

Twentieth-Century Fiction
Prof. Avishek Parui
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Madras

Lecture - 49
Toba Tek Singh - Part 1

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10/15/2019 Toba Tek Singh - Words Without Borders

Two or three years after Partition, the governments of Pakistan and India decided to exchange lunatics in the same way that they had exchanged civilian prisoners. In other words, Muslim lunatics in Indian madhouses would be sent to Pakistan, while Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani madhouses would be handed over to India.

I can't say whether this decision made sense or not. In any event, a date for the lunatic exchange was fixed after high level conferences on both sides of the border. All the details were carefully worked out. On the Indian side, Muslim lunatics with relatives in India would be allowed to stay. The remainder would be sent to the frontier. Here in Pakistan nearly all the Hindus and Sikhs were gone, so the question of retaining non-Muslim lunatics did not arise. All the Hindu and Sikh lunatics would be sent to the frontier in police custody.

I don't know what happened over there. When news of the lunatic exchange reached the madhouse here in Lahore, however, it became an absorbing topic of discussion among the inmates. There was one Muslim lunatic who had read the newspaper *Zamindar*¹ every day for twelve years. One of his friends asked him: "Maulvi Sahib! What is Pakistan?" After careful thought he replied: "It's a place in India where they make razors."

Hearing this, his friend was content.

One Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh: "Sarfaraz ji, why are they sending us to India? We don't even speak the language."

"I understand the Indian language," the other replied, smiling. "Indians are devilish people who strut around haughtily," he added.



While bathing, a Muslim lunatic shouted "Long live Pakistan!" with such vigor that he slipped on the floor and knocked himself out.

There were also some lunatics who weren't really crazy. Most of these inmates were murderers whose families had bribed the madhouse officials to have them committed in order to save them from the hangman's noose. These inmates understood something of why India had been divided, and they had heard of Pakistan. But they weren't all that well informed. The newspapers didn't tell them a great deal, and the illiterate guards who looked after them weren't much help either. All they knew was that there was a man named Mohammed Ali Jinnah, whom people called the Qaid-e-Azam. He had made a separate country for the Muslims, called Pakistan. They had no idea where it was, or what its boundaries might be. This is why all the lunatics who hadn't entirely lost their senses were perplexed as to whether they were in Pakistan or India. If they were in India then where was Pakistan? If they were in Pakistan, then how was it that the place where they lived had until recently been known as India?

One lunatic got so involved in this India/Pakistan question that he became even crazier. One day he climbed a tree and sat on one of its branches for two hours, lecturing without pause on the complex issues of Partition. When the guards told him to come down, he climbed higher. When they tried to frighten him with threats, he replied: "I live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I'll live in this tree right here!" With much difficulty, they eventually coaxed him down. When he reached the ground he wept, and his Hindu and Sikh friends, distraught at the idea that they would leave him and go to India.

One man held an M.S. degree and had been a radio engineer. He kept apart from the other inmates, and spent all his time walking silently up and down a path in the garden. After hearing about the exchange, however, he turned in his clothes and ran naked all over the grounds.

There was one fat Muslim lunatic from Christ who had been an enthusiastic Muslim League activist. He used to wash fifteen or sixteen times a day, but after the exchange, he stopped. Overnight, his name was Mohammed Ali. One day he announced that he was the Qaid-e-Azam, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Seeing this, a Sikh lunatic decided to



So, hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Twentieth Century Fiction. We will start with a new text today having just finished Virginia Woolf's *Solid Objects*.

So, this text the story we will start off with today is a story by Saadat Hasan Manto called *Toba Tek Singh*. Now, originally the story was written in Urdu, but obviously, we will read this in English translation; *Toba Tek Singh* by Saadat Hasan Manto.

Now, just a little context I think is in order before we start with the main story. This is essentially a story about partition, the 1947 partition and obviously, we are all aware of the history of partition, the violence of partition, the trauma of partition, and it was one of the bloodiest events in this part of the world, in south-east Asia and perhaps across the world in human history.

And now the entire irrationality of partition was obviously, that people suddenly became divided because of religious differences. Suddenly, they were told that just because you belong to a certain religion you are supposed to be in a certain place and vice versa.

Now, what that did essentially and historically is that, it completely complicated people's sense of their own location or people's existential location or emotional location, like for instance if someone is told for instance that a village that he grew up in you know the entire his entire generations grew up and his forefathers, him and his subsequent generations would grow up as well; sadly that village happens to be in a different country altogether.

