


Trauma and Literature
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Lecture - 04
Manto's Toba Tek Singh - Part 3

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2/24/2020 Toba Tek Singh - Words Without Borders



Then his relatives stopped visiting him. Formerly he could predict their arrival, but now it was as though the voice inside him had been silenced. He very much wanted to see those people, who spoke to him sympathetically and brought gifts of flowers, sweets and clothing. Surely they could tell him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or India. After all, he was under the impression that they came from Toba Tek Singh, where his land was.

There was another lunatic in that madhouse who thought he was God. One day, Bhashan Singh asked him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or India. Guffawing, he replied: "Neither, because I haven't yet decided where to put it!"


Bhashan Singh begged this "God" to resolve the status of Toba Tek Singh and thus end his perplexity. But "God" was far too busy to deal with this matter because of all the other orders that he had to give. One day Bhashan Singh lost his temper and shouted: "Upri gur gur di annexe di be-dhiyana di mung di daal of wahay Guru ji wa Khalsa and wahay Guru ji ki fatah. Jo bolay so nahal sat akal!"

By this he might have meant: "You are the God of the Muslims. If you were a Sikh God then you would certainly help me."

A few days before the day of the exchange, one of Bhashan Singh's Muslim friends came to visit from Toba Tek Singh. This man had never visited the madhouse before. Seeing him, Bhashan Singh turned abruptly and started walking away. But the guard stopped him.

"He's come to visit you. It's your friend Fazluddin," the guard said.

Glancing at Fazluddin, Bhashan Singh muttered a bit. Fazluddin advanced and took him by the elbow. "I've been planning to visit you for ages, but I haven't had the time until now," he said. "All your relatives have gone safely to



Hello and welcome to this NPTEL course entitled Trauma and Literature where we are looking at Saadat Hasan Manto's short story Toba Tek Singh, which we will hopefully finish today. We will just move on from where we left last time. We talked about how the protagonist in the story, Bhashan Singh, becomes mad.

He develops a sixth sense about his relatives coming to visit him and we see how those activities, the relatives coming and visiting madmen in the asylum become interrupted because of the partition. It becomes unsafe for people to go on the streets for normal reasons. So we have this point on the screen where we just continue reading.

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spoke to him sympathetically and brought flowers, gifts of flowers, sweets and clothing. Surely, they could tell him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or India. After all, he was under the impression that they came from Toba Tek Singh where his land was."

So we see how the whole idea of identity over here becomes associated with your space. He is from Toba Tek Singh. Thus, that is what he wants to know. His only question in this entire discourse of partition is to know where Toba Tek Singh is currently situated.

No one seems to be able to give him a satisfactory response to that because everyone is encouraged by the idea of India and Pakistan. We have over here two grand narratives which are being formed. Those grand narratives are consuming essentially the local narrative, the immediate, the personal narrative of Toba Tek Singh.

His association with this place becomes so extreme and so organic, that he almost becomes Toba Tek Singh, almost becomes the space. His confusion over here, which is political as well as existential, is that no one seems to know where his place is, where his sense of identity is. He is from that particular place, so essentially he is that particular place and no one seems to know what that is.

Essentially, his own identity as a person, as a self, as a subject, has been interrupted by this sudden violence of partition. "There was another lunatic in the madhouse who thought that he was God. One day Bishan Singh, asks him whether Toba Tek Singh was in Pakistan or India, Guffawing, he replied, "Neither, because I have not decided where to put it." So again, we have this mimicry of Godlike activities.

We may have this mimicry of Godlike creatures over here. The whole point is that's part of the satire package in the story, where the narrative is trying to tell us that Gods in high heavens are trying to decide where India would go and Pakistan would go and Toba Tek Singh would go.

And that decision is done at some level from which the common man is completely disconnected, unattached.

This disconnected inaccessibility becomes a major part of the crisis of agency in the story. There is no agency, there is no free will because you are disconnected from the decision-making bodies and the Gods over here who appear obviously as satires. For example, the whole idea of the whimsical God, the fact that God has not decided where to put India or Pakistan or where to put Toba Tek Singh.

The whimsical irrational God figure in the story is symbolic and reflective of the irrationality of the partition as such as a political movement. "Bishan Singh begged this God to resolve this status of Toba Tek Singh and thus end this perplexity. But, God was far too busy to deal with this matter, because of all the other orders that he had to give. One day Bishan Singh lost his temper and shouted again."

The whole point is that you are the God of a certain community. If you are a God of my community, you will help me out. Again, if you take a look at the nonsense rhetoric that he is uttering all the time - he keeps talking about the moong ki daal.

The moong ki daal is the metaphor of the common man's sustenance, a metaphor of the common man's condition, and the refrain throughout the story is that moong ki daal is deteriorating because Gods up there have no time to deal with the moong ki daal. So the moong ki daal is obviously his food. But that moong dal becomes a metaphor for sustenance or nourishment to keep the common man going.

The fact that no one is concerned about that, the quality deteriorating every day is obviously reflective of the condition of the common man where this normal basis sustenance is deteriorating every day, is worsening every day. And that worsening becomes something to which the gods are completely indifferent.

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By this he might have meant: "You are the God of the Muslims. If you were a Sikh God then you would certainly help me."

A few days before the day of the exchange, one of Bashan Singh's Muslim friends came to visit from Toba Tek Singh. This man had never visited the madhouse before. Seeing him, Bashan Singh turned abruptly and started walking away. But the guard stopped him.

