

**Modern Indian Writing in Translation**  
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**Week 4 Lecture 3: Toba Tek Singh Part 3**  
**Length: 15:10**

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Good afternoon. Welcome to an afternoon discussion on Saadat Hasan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh'. Today we are going to take a look at how the short story is engaging the idea of politics of space. In this particular short story today we are going to look at the idea of dislocation, specifically the idea of spatial dislocation from the perspective of the central protagonist of the short story, Bishen Singh.

Most importantly, today since we are going to talk about place and space, we are going to include a particular idea known as the topographical imperative. Before we get into the discussion I need to elaborate a little about the idea of topographical imperative. Topographical imperative is a particular phrase which is used to notify the fact that how topography becomes an essential as well as a constant in the life of man.

In that sense how in this particular short story if we contextualize this, we need to understand how the identity of Bishen Singh becomes almost identical with the identity of the land where he belongs, that is the village of Toba Tek Singh. So I think that the idea of topographical imperative will be very very fundamental in understanding the politics of dislocation and space in the short story.

So I will start by reading the first paragraph. The contextualization of space has been one of the most fundamental concerns in the narratives that deal with the subject of dislocation. The discourse of locating the identity in an unpredictable chronotope is a primary emphasis of the narratives that portray the relationship between the individual and the place, in this case Bishen Singh and his village Toba Tek Singh.

Their causality and the direct proportionality that links both of these elements to mutually correspond and this mutual correspondence which I am talking about is very-very explicitly represented throughout the entire short story if we take a close look at it. The selective discourses of the postmodern condition that specifically deal with the narratives of Partition and diaspora are rooted in the process of realizing the plight of existence that oscillates between the unpredictable functions of origin and destination.

Now the functions of origin and destination, how do we contextualize this in this particular short story? If we look at the idea when Toba Tek Singh was actually imprisoned in the lunatic asylum in Pakistan, and after Partition if we see the discussions in which the asylum members as well as the prisoners are engaging themselves is about where exactly is the other country known as India, Hindustan, and where exactly in the other country known as Pakistan.

So they are basically highly confused with the idea of how a place that was previously included within the boundaries, within the geographical margins of Hindustan, how does something become a different place or a different nation altogether? So these narratives are inherently endowed with the complicated and disbalanced circumstances that are responsible for ensuing a chaos that disturbs the array of elements that are intertwined in the course of the narrative.

The narratives of space become a form of constant as I was saying and imperative, that remains as a prior condition of permanence for the inhabitants residing in a particular place. So we can imagine what exactly was the, how exactly was the position of Bishen Singh jeopardized when he was said that he was going to be part of an exchange where the people from Pakistan whose families have already transferred themselves to Hindustan, they will be sent to Hindustan for the sake of their families in spite of the fact that their native place will remain where it is.

So hence any form of action that challenges the imperative here, when the action that is challenging the topographical imperative of Bishen Singh is when he is pushed by the guards on the other side of the border into Hindustan. So hence, any form of action that challenges the imperative that exists between the land and its inhabitants entails an entirely different set of events that actually becomes more than just movement of people, like the physical movement of people from one place to another.

It is not merely a physical movement or transferring of people from one place to another because when Bishen Singh is actually forced to move from his, from the newly partitioned, newly created nation Pakistan into India, he is not only forced to move physically from one land to another. He is also forcefully, he is also forced to leave his memories. He is also forced to leave his history. He is also forced to leave everything that is connected to his identity that is connected to his life or was connected to his life in a small village of Toba Tek Singh. So an act of Partition however it can be justified politically, however it can be justified administratively, it is probably more difficult to be justified on the grounds of a personal, man's personal emotions, his own identification with an area and how exactly it is imposing a set of regulations and rules which doesn't come to him naturally.

When the natives are driven or evicted from the place of their origin they are not only denied their land, they are equally denied of their memories that are connected to it, their ancestry and most importantly they are denied of their life force. So the idea of land that is of concern in this paper is completely different from the contemporary idea of land.

In order to understand the form of consciousness of land that Manto's narrative is reflecting, we need to have a clear understanding of how a particular land exists today. Land today is considered just as a resource that consequently makes it a commodity in its use. The modern sensibility has defined it as a commodity that only exists to be utilized by man. On the contrary the narratives of Partition and diaspora actually elucidate land beyond its physicality.

They transcend the literal understanding of land into a metaphor of land and how it involves and engages the people who inhabit it. Hence Manto's Toba Tek Singh portrays the inconsideration of a system that simply demarcates the familiar topography, dislocates existence and assigns unfamiliar topographical metaphors that the people are expected to familiarize with.