So, that geopolitical shift, the sense of geopolitical shift, the newness, the abruptness, the accident, the catastrophe of the geopolitical shift, or the geopolitical shift acknowledged narrative that obviously, had lots of emotional and existential repercussions. You know because people suddenly were told, jolted out of their sense of their geopolitical slash existential you know situatedness, right.

So, for instance if someone comes and tells a person that the village or town, or city that he or she had grown up in is suddenly called something else, and it is suddenly part of a new country that would obviously, create a sense of jolt, a sense of epistemic violence. And by epistemic violence I obviously mean violence at the level of knowledge that you know, the level of knowledge what you know is suddenly and dramatically defamiliarized, is suddenly and dramatically you know denaturalized, and made into something else.

And that obviously, generates a sense of epistemic violence, a violence at the level of knowledge. So, your sense of knowledge, your knowledge of your surroundings, your knowledge of reality, your knowledge of who you are, where you belong everything just changes dramatically in a quite in a cataclysmic kind of a way.

Now obviously with partition, the change was very dramatic, the change was very violent, very bloody, people were killed, slaughtered, you know mutilated and obviously, the mutilation, the bodily mutilation and all of us are aware what is very iconic graphic images of the partition where trains full of human corpses would be sent across the border from either side. So, the train from you know India to Pakistan, Pakistan to India full of corpses which would be indicator of the degree of slaughter, the degree of violence which took place. It is obviously a shameful part of human history, it is a disgrace in human history and it is one of the fallouts of imperialism. I mean this is what

some of the last things that imperialism did to this part of the world. It just created this divide from which we are yet to recover.

Now, given that this is the context in the story. This particular story is not exactly about physical violence, right. So, it is actually it grows more sinister than physical violence. It becomes more sinister, darker, it has a dark comic quality to it which actually makes it even more disturbing. The fact that you can actually produce comedy out of such a situation, a situation of loss, alienation, existential annihilation, how can that be turned into a comedy, how can that be turned into something which almost makes you laugh, right. And the laughter which comes out of this story sometimes is obviously a laughter which is subversive in quality, a laughter which is sort of mocking in quality, it is a sarcastic dry laughter. It is not a laughter of fulfilment, it is a laughter of the knowledge of nothingness which is what the laughter is about in the story.

Now, interestingly this story is set in a madhouse in an asylum and the setting the temporal setting in the story is a few years after partition. So, it is a post-partition story set in a madhouse. So, the time and the place in the story are very important.

Now, the madhouse obviously is the very symbolic place, a symbolic space rather for irrationality, right that is where irrational men and women stay, quote unquote “irrational” men and women stay. But also an equally the madhouse is also the space where the medical and the political converge sometimes, very brutally sometimes, very strategically and sometimes very very non-humanly in order to treat human beings, in order to correct human beings to cure them. So, there is always this apart from a curative quality, apart from this care giving quality, there is also a coercive quality about the madhouse. There is a degree of violence about the madhouse with which people are you know constrained, people are sort of forced to stay there, physically confined to certain spaces to certain parameters, certain permitted parameters.

And the whole idea of the permitted parameter in the madhouse people are supposed to wear some kind of dress, dress straitjacket more often than not. People are sort of medicalised, madness is medicalized. So, that obviously, becomes very two-pronged instrument of medicalization and legalization because on the one hand you classify someone as mad through a medical process.

Now, in this story you find that madness becomes a very complex category especially in the wake of partition, especially in the wake of this massive massacre of partition, the violence of partition because what it does that backdrop, that partition backdrop is that it completely inverts the rational irrational dichotomy or the rational irrational relationship, right. Because you know what appears to be irrational is sometimes in this story it seems to be the most rational decision the most rational question the seemingly irrational question. Whereas, the bureaucracy outside the madhouse which is that of the rational universe that sometimes it stems from the most irrational evil manoeuvre against human beings, right.

So, among other things this story inverts this rationality, irrationality question, the mad, normal question etcetera. And it asks some very fundamental question about like for instance how does one's understanding of one's existential self and situatedness of the existential self, how does that change when a major geopolitical change occurs, when a major political change occurs, when a major discursive change occurs.

And throughout the story you found that you know we have read novels such as Ulysses, we have read Mrs Dalloway, we have read Eliot's early poetry, almost everything we have read so far we find that there is this very interesting connection between discursivity and experientiality, right. So, what is discursive out there, the set of laws set of narratives, the coded quality of narratives, etcetera, all that architecture around us how that affects us experientially. So, for instance, a very good parallel with this story would be Mrs Dalloway something which you have already done in this course.

