and destructive than any other animal.”

From the responses of lunatics in asylum every sensible reader understand that these

“insane” people are sane and ‘sane’ people who are involved in partition are insane. It happens exactly turning the sides upside down.

As Derrida did in his philosophy of Deconstruction. The binary opposition is the structuralist idea that acknowledges the human tendency to think in terms of opposition. For Saussure the binary opposition was the “means by which the units of language have value or meaning; each unit is defined against what it is not.” With this categorization, terms and concepts tend to be associated with a positive or negative. For example, Reason/Passion, Man/Woman, Inside/Outside, Presence/Absence, Speech/Writing, etc. Derrida argued that these oppositions were arbitrary and inherently unstable. The structures themselves begin to overlap and clash and ultimately these structures of the text dismantle themselves from within the text. In this sense deconstruction is regarded as a forum of anti-structuralism. Deconstruction rejects most of the assumptions of structuralism and more vehemently “binary opposition” on the grounds that such oppositions always privilege one term over the other that is, signified over the signifier. He says that from centuries together almost all the branches of knowledge taken some words for granted. He calls them transcendental signifieds. But there is no such absolute term or signified. Derrida claims that meaning of one term is hidden in the meaning of other. In other words white doesn’t have meaning in itself it is absence of black, and this is applicable to all terms. The main accusation of Derrida to this binary is the fact that the first term got dominance over the second

term. Not only dominance but positive connotations also. The second term is always look down. Derrida wants to change the this pseudo hierarchy by bringing second term to the centre.

In the story *Toba Tek Singh* the binaries at stake are sane/insane. And Manto successfully deconstructed this binary through his mastery of storytelling. Generally in every society people attach positive to the first term, so the first term sane in this binary is dominating, at the centre and the second term insane is at the periphery and literary marginalized and put in the asylum but their ‘insane’ and meaningless talk shows the signs of sanity.

As the news of exchange of lunatics reached among the inmates of mental asylum at Lahore they gave their thoughts words. No one has least idea about what is Pakistan? or what is India? When question is asked they used to give very funny answers. Because the answer is bound to be funny. The only possible answer is both are countries. That’s all. But a lunatic answers the first question saying,

“It’s kind of place *in Hindustan* where razors are made” (3) (Italics are Mine).

Some of the inmates in this asylum were not actually lunatics but murderers, their family members admitted them to escape the law and from capital punishment so they are pretending mad. Even these ‘sane’ does not decode the dilemma of partition.

“.....whether they are in Pakistan or Hindustan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how could this be, since a while ago, while staying

right here, they had been in Hindustan?"(4)

It suggests that it was very difficult even for some people to believe the fact that they become outsiders of their own land by one political decision of partition. One of the lunatics was so troubled by this nagging question of Hindustan and Pakistan he became more lunatic and decided on his self to be at safer side without taking any decision whether to go or not to go. He climbed the tree and said he was happy over there. He didn't want to go anywhere. He didn't want to live in Hindustan or Pakistan. In fact he had not seen or suffered the communal violence yet he came to the conclusion to be neutral without taking either side. He seemed 'sane'. One Muslim inmate declared himself Qa'id-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah another Sikh declared himself Tara Singh and both fought bloody battle. They had to be kept in separate cells. The two Anglo-Indian inmates were worried about their status now. Because they were neither Hindu nor Muslims, probably Christians, where they would be located. If Hindustan was for Hindus and Pakistan for Muslims as per partition then they didn't have choice because they fall in another line. This shows mere blunder of the politicians to divide the country in to two on the basis of religion. After 73 years of Independence and partition the dreams were not fulfilled. Bhisham Singh was one of the inmates of Lahore mental asylum. As others are concerned about the locality of Hindustan and Pakistan, he was infatuated about his native place Toba Tek Singh. He was in the asylum from last fifteen years. He had not lie down in that period because of consistent standing his

legs and ankles swelled. He used to answer in mix language Panjabi, Urdu and English. He used to ask almost to everyone in the asylum whereabouts of Toba Tek Singh.

