

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Week 4 Lecture 2: Toba Tek Singh Part 2
Length: 21:56

(Refer Slide Time: 00:16)



(Introduction by Mridula starts)

Hello everybody. Today I will be giving a summary on the short story Toba Tek Singh written by Saadat Hasan Manto. Toba Tek Singh is considered to be one of the best short stories written on the theme of Partition. The story opens a couple of years after the India-Pakistan Partition and the story sets in Lahore Lunatic Asylum. As the story opens, the situation is extremely tense in the asylum as the news of the exchange of lunatics have crept in.

According to the final agreement that is signed by the two countries, the Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistan will be sent to India and Muslim lunatics from India will be sent to Pakistan and a date was fixed for this. Asylum dwellers are very much confused about this whole process of agreement and they know nothing about this newly-formed Pakistan. They wanted to know whether they were in India or in Pakistan and they wondered that if they were in Pakistan then how come a little while ago they were in India.

A series of interesting episodes takes place inside the asylum which invokes a lot of questions in the minds of the readers about this whole process of Partition. There is this one lunatic who climbs up a tree and orates for two hours on India-Pakistan problems. There is another Muslim lunatic who declares himself as Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Sikh lunatic who calls him Master Tara Singh and they begin to abuse each other.

There is a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore who is heartbroken about the Partition as his beloved is now in Amritsar. Then when it comes to the Anglo-Indian lunatics who are in the asylum they are worried much about what will be served for the breakfast and whether they will get a separate European ward. You can see that all these lunatics have their own problems and they are worrying very much, are very much perturbed about this whole incident.

The story then focuses on the titular character Bishen Singh who is also known as Toba Tek Singh. He was brought to this asylum some fifteen years ago. He was initially a prosperous farmer who, from the village Toba Tek Singh. When he hears of this whole proposition he gets obsessed about the location of Toba Tek Singh and he questions his fellow inmates about it. A few days before the proposed exchange, Bishen Singh's friend Fazal Din, visits him and delivers the news about Bishen Singh's family's relocation to India.

He seems very much disinterested in all his, all these affairs and what he wants to know is the location, like where... he just wants to know where Toba Tek Singh is. Finally the day of exchange comes and lunatics are taken to the Wagah border. The whole process turns out to be a very difficult task as the lunatics were out of control. Some refused to come out of the bus. Few broke loose. Some ran naked. Some squabbled and others cried or roared with laughter.

When it was Bishen Singh's task, turn, for the exchange he asked one of the officers where Toba Tek Singh was. And when he understands that it is in Pakistan he turns away and runs back, and all the officers try to catch hold of him and they try to move him back to India but he refuses to budge. And then they just leave him for some time because they think that he is not really sound in mind, so they thought okay, let us wait for some time and then see what happens.

And then shortly before the sunrise, a scream is heard from Toba Tek Singh who is now lying flat face forward onto the ground and his body remained in No Man's Land between the two barbed-wire fences that divided India and Pakistan. That is how the story ends.

You can see that Toba Tek Singh is a very powerful satire on the reckless manner in which the Partition of India and Pakistan took place. By placing the story in an asylum, Manto takes the liberty to question the idea of sanity. At the end of the story we are compelled to think whether it is truly the clinically insane people who are mad or whether it is the world outside them.

(Introduction by Mridula ends)

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(Professor-Professor communication starts)

Professor Divya: Thank you, Mridula for that summary of Toba Tek Singh. I just wanted to reiterate one point, the Partition has become reckless, you used the word reckless so I am just kind of commenting on that. It has become reckless because the misplanning of the British administrators, you know the speed with which the partitioning of the two countries were done is one of the main reasons for that immense amount of bloodshed.

So we need to keep that constantly in mind the role played by the Barrister Cyril Radcliffe who did not have a massive experience of this huge country and he was invited to do the division of the two. So that idea of the colonial misadministration is massively responsible

for this kind of chaotic scenes, very violent scenes during the Partition. So that is something we would like to keep in mind. And we have done another story, Crossing the Ravi by Gulzar and I want to see if we can draw some parallels between that story, that very brief story

Mridula: Yeah

Professor Divya: and Toba Tek's story. Both are, Toba Tek Singh is very, very iconic of this Partition narrative and Gulzar is also well-known because of its poignant ending, you know. So, I was wondering if you are able to draw some comparisons off the top of your mind between these two stories. What are your thoughts?

Mridula: Definitely these two stories talk about the Partition, very like; it is very hard, disheartening to listen to such stories. When it comes to Toba Tek Singh there is an element of, distancing effect I feel because this is, when you read this story we think that, this is happening in asylum and all these are lunatics but there is definitely an underlying meaning behind this whole thing and he wants to show that we are all like these lunatics and this country has become a big madhouse.