Take Septimus Smith for instance, the way he is treated it is obviously a very coercive in quality, rather than caregiver quality, the doctors in that story, the that novel Holmes and Bradshaw, they appear as absolutely totalitarian you know figures representing a certain regime of care, regime of cure which is more coercive rather than care giving. And you know the entire medical vocabulary, the entire medical narrative in the story is one of violence, violence done to the human body, alright. So, there is this homo psychic quality about that story as well.

The same homo psychic quality is there in this particular short story that the fact that these mad man, people who are like almost collateral damages they are saying but at the same time you know it is easy to murder them by not killing them, right. So, the whole

idea of the liquidated self, the exhausted self is there, the interrupted self is very much there. So, madness in the story could be seen as a sort of interruption, as an interrupted state of being, as an interrupted embodiment where a normal neural behaviour, a normal cognitive behaviour is interrupted.

Now, interestingly what happens in this story is that the interruption with the cognitive normal neural interaction, interruption in this mad man that actually becomes subversive in quality, subversive in quality. So, this subversion interruption equation is interesting over here, right. So, the subversive quality about madness is something which we see. It does not really decimate anything, it does not really invert anything, does not really change anything politically in the real world, but it asks some really fundamental and difficult questions, questions which are directed against some of the so called rational manoeuvres made during partition, right.

So, on the one hand we have this rational bureaucratic regime outside which are taking all these big decisions, which are dealing with all these you know problems of vast quantities a masses of people and obviously, making absurd laws. The absurdity of the real world out there it is sort of critiqued in a very sarcastic way, by the seemingly absurd behaviour, the seemingly absurd activities inside the asylum. Now, it turns out in the end that the asylum is less absurd than the new world out there. So, then again the absurdity normalcy logic is inverted and that becomes a problem here in the story as well

Now, among other things this story is also about memory, right. So, the whole idea of memory becomes important. What you remember you know, what you do not remember becomes important because. You know this the protagonist in the story is someone called Bishan Singh, who becomes Toba Tek Singh was the name of a village which does not exist anymore, the non-existence of that village becomes important. It is an absent space. But we will come to that later.

When we find that how you know the protagonist, he has he suffered some memory loss. Now, technically the term for memory loss in this particular story, the way it is represented in this story is a retrograde amnesia. Now, in retrograde amnesia what happens is you retain the memories which happened to you many years ago, when you are a child perhaps. You retain that memory, but you lose a memory of events and figures

or experiences which happen to you like not so long ago. So, the quicker, the short term memory that goes away, the longer memory that stays back.

And I am happy, I have got a published article on this particular short story which I am happy to upload in the forum on request. So, do go through it along with the story and find if there are some resonances that maybe drawn, in terms of looking at this story from memory studies perspective.

So, memory, obviously is an act of remembering or re hyphen membering (remembering) there is an organic quality about memory. Now, what happens in the story is what is to be remembered or what ought to remember that disappears entirely. So, the village called Toba Tek Singh from which this character is from, Bishan Singh is from, Toba Tek Singh that village goes missing no one knows where the village is. It is not really a classified space anymore because you know that entire idea, the entire ontology, the entire mapping of space has changed dramatically with partition.

It has been a very, it is an act of very violent and very quick remapping with which suddenly these two countries are formed and the old villages which you know was supposedly belonging to one part of the you know one part of this entire land mass suddenly does not have any location and this location-less-ness of the village, the fact that Toba Tek Singh is a village that no one knows quite where it is, the location-less-ness is interestingly mapped on to you the agency-less-ness of the individual. The individual human subject here has zero agency. Decisions are taken for him. And he is just supposed to follow the decisions and the agency-less-ness and the location-less-ness they become interesting competitive categories.

Again, which brings me back to something I have talked about already, the whole idea of existential dislocation you know followed by or equated with geopolitical dislocation, right. So, geopolitics becomes important politics and geography your sense of shape, your sense of space, your sense of location, your sense of address are politically determined and decided for you, right. So, this is the backdrop of the story you know where this entire madhouse is located and the mad men, the exchange you know, very absurd conversations with each other which sometimes make more sense than the rational conversations outside because the entire world over here is very upset.

So, in that world micro absurdity inside an asylum, it actually makes more sense than the massive absurdity which disguises as rational enterprise in the world out there. So, this is the backdrop of the story and we will just dive in the story right now and we will see how it goes. So, this is Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hasan Manto and this should be on your screen.