So this paper intends to explore into the construct of land that undergoes a flux amid the confusion of Partition between India and Pakistan and how the inhabiting identities are turmoiled by the negation of the topographical imperative thereby giving rise to a politics of space that entails a liminality or a crisis in existence. I will quote a small quotation from Manto's writings.

‘To tell you the truth the world seemed full of sad people, those who slept on the uncovered stoops of shops as well as those who lived in the high-rise mansions. The man who walks about on foot worries that he does not have decent shoes to wear; the man who rides the automobile frets that he does not have the latest model car, so every man's complaint is valid in its own way; every man's wish is legitimate in its own right.’

Here if we contextualize the last line that ‘every man's wish is legitimate in its own right’ I think we can get to a point where we are able to articulate and substantiate what exactly was the psychological state of Bishen Singh where he actually is wishing to stay in his own land irrespective of any other consideration. So I think, yeah it is true that every man's wish is legitimate in its own right. The text uses the issue of Partition and the diplomatic agreement of exchanging the inmates of the lunatic asylum to look into the observations and reactions of the people to whom the disjuncture affected as an immediate awareness of reality.

So they have always been in an enclosed wall, so suddenly a whole new different thing that has taken over the nation which has been partitioned, it is something like an immediate awareness of reality that they have been in a different plane and suddenly all these things come and strike them at an instant. Manto dexterously sketches the characters in the story thereby showing that how, for the inmates the very idea of getting transferred to India is absolutely beyond imagination.

Their difficulty to understand the fact that how a place where they stayed known as Hindustan can become Pakistan; and if there is a separate place where they, if there is a separate Hindustan then where is the Pakistan shows how the unreliable narrative for the select few becomes the most realistic acceptance of the collective memory. The entire nation who are actually undergoing or who are going through this entire process of Partition, they know what the situation is.

So it is something which is, through revolt and also through acceptance has become a collective reality for most of the people which is completely different from the people who

are actually living inside the asylums. The author narrates the plot where he combines the presence and absence both in terms of the identity and the place with tremendous clarity. It is interesting to study how the characters in the asylum are attempting to figure out the new locations of Sialkot and Lahore. It actually portrays the realization that the attempt to find the center is also to find where the center is not.

So in a very clear sense we can find out that the idea of, the geographical idea of location has some, has almost undergone a huge amount of confusion so they don't know exactly where things are, where things used to be. So as usual they are kind of, in a pretty deep confusion. So Saadat Hasan Manto has taken a few lunatics, the ones who are popularly understood as people without sense, as his speakers and characters to portray the pandemonium and the mass hysteria entailed by the Partition which was ensued by the actions and the ideas of the sensible people, in that sense.

So the story is a live canvas of irony and satire but most importantly it is a comment on the most integrating relation and synthesis that man experiences with the place. So I would like to mention a few points regarding the source of the phrase topographical imperative. The phrase topographical imperative was used by Michael Branch in his essay 'Indexing American Possibilities, The Natural History Writings of Bartram, Wilson and Audubon'. The essay attempted to showcase the significance of land that actually became a cornerstone of creating a new culture in America. It foregrounded the importance of the landscape and the wilderness and how the natives perceived and conceived land as a fundamental factor to their existence. This idea certainly has an extensively relevant ground to this story by Manto. The moment when Bishen Singh dies in the No Man's Land between the borders of India and Pakistan, it echoes various notions, various memories where a man is actually left oscillating in a particular momentum where he exactly doesn't know where his destination would be.

It is not exactly a journey which we look, we are looking, we are trying to look at Bishen Singh's character, it's not a journey. What it actually is, is a system failed to assign Bishen Singh a new identity because Bishen Singh chose to assign, self-assign himself an identity of a small village. The nation is not of the concern in this respect. So the system failed to assign him a new identity in a new nation, neither did they allow him to restore his old identity in his own ancestral village in the newly found Pakistan.

Unfortunately, Bishen Singh remained and died as a non-assigned identity away from the hysteria of the partitioning countries which were wounded to the core. So it means that how this person remains away from the collective hysteria and dies a miserable death without much expectations from any of the two countries, just only expecting to stay close to the only place where he had been born and brought up, with whom he is actually, who he actually essentialises his existence.

And hence I believe that in spite of the dominant narratives of politics and discourse of, discourse regarding, in spite of the dominant narratives of politics there is something more interesting and intense in this case is that, of the politics of space, that is the understanding of how the identity of human being can be connected, deeply integrated.

So thank you, it was, it was great to discuss regarding this thing. We look forward to the next video.