When it comes to the other story, it speaks to us directly. It is very emotional. It talks about a father's dilemma, it talks about a son's dilemma, a husband's dilemma and it is so sad to, the ending is really sad. The very fact that he had to, he himself is the cause for the death of his son who is alive.

Professor Divya: Yeah

Mridula: And in one way that story talks about the birth of the country...

Professor Divya: I want to pick up from some of the points that you have mentioned in your commentary. One is that we get a distancing effect in Toba Tek Singh, that is I think one of the reasons for that distancing effect is that, that story happens after the Partition.

Mridula: Yeah

Professor Divya: If you look at the story, it says 'a few years after the Partition, you know the governments decided to exchange the lunatics.' You know there is a literal distancing from the agony of the Partition, from the trauma, you know visceral, literal trauma of the Partition. That is one of the reasons.

It's a few years down the line, you know that the dust has settled and people, kind of you know, but at the same time while we think that this is few years down the line that is also this confusion on the part of the lunatics some of whom are not very sure where a particular region belongs to, whether it belongs to Pakistan or to India.

So that again takes us back into the, you know the moment of the Partition when people were confused. So there is a past as well as a present which creates the, you know a sense of confusion, right and even the timeline seems to be blurred.

Mridula: Yes

Professor Divya: Right, because of the back and forth movement but in the case of Crossing the Ravi, it happens in the middle when people are migrating. Migration is one of the important tropes, trope of this, trope as well as the feature of this Partition, people moving across the borders, so it is very immediate in that regard and another point that comes to mind is the fracturing of families.

That's the common theme in both these stories. We have Toba Tek Singh being taken away from his family just as the other lunatics have been too, so they become individuals disconnected with their families and with their land. The lunatic becomes a kind of representative, you know, figures for that kind of idea of being divided from your near and dear, right. The same thing happens in Crossing the Ravi, isn't it?

Mridula: Yes

Professor Divya: So with Darshan Singh leaving his parents behind, the mother in the Gurudwara, the father dead, and he is moving forward to a new country to make a new life and along the way, he loses his progeny, his descendants. So the family is being split time and again because of various reasons. So fracturing of identity, shattering of relationships becomes totemic of this idea of Partition itself. So anything else that you can think about in terms of these two stories?

Mridula: The idea of religion to some extent, in Crossing the River you can see that the whole concept of him feeling secure in dargah...

Professor Divya: Gurudwara

Mridula: Gurudwara, yes, he knows that all of them are going through a dark phase but there is a sense of community and although he knows that he will not be really safe out there but by seeing that there are a lot of people who are there, who are going through the same problems, that gives you a sense of assurance that we are not really alone out there.

Professor Divya: Yeah

Mridula: And in Toba Tek Singh you can see again, religion in, you can see that there is, there is no, people are not divided based on religion or caste or community out there, everybody is same, and there is, I even pointed out that there is this lunatic who goes up, climbs up a tree and he goes on giving people lectures on the problem that India and Pakistan faces. And then as soon as he comes down, he hugs his fellow inmates and he says that 'I don't want to let go.' Although there is some difference between them, he is a Muslim and other people are Hindus, he hugs a Hindu, and there is blurring of religion or whatever, how people are divided...

Professor Divya: Yeah

Mridula: That I think, it is a predominant trope.

Professor Divya: Yeah. I think there is a weird sense of community among the lunatics. Lunacy becomes the bond, the idea of lunacy, either literal or metaphoric or convenient because there are also some murderers, masquerading as lunatics, isn't it? So lunacy becomes a bond that links all these individuated figures in that, you know institution.

And they are also very kind of, weirdly self-aware, you know strangely self-aware at moments. One example would be that a lawyer, who despite of being so much in love with his beloved, you know who has jilted him and he still kind of longs for her and things like that but you know he also is aware that if he goes to India he will not be able to set up his profession. He will not flourish because all his roots, all his contacts, all his community are back in a different country. So more than the importance that he gives to romance, you know the survival, the profession, your career, identity is rooted to the land, you know in which you are born. So that kind of, you know self-consciousness is also the subtext, you know amongst this bunch of lunatics. So that is also very interesting. Despite their lunacy they are also very-very, you know aware.

Mridula: Yes

Professor Divya: So that also creates a strange, you know effect on the reader, isn't it? And where they can comment on these various political leaders and things like that, isn't it?

Mridula: And this idea that there are these murderers who are also dwellers of this asylum and although they are sane mentally, they are not able to make out what is happening.