Two or three years after Partition, the government of Pakistan, the governments of Pakistan and India decided to exchange lunatics in the same way as they had exchanged civilian prisoners. In other words, Muslim lunatics in Indian madhouses would be sent to Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani madhouses will be handed over to India.

I cannot say whether this decision made sense or not, in any event a date for the lunatic exchange was fixed after high level conferences with both sides of the border. All the details were carefully worked out. On the Indian side, Muslim lunatics with relatives in India will be allowed to stay. The remainder would be sent to the frontier. Here in Pakistan nearly all the Hindus and Sikhs were gone, so the question of retaining non-Hindu lunatics did not arise. All the Hindus and Sikh lunatics would be sent to the frontier in police custody.

Now, note the dry, almost detached journalist returned in the opening of the story. It is just giving you information, just giving you data you know supposedly in a very dry voice, supposedly in a very objective voice. Now, obviously, this objectivity the dryness is it is very superficial kind of a construct because if we just go deep into it, you find this is not dry at all, this is not you know journalistic at all. What has been told to us is that a very sinister thing is happening, a very perverse thing is happening, suddenly it is decided through bureaucratic meetings that you know the entire even the madmen should be exchanged as per religious affiliations as far religious differences go.

So, the Muslim madman would go to Pakistan if they do not have relatives in India whereas, a Hindu madman in Pakistan will be sent back to India. So, again widely the madman helps out as well. So, the madhouse over here becomes a very discursive space as you can see already, right.

Well, there is a single person narrative over here, a first person narrative, I cannot say whether the decision made sense or not. So, there is ambivalence, a seeming

ambivalence about this decision which obviously makes a mockery of it. It actually makes it even more sarcastic, the fact that it is obliquely sarcastic, the fact that it is actually not committed to committing or commenting on the decision's viability or usability, right. So, that non-committal quality is very journalistic, it is just reporting to you, it is not his job to comment on it, but at the same time the superficiality of the voice is very obvious as a result of which we actually get to get a flavor of the sinister quality the entire enterprise, ok.

So, I do not know what happened over there. When news of the lunatic exchange reached a madhouse here in Lahore, however, it became an absorbing topic of discussion among the inmates. So, again we now know that the setting in the story is Lahore and obviously, Lahore as we know was one of the most multi-cultural and cosmopolitan cities in the entire South-East Asia, and for a long time people did not know whether Lahore would go to India or Pakistan there was a big chance it will come to India, but India was a larger landmass and it wanted a piece of Lahore, but in the end it went back to Pakistan at straight. You know it just was associated with Pakistan geopolitically, right, ok.

So, this is a madhouse in Lahore. And the inmates are very excited on being told they would just go back to their own countries depending on what the religious affiliation is. So, for instance if there is a Hindu madman in a Lahore asylum that person will be sent back to India and if there is a Muslim madman across the border in India it will be checked whether he or she has any relatives in India, if not, they would be sent back to Pakistan as well, ok. So, it was an absorbing topic of discussion among the inmates.

There was one Muslim lunatic who had read the newspaper Zamindar every day for twelve years. One of his friends asked him: "Maulvi Sahib what is Pakistan?" After careful thought he replied. "It is a place in India where they make razors.

Right. So, again look at the absurdity in these entire dialogues. But then the whole point is the absurdity is very small, very minimal compared to the entire massive spectacle of absurdity which was the partition in the first place, the violence which was generated out of the absurdity that becomes the real absurdity in the story. Whereas, this micro models of absurdity are very innocuous and they do not really mean anything. So, there was a person who asked Maulvi Sahib wherein, where Pakistan is and he thought it is a place in

India where people make razors. So, again a very irrational often Alice in Wonderland kind of response. When bathing sorry where they make razors.

Hearing this, his friend was content.

One Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh: "Sardar ji, why are they sending us to India? We do not even speak the language."

"I understand the Indian language," the other replied, smiling. "Indians are devilish people who strut out haughtily," he added.

While bathing, a Muslim lunatic shout "Long live Pakistan" with such vigor that he slipped on the floor and knocked himself out.

So, again these are the comic touches in the story and we see already that you know how Manto is really making it ambivalent for us because in one hand this is obviously, story about madmen and their complete lack of agency, the complete loss of agency. They are just told to go to some places and they just follow orders. So, there is a depressing human coercive condition.

But on the other hand there is a sense of very dark humour associated with this entire bureaucratic irrationality. So, you know people are saying India is a Pakistan is a place where they make razors, etcetera and then there is two Sardars, two Sikhs who are talking to each other, obviously they are supposed to go to India, but they resent the idea of going to India because one of them is saying, oh I do not understand the language at all.