"..."But no one at all knew whether it was in Pakistan or Hindustan. If they tried to tell him, They themselves were caught up in the perplexity that Sialkot used to be in Hindustan, but no it was said to be in Pakistan. Who knew whether Lahore, which now is in Pakistan, tomorrow might go off to Hindustan? Or all of Hindustan itself might become Pakistan? And who could place his hand on breast and say whether Hindustan and Pakistan might not both someday vanish entirely?"(5)

Bhisham Singh appeared frightening as he didn't shave or cut his hair. But by his disposition he was a quiet man. He didn't quarrel with anyone. Others knew that he was from the town named Toba Tek Singh so they used to call him by the name of his place he hailed from. The name of his town becomes his identity. The whole story questions the identity. The identity crisis is the measure issue in most of the literature of diasporic writers and the writers of partition too. What identity one acquires after leaving from his/her homeland. Whatever may be the cause of migration and displacement. Everyone wants to know the answer of the question who am I? . The entire spirituality and philosophy is after this illusive question. For example in Shakespeare's *King Lear* King asked the fool about his identity, when thrown out in the storm by his own daughters. "Who am I?" The fool answered wisely saying "nothing, at least I am a fool"

Bhisham Singh had surpassed the question of his identity, now he became his land so

all inmates called him Toba Tek Singh as if Bhisham Singh as Human got thoroughly mixed up with his town, now no are going to separate Bhisham Singh from Toba Tek Singh. That's why exchange of Bhisham Singh became impossibility as he stands for the physical entity of land located at Toba Tek Singh. As Bhisham Singh didn't get any assured answer to his query where Toba Singh was he became more concerned and disturbed about not getting satisfactory answer. The monthly visitors who came to visit him from his own place Toba Tek Singh now stopped to come to see him. His life was stake and desperately he needed the answer. In the same asylum there was one more lunatic who called himself God. So Bhisham Singh sought his help. When whereabouts of Toba Tek Singh was asked, lunatic who was self-proclaimed god replied—

“It's neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan—because we haven't given the order yet.”(6)

Bhisham Singh pleaded hundreds of times but God-lunatic didn't reply. Bhisham Singh became more irritated and claimed that God-lunatic was a god of the Muslims and not of Sikhs. A friend of Bhisham Singh Fazal Din came to visit him and to tell the first hand report of his relatives and his daughter. At the beginning Bhisham Singh turned away while seeing him, when guard told him that he came to see him he stopped. Fazal Din told him that all his kith and kin were good and had gone to Hindustan safely. He stumbled to say the truth regarding Rup Kaur's health, daughter of Bhisham Singh. He took long pause and modified his answer smelling the lunatic condition of Bhisham Singh saying, his daughter was also good

and went to Hindustan with other relatives. The blank spaces meant that Rup Kaur was exploited and she was no more. It is said in silence. Bhisham Singh asked his basic question whether Toba Tek Singh was in Hindustan or Pakistan and Fazal Din got confused to say Hindustan or Pakistan. He uttered both the responses which didn't satisfy Bhisham Singh, he muttered his anger like refrain in mixed language and went off.

On the day of actual exchange all Hindu and Sikh inmates had been brought from Lahore to Wagah border guarded by police. It was very difficult procedure to exchange the lunatics. The scene was of chaos. The inmates became uncontrollable. They wouldn't understand the logic of highly illogical idea of partition of the nation which robbed them of their identities and sense of belonging. The scene at the border was microcosm of macrocosm. Here at least the people were labeled insane. But those who were sane behaving in much more violent and dangerous way. The narrator of the story gave vivid description.....

“To extricate the lunatics from the Lorries, and confide them to the care of the other wardens, was a very difficult task. Some refused to emerge at all. Those who were willing to come out became difficult to manage, because they suddenly ran here and there. If clothes were put on the naked ones, they tore them of their bodies and flung them away.. Someone was babbling abuse, someone was singing. They were fighting among themselves, weeping, muttering....”(7)

The inmates were unable to find the rationality behind their exchange. Though

they were insane they had retained little bit sanity to oppose being uprooted. Finally turn of Bhisham Singh came. An officer in charge began to make his name's entry in the register. Bhisham Singh questioned the officer where Toba Tek Singh was. The officer told him that it was in Pakistan. After getting this answer Bhisham Singh ran off. He refused the pulling by the guards. He shouted loudly saying Toba Tek Singh was here and repeated the refrain. The guard and officers tried to persuade him and told that Toba Tek Singh had gone to Hindustan and if it hadn't then it would be sent. But Bhisham Singh didn't believe it. And didn't move an inch from the place where he had stopped in middle. He was permitted to stand where he was as he was not harmful as other inmates. Others were exchanged.