Professor Divya: Yes, absolutely

Mridula: But these lunatics, to some extent, they know this whole process and they are aware but when compared to them, they are much more sane but they are like, they are in the process of insanity because of this.

Professor Divya: Correct, correct so the underlying idea seems to be, nobody could make sense of this cataclysmic event which is a direct legacy of this colonial rule and I think that is something we should not forget when we get involved within the mechanics of the text that this historical, intervention on the part of an empire is a major reason for this kind of schizophrenic understanding of the state of affairs on the part of the lunatics.

There is another thing which is intriguing, the episodic nature or the character sketch that you get. There is less of plot, and more of character sketches. So you can see that Manto wants to kind of, give you a sample from every walk of life in the society, so which is why we get that sketches instead of very coherent plot.

There is hardly any plot. They are supposed to be exchanged. They are taken to the border, one person does not want to cross over because his land is back in Pakistan and he dies, right? There is hardly any plot. It is very bare-boned kind of narrative trajectory that we have but there is a small world which kind of is given to, a familial world is given to Toba Tek Singh through his daughter, right, his neighbor who comes to have a chat, kind of gives us that glimpse, so it is a kind of much removed, family sketch that we get, twice removed but then we get that glimpse and that gives us that connection, the emotional connection, the very personal connection to Toba Tek Singh, the fact that he has lost his daughter and that his family has moved to India.

So I think while there is a kind of an episodic, character-driven kind of narrative that emotional connection is given through that little girl, young girl who is presently absent from

the story, so the trauma is kind of hidden. The trauma becomes the subtext and it is doubly tragic the father cannot realize, father cannot relate to that kind of agony the daughter has undergone, right, because he has gone mad. And all he can remember his lands, just as the lawyer is a kind of worried about his profession, Toba Tek Singh wants to belong to his village where his identity is anchored.

So that is something which is kind of hidden. But as you pointed out, in *Crossing the Ravi* it's very kind of, on the surface. It is immediate, two babies travelling on top of a train at this moment, immediately draws attention to that, you know, pathos associated with that kind of migration.

Mridula: I think Gulzar wants us to really feel what he wants us to feel in *Crossing the Ravi* because he dictates, 'okay this is this, this is that and this is how things are done.'

Professor Divya: Yeah

Mridula: But when it comes to Toba Tek Singh it is up to the readers. We can feel for any of these characters. And there are a lot of underlying emotions behind all these characters, not just the titular character. *Crossing the River*, it is extremely emotional because the writer wanted it to be so. He wants us to be aware of the bloodshed and things that had happened during that time and it is very evident. But here it is not all that poignant but still there is still that sense of, we feel that we have that baggage with us when we read it.

Professor Divya: And it's very weird or strange that, you know there is no reaction from the parents, right, either Darshan Singh or Shahni when they realize that it's a live baby which has been thrown out of the top of the train. There is no comment from either, or the silence is deafening, wouldn't you think?

Mridula: Yes

Professor Divya: Instead what we have is other commentaries about the nation, you know.

Mridula: Yeah

Professor Divya: So you know, the personal reactions are deliberately kind of suppressed and that I thought was very interesting. It connects me to the other story, *In the Flood* which we were discussing earlier, that there is no reaction from Chennan when he sees the dead body of

the dog in the waters when he comes back once the flood has receded. We do not get any comment from him and that in itself, makes us feel massively for the character going through this kind of experience. So I thought that was pretty interesting, that the lack of voice on part of Shahni and Darshan Singh is very interesting.

So the other thing that I wanted to think about is, again we have talked about, you know the lunacy that is there in that moment of migration when they are not able to think through, individual thought processes are curtailed by the mass thought process. When Darshan Singh is forced to react, you know at the prompting of others, right and that is very interesting, and that compares, you know, in a different way with Toba Tek Singh who cannot be compelled by anybody to migrate. He resists that very,very strongly. So he is very, very individuated, isn't it, with strong feelings for what he believes to be right and wrong. So that mass psychosis is not affecting him, strangely. And another interesting thing is Toba Tek Singh is the name that the others give him.

Mridula: Yeah

Professor Divya: Right, so everybody sees him as being part of that village, so it is a sense that everybody has but nobody can do anything about it. So everybody knows he is the man from Toba Tek Singh village and he belongs to Toba Tek Singh but they cannot do anything, so he has to cross over that border to go back, to go home, to a different home. So there is awareness but people are vulnerable and helpless, that kind of feeling is also given in these stories.

Thank you for your thoughts.

(Professor-Professor communication ends)