Now, obviously, what that tells you is a language like culture, like religion, like almost everything else which defines as a person is very located in terms of where you are. So, language and location are very interrelated categories. So, you know when you use certain language you also betray your location. Now, what these two Sardars who are like technically they are just go to India, but they are fearing, they are resenting, the very possibility the prospect of going to India because they do not speak that language, one of them is telling the other person. And they are much more comfortable linguistically stay here in Pakistan, in Lahore, although technically, they are religiously the outsiders over here, the religious others over here.

So, we can see how religion which became the dominant narrative of partition, the dominant narrative of division. It is such an inadequate and irrational category because there are so many other categories which are completely sidelined, location, language, you know food for instance, you know all these different categories which actually inform your cultural identity they got completely sidelined and religious identity was a dominant narrative which decided and overdetermined the entire brutality and irrationality and absurdity of partition, ok.

And then we are told while bathing a Muslim lunatic shouted long live Pakistan with such vigor that he slipped on the floor and knocked himself out. So, again all these little comic touches, perversely comic touches make the story even more sort of ambivalent and sinister in quality.

There were also some lunatics who were not who were not really crazy. Most of the inmates were murderous, most of these inmates were murderers whose families had bribed madhouse officials to have them committed in order to save them from the Hangman's noose. So, again look at the complication or the complicated, the complex demography in certain madhouse, because we are told quite categorically that not all these people who were in the madhouse are mad really, some of them are actually criminals, some of them are murderers, but just to save them from the from hanging they are classified as mad. And the families bribed medical officials to get them in this asylum just so they can be classified as mad, and that classification, that medical classification would be a safeguard against hanging for instance, ok.

These inmates understood something of why India had been divided, and they heard of Pakistan. But they were not all well informed. The newspapers did not tell them a great deal, and the illiterate guards who looked after them were not much help either. All they knew was that there was a man named Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whose people whom people called the Qaid-e-Azem. He had made a separate country for the Muslims called Pakistan. They had no idea where it was, where its boundaries might be. This is why all the lunatics who had not entirely lost their senses were perplexed as to whether they were they were Pakistan's, they were in Pakistan or India or were they in India, then where was Pakistan. If they were in Pakistan then how was it that the place where they lived had until recently had been known as India.

So, again all these are very sort of crazy questions, but despite the craziness you know, despite the irrationality these are very fundamental questions that are being asked over here, right. So, you know if this is India, where is Pakistan, this is Pakistan how come this was India like just a couple of days ago, right. So, all these very pointed irrational questions actually crack up the entire construct of nationalism and citizenship which are formed at this point of time historically, ok.

So, one lunatic got so involved in this India Pakistan question that he became even crazier. One day he climbed a high climbed a tree and sat on one of its branches for two hours, lecturing without pause on the complex issues of Partition. So, again very rational, very mad, someone climbing up a tree and then from there he is almost delivering a lecture to an audience about the complex issues of partition. Now, that image of this madhouse climbing a tree, preaching about partition becomes a very irrational image. But the same time this is also commentary on the irrationality of partition in the first place, why do you have a partition of this scale, slaughtering so many people, killing so many people purely because religious reasons. So, that is the most irrational you know thing, the most sinister thing, ok.

One lunatic got so involved in this India Pakistan debate that he became even crazier. So, you know and we are told that you know someone climbs the tree and sits in one of the branches for two hours, lecturing without pause on a complex issue of partition. When the guard told him to come down, he climbed higher. When they tried to frighten him with the threats, he replied "I will live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I will live in this tree, right here."

And again this is a very important beginning in the story where this whole sense of space becomes important, sense apropos of place. So, we have classified places, but then these people are more interested in spaces because spaces is where you psychologically and emotionally existentially lie - you are situated in those spaces.

Now, here we have a madman who climbs a tree and refused to come down from the tree and when the guards chase him up, he climbs even higher and say I will go to neither India nor Pakistan, I will sit here on this tree. Now, the reason why this passage is important is that it also brings in the very complex question of agency, right. So, the whole idea of agency, your will to articulate what you feel with the possibility of making

a change, the change may or may not come, but at least you have the freedom to articulate your will, to articulate what you feel. Now, here the madman you know he climbs a tree and sits on the tree and says this is where my place is, I should stay here forever, I should neither come down, nor go to India or Pakistan.