Another day early in the morning a shriek was heard shattering the atmosphere. All ran to him. They saw lied Bhisham Singh a man from last fifteen years had never been seen in this posture. He exactly in between neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan but at no man's land probably for him it was Toba Tek Singh. The characters in the story are insane yet they disliked the idea of partition because it caused much more loss than gain for both the countries. It led the way for continuous and regular conflict and tension at the border lines.

The story ends but raises many questions in the minds of readers. After 73 years of independence and partition, we are unable to heal the wounds we inflicted on each other. The poison of animosity and hatred is spread in the name of religion and nationalism. The terrorism, fundamentalism, riots, violence, suicide bombers retell the same story partition full of agony and pathos

again and again. Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Shadow Lines* deals with the themes of nationalism and violence. Thamma the grandmother of the narrator was disillusioned when she could not get any solid and substantial difference between East Pakistan and India. She said, "But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where the difference is, both sides will be the same...What was it all for then—Partition and all the killing and everything—if there isn't something in between."

Many writers, poets, playwrights from Pakistan and India raise the issues of communal riots, poverty, border conflict and disillusion of dream dreamed before independence and before partition. Nida Fazli a famous Urdu poet (shayar) says the fate if common man in both the countries. He says after returning from Pakistan,

“इन्सान में हैवान यहाँ भी है वहाँ भी
अल्लाह निगहबान यहाँ भी है वहाँ भी |
खूँखवार दरिंदों के फ़क़त नाम अलग हैं
शहरों में बयाबान यहाँ भी है वहाँ भी |
हिन्दू भी मज़े में है मुसलमाँ भी मज़े में
इन्सान परेशान यहाँ भी है वहाँ भी ||(8)

The above couplets speak the realistic condition of common man in both the countries. The grace of god is abundant in both the countries yet fool people are at rampant in both the countries. It is very much evident that Manto and his writing is not of Past or event specific about partition but it is very much relevant today. And not only relevant in reference to India and Pakistan but relevant to all humanity all over the world by and large. The last couplet of above poem is poignant remarks on all fundamentalist who make the life of

common people unbearable. What Manto said after partition is worth to quote. He said, "Hindustan had become free. Pakistan had become independent soon after its inception but man was still slave in both these countries- slave of prejudice, slave of religious fanaticism—slave of barbarity and inhumanity." It is very much true that people are not freed of this slavery till today. If they had been freed from all such slaveries there would not be riots, terror attacks in the name of religion. Mere freedom from British Raj and separation from India on the basis of religion is not a solution to the problems of poverty, unemployment, corruption, atrocities and exploitation of women. This is applicable by and large to most of the countries and to number of religious fundamentalism all over the world.

Manto has been criticized for his portrayal of bitter realities in his short stories. To such adverse criticism he simply replied in the following words.....,

"If you cannot bear these stories then the society is unbearable, who am I to remove the clothes of this society which itself is naked. I don't even try to cover it, because it is not my job, that's the job of dressmakers"

Conclusion:-

His stories grew from the social climate he lived in and his own financial crisis. He felt helplessness of human towards harsh

realities of life. His stories are satire that orients towards dark comedy. It depicted collective madness of sane people that he saw in the ensuing decade of his life. His cynical view of society deepened because of his isolation and addiction to alcohol to cope up with the external situation which he could not change nor he closed his eyes to it. Being a sensitive and sensible writer he felt his moral responsibility to give voice to the voiceless. To suffer and to write is his destiny. As Philip K Dick rightly pointed out, "It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane.". He had been admitted to the asylum to cure his addiction and moods disorder. The story we discussed above is a powerful blow on all people who claim sanity by the inmates of insane asylum to reconsider their demarcation line of sane/insane. What Derrida has practiced in his theory of deconstruction Manto has showed in his short story *Toba Tek Singh*. The inmates of mental asylum though insane oppose the idea of partition and spoke the truth about meaninglessness of such division. So the question Manto poses before the readers of the story is that how one is going to define Who is sane? And who is insane? One doesn't have perfect answer to this enigma. In this enigma the strength of Manto lies. I conclude with his words, "If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth."

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