Now, a very quick word on the entire ontology of madness, because these people are mad quote unquote “medically mad” they are outside the entire penal code, so to speak, and then thus we see two men, two or three men who are actually criminals who should be subjected to the penal code they are actually disguising as mad men because you know madness also among other things, is a protection from penal code. So, as a madman who commits a crime, madman who commits an act of violence, then he or she is sort of reprimanded and given a different kind of punishment rather than a most civilian punishment which is more perhaps a brutal in quality, right.

So, there is this person who climbs a tree and sits on a tree, and decides not to come down and say that I will live here forever and I am neither going to go to India nor go to Pakistan and you know that idea, that choice of not going to either that is unavailable to all these people. So, you either have to go to India or Pakistan and even that you do not have a choice because if you belong to a certain religious identity you are predestined to go to a certain place and vice versa.

But you cannot really complicate, you cannot really say I am I belong to religion x and I will stay in country y. No, if you are in religion x you have to go to religion or country x and vice versa. So, that pre-distinct quality is what makes it so agency-less. And the only way agency can be claimed or articulated is through acts of madness. So, over here interestingly madness becomes an instrument of agency, an instrument of acquiring agency, of articulating agency and that is something which we have to keep in mind very carefully.

With much difficulty, they eventually coaxed him down. When he reached the ground he wept and embraced his Hindu and Sikh friends, distraught at the idea that they would leave him and go to India. So, again look at this emotional bond between this madman, obviously, these are crazy behaviors, but the same time beneath the craziness despite the irrationality, they, the madmen, they end up displaying more human quality rather than the non-mad people. The non-mad people, the bureaucrats out there making all the big

decisions, they are the ones who come up with all the series of irrational decisions. And the seemingly irrational madmen in the inside the madhouse they reflect or they betray a more humane response apropos of each other, they all hug each other and weep at the prospect of leaving each other, right, ok.

One man had held an M.S degree and have been a radio engineer. He kept apart from all the other inmates, and spent all his time walking silently up and down a particular foot path in the garden. After hearing about the exchange, however, he turned on his clothes and ran, he turned in his clothes and ran naked all over the grounds.

So, again the whole idea of stripping and running naked is a very classical trope of madness, a very classical iconic image of madness, taking off your clothes and running. Now, we also get to know that he was an M.S degree holder, Master of Science, and he has also been a radio engineer. So, the radio becomes an important category over here, because you know as we know the historically, the entire idea of partition, the entire idea of independence, the entire announcement of independence, partition, all the major political decisions and articulations were done through the radio. So, the fact that the radio engineer is mad is obviously a symbolic you know presence in this madhouse.

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One lunatic got so involved in this India/Pakistan question that he became even crazier. One day he climbed a tree and sat on one of its branches for two hours, lecturing without pause on the complex issues of Partition. When the guards told him to come down, he climbed higher. When they tried to frighten him with threats, he replied: "I will live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I'll live in this tree right here!" With much difficulty, they eventually coaxed him down. When he reached the ground he wept and embraced his Hindu and Sikh friends, distraught at the idea that they would leave him and go to India.

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There was one fat Muslim lunatic from Chiniot who had been an enthusiastic Muslim League activist. He used to wash fifteen or sixteen times a day, but abandoned this habit overnight. His name was Mohammed Ali. One day he announced that he was the Qaid-e-Azam, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Seeing this, a Sikh lunatic declared: "Master Tara Singh. Blood would have flowed, except that both were reclassified as dangerous lunatics and confined to separate quarters."

<https://www.wordsofthecolors.org/article/fat-sikh-singh>



There was one fat Muslim lunatic from Chiniot who had been an enthusiastic Muslim League Activist. The Muslim League as you know was a major political party which was obviously, directed against imperialism and you know it supported the entire nationalist

movement, freedom movement. He used to wash fifteen or sixteen times a day, but abundant in the habit overnight. His name was Muhammed Ali. One day he announced that he was Qaid-e-Azem, Muhammed Ali Jinnah. Seeing this, a Sikh lunatic declared himself to be Master Tara Singh. Blood would have flowed, except that both were reclassified as dangerous lunatics and confined to separate quarters.

So, again look at the irrational affiliations, the Muslim person is claiming to be Muhammed Ali Jinnah in his schizophrenic mind, saying that a Sikh lunatic, he calls himself Master Tara Singh, another big spiritual leader, spiritual slash political leader for the Sikhs. So, you know we have this constant claim through certain figures which obviously make you know which is invested with cultural investments, with cultural affiliations, with cultural prestige for instance. So, one madman imagines he is Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the other mad man imagines he is Master Tara Singh. And they almost come to loggerheads with each other except for the guards who stopped them.

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10/15/2019

Toba Tek Singh - Words Without Borders

There was also a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore who had gone mad over an unhappy love affair. He was distressed to hear that Amritsar was now in India, because his beloved was a Hindu girl from that city. Although she had rejected him, he had not forgotten her after losing his mind. For this reason he cursed the Muslim leaders who had split India into two parts, so that his beloved remained Indian while he became Pakistani.

When news of the exchange reached the madhouse, several lunatics tried to comfort the lawyer by telling him that he would be sent to India, where his beloved lived. But he didn't want to leave Lahore, fearing that his practice would not thrive in Amritsar.

In the European Ward there were two Anglo-Indian lunatics. They were very worried to hear that the English had left after granting independence to India. In hushed tones, they spent hours discussing how this would affect their situation in the madhouse. Would the European Ward remain, or would it disappear? Would they be served English breakfasts? What, would they be forced to eat poisonous bloody Indian chapattis instead of bread?

One Sikh had been an inmate for fifteen years. He spoke a strange language of his own, constantly repeating this nonsensical phrase: "Upri gur di annexe di be-dhiyan o mung di daal di laiteen."² He never slept. According to the guards, he hadn't slept a wink in fifteen years. Occasionally, however, he would rest by propping himself against a wall.

His feet and ankles had become swollen from standing all the time, but in spite of these physical problems he refused to lie down and rest. He would listen with great concentration whenever there was discussion of India, Pakistan and the forthcoming lunatic exchange. Asked for his opinion, he would reply with great seriousness: "Upri gur di annexe di be-dhiyan o mung di daal di di Pakistan gornament."³



Later he replaced "of di Pakistan gornament" with "of di Toba Tek Singh gornament." He also started asking the other inmates where Toba Tek Singh was, and to which country it belonged. But nobody knew whether it was in Pakistan or India. When they argued the question they only became more confused. After all, Sialkot had once been in India, but was apparently now in Pakistan. Who knew whether Lahore, which was now in Pakistan, might not go over to India tomorrow? Or whether all of India might become Pakistan? And was there any guarantee that both Pakistan and India would not one day vanish altogether?

This Sikh lunatic's hair was unkempt and thin. Because he washed so rarely, his hair and beard had matted together, giving him a frightening appearance. But he was a harmless fellow. In fifteen years, he had never fought with anyone.

The attendants knew only that he owned land in Toba Tek Singh district. Having been a prosperous landlord, he suddenly lost his mind. So his relatives bound him with heavy chains and sent him off to the madhouse.

His family used to visit him once a month. After making sure that he was in good health, they would go away again. These family visits continued for many years, but stopped when the India/Pakistan troubles began.

This lunatic's name was Bashan Singh, but everyone called him Toba Tek Singh. Although he had very little sense of time, he seemed to know when his relatives were to visit. He would tell the officer in charge that his visit was impending. On the day itself he would wash his body thoroughly and comb and oil his hair. Then he would put on his best clothes and go to meet his relatives.



There was also a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore who had gone mad over an unhappy love affair. He was distressed to hear that Amritsar was now in India because his beloved was a Hindu girl from the city. Although she had rejected him, he would not have forgotten her after losing his mind. For this reason he cursed the Muslim leaders who had split India into two parts, so that his beloved remained Indian while he became Pakistani.

Now, again we have a Hindu lawyer from Lahore you know who is under stress because Amritsar is in India you know because he loved a girl from the city, obviously, what he does not know and it is the dramatic irony that Amritsar will go to India eventually you know, and then you know this old distress would be even compounded because you know he would not be able to travel. And again this whole ban on travelling becomes interesting because what used to be a free flow, free flowing access to different spaces suddenly is banned by different political permissions and all that a permission becomes quite discursive in quality.

Although she had rejected him, he had not forgotten her after losing his mind. For this reason he cursed the Muslim leaders who had split India into both parts, into two parts, so that his beloved will remain an Indian while he became a Pakistani. Obviously, the dramatic irony here is he does not know that he was sent to India as well because he is a Hindu lawyer from Lahore and you know because he does not have any presumably he does not have any relatives, and even if he did have relatives, it was decided that you know the Hindus would be sent from Pakistan to India. So, he would come to Amritsar as well.

When news of the exchange reached the madhouse, several lunatics tried to comfort the lawyer by telling him that he would be sent to India, where his beloved lived. But he did not want to leave Lahore fearing that his practice would not thrive in Amritsar. So, again look at this is a comic quality over here where he is sort of thinking about his practice at the same time. He is saying, ok, I cannot go to Lahore, I cannot go to Amritsar because my entire practice is over here. So, my beloved is in Amritsar, but I cannot go because I have to make money, etcetera.

So, all these little obsessions with money and petty problems, they play out against the bigger backdrop of the partition, the irrationality of partition, the violence of partition, the epistemic violence of partition, epistemic being the level of knowledge. So, the knowledge narrative is getting you know violated, it is getting defamiliarized and therein lies the partition, therein lies the violence, right.

And now we come to the other comic quality over here. In the European Ward there were two Anglo-Indian lunatics. So, we have different kind of racial and cultural categories over here. In European Ward there were two Anglo-Indian lunatics. They were very

worried to hear that the English had left after granting independence to India. In hushed tones they spent hours discussing how this would affect the situation in the madhouse. Would the European Ward remain, or would it disappear? Would they would they be served English breakfasts? What, would be they forced to eat, what would they be forced to eat poisonous [body/bloody]- bloody Indian chapattis instead of bread?

So, again look at the anxiety, look at the concerns over here by these two Anglo-Indian lunatics. So, now, the first thing they think about is you know, would there be a European Ward at all, would they be a ward for the quote unquote “non-native” which is where they are presumably at this point of time, would they have served English breakfast, would they have proper English breakfast, would they chapattis which is you know flat bread made in Indian style which is something they resent presumably, right.

So, the whole idea of Anglo-Indians become important. I will stop at this point today, but just want to spend a little time talking about the Anglo-Indians. And obviously, Anglo-Indians were products, the generations which emerge out of miscegenation, out of quote unquote you know sometimes legitimate, sometimes illegitimate affairs between Englishman and native woman.

So, they were the mixed breed, they were the hybrid breed out of colonialism, but interestingly we find that Anglo-Indians you know they are the ones who get doubly discriminated at all points of time, because the English do not want to own them, they disowned them because they are born of the illegitimate offspring of affairs between Englishman and native woman. And Indians post-independence also treated them badly because they remain as a remnant of the white sahib, the remnant of the white man and which who is now powerless, who is now agency-less. So, now, it is a good time to attack them. So, the Anglo-Indians are a very anxious presence apropos of partition and post partition.

And obviously, we find that the entire anxiety is couched over here, through some very deliberately flippant rhetoric, some very deliberately flippant vocabulary such as for instance they are talking about how they will get actual good breads or would there be and would they have to suffer bloody Indian chapatti as I mentioned, right.

So, you know chapatti, bread, the absence of the European Ward all these become very symbolic anxiety. So, would there be European ward at all now that the English are

leaving or would they have to sleep within the same bed and same series of bed with the natives? So, there is obviously going to be a change in everything and that is something which they are obsessed with, and then the final question obviously, here is would they be served English breakfast which is something they hitherto had or will they be subjected to the Indian bread or the chapatti instead of the English bread.

So, let us stop at this point today. I will see again just very quickly recapitulate and summarize again for you. This entire story about irrationality and madness inside the madhouse, the questions which are asked among the madman to each other are very irrational question, are very absurd questions, are very sometimes funny questions. But the fun, and the absurdity and the irrationality of these questions are precisely and deliberately done and dramatized, so as to question the absurd quality of partition in the first place, you know because absurdity comes out of absurdity in the story. The more absurd the partition was historically, the more absurd questions are over here as well.

So, from the next class we will see how the character the main protagonist in the story is described in great details and how it becomes a symbol of unflowing time, a frozen time which is sort of almost anatomically embodiedly represented in his being, the fact that time does not flow anymore, and he remembers something many years ago, when you know everyone was different he had his very small child. However, he finds it difficult to remember something which happened to him recently and that character Bishan saying is a really moving character in partition fiction and he is someone who is who we will take up the next lecture.

But suffice it to say, this story at this point till this point we will see how this question of agency-less-ness begins to come in, as mad men became you know agency-less in a very literal sense, right. So, they are madmen, they're doubly marginalized inside a Lahore asylum. And again this Lahore Amritsar locations are very important because like I said the geopolitical reclassification is interesting because that also means also entails the reclassified thoughts or codes in mind which is obviously a violent process of forgetting you know denarrativizing something. You get out of a narrative, you go and join some other narrative, an entire process takes place through disruption, defamiliarization which is something which we will talk about in more details in the next lecture.

Thank you for your attention.