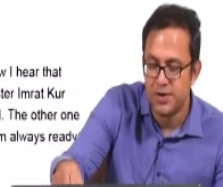
"He's come to visit you. It's your friend Fazluddin," the guard said.

Glancing at Fazluddin, Bashan Singh muttered a bit. Fazluddin advanced and took him by the elbow. "I've been planning to visit you for ages, but I haven't had the time until now," he said. "All your relatives have gone safely to India. I helped them as much as I could. Your daughter Rup Kur . . ."

Bashan Singh seemed to remember something. "Daughter Rup Kur," he said.

Fazluddin hesitated, and then replied: "Yes, she's . . . she's also fine. She left with them."

Bashan Singh said nothing. Fazluddin continued: "They asked me to make sure you were all right. Now I hear that you're going to India. Give my salaams to brother Balbir Singh and brother Wadhada Singh. And to sister Imrat Kur also . . . Tell brother Balbir Singh that I'm doing fine. One of the two brown cows that he left has calved. The other one calved also, but it died after six days. And . . . and say that if there's anything else I can do for them, I'm always ready. And I've brought you some sweets."



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"Fazluddin advanced and took him by the elbow. "I have been planning to visit you for ages, but I have not had time till now" he said. "All your relatives have gone to India. I helped them as much as I could. Your daughter Rup Kur" and then there is silence over here. And this becomes obviously a very sinister silence. "Your daughter Rup Kur..." and this is an ellipsis.

This is something very important for us to notice. "Bishan Singh seemed to remember something. "Daughter, Rup Kur," he said. Fazluddin hesitated. He then replied, "Yes, she is also fine. She left with them." Now, this becomes a very cryptic sentence, a very almost sinister sentence. Something really dark and foreboding about the half information about a sentence.

It is never clear who is this them over here. Whether the daughter was abducted, or the daughter was taken away by members of another community, whether any violence done to her is never clear.

There is a silence where Fazluddin is saying, "your daughter" also, by the way, she went with them. This awkwardness, this difficulty of conversation, this interrupted conversation, and these half-sentences all become very important parts in his entire exchange, which obviously is suggestive of something that may have happened to the daughter, something brutal may have happened to the daughter, something very sinister may have happened to the daughter, which has never been spelled out.

And this whole idea of not spelling out becomes important in Manto, the whole idea of half information or half chopped information becomes important for Manto as well. They are throughout this discourse, throughout the stories.

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Bashan Singh handed the package over to the guard. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked.

Fazluddin was taken aback. "Toba Tek Singh? Where is it? It's where it's always been," he replied.



"In Pakistan or in India?" Bashan Singh persisted.

Fazluddin became flustered. "It's in India. No no, Pakistan."

Bashan Singh walked away, muttering: "Upar di gur gur di annexe di dhiyana di mung di daal of di Pakistan and Hindustan of di dar fatay mun!"

Finally all the preparations for the exchange were complete. The lists of all the lunatics to be transferred were finalized, and the date for the exchange itself was fixed.

The weather was very cold. The Hindu and Sikh lunatics from the Lahore madhouse were loaded into trucks under police supervision. At the Waghga border post, the Pakistani and Indian officials met each other and completed the necessary formalities. Then the exchange began. It continued all through the night.



"Bishan Singh said nothing. Fazluddin continued, "They asked me to make sure you are all right. Now I hear that you are also going to India. Give my salaams to your brother Balbir Singh and brother Wadhada Singh and the sister Imrat Kur. Tell Balbir Singh that I am doing fine. One of the two brown cows that he left has calved. The other one calved also but it died after six

days. And ... and say that if there is anything else I can do for them I am always ready and I have brought you some sweets.”

Now observe the way in which this entire exchange is so local, so topical, so immediate, so organic and so emotional in quality. He is talking about the cows in his neighbourhood, the cows which have given birth to more calves, and how one of the calves has died in six days’ time.

All these very local narratives become important for these people, whereas everyone else is consumed with the grand narrative of India and Pakistan. Everyone is just engrossed in where India is going, where Pakistan is going. Those become the important parameters, political importance, the important parameters to identity. Whereas with these men, all they care about all they know about all they want to know about is where Toba Tek Singh is.

What is happening in the village? What has happened to the cows? What has happened to the calves? How many cows have been born ever since he has gone away? And obviously, you can see the emotion to connect this Muslim person with the brothers of Toba Tek Singh or Bishan Singh. He talks about Balbir Singh, he talks about Wadhada Singh presumably the brothers of Bishan Singh.

And how Fazluddin the Muslim is so emotionally connected to them. He has brought him, sweets. And he tells Bishan Singh that I am happy to do anything for you, to help you in any way I can.

"Bishan Singh handed the package over to the guard. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked. Fazluddin was taken aback. "Toba Tek Singh, where is it? It is always, it is where it has always been," he replied. "In Pakistan or in India?" Bishan Singh persisted. Fazluddin became flustered. "It is in India. Oh no, no Pakistan.”

Again, this confusion that he does not know where it is. First, he said India then he said Pakistan. Because obviously no one quite knows the geopolitical location of the small villages because no one is concerned about these things. Everyone is talking about the big cities like Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Amritsar, and Ludhiana.

All these places become important in the discourse of partition. Whereas a small place like Toba Tek Singh becomes almost no man's land. It becomes a land that no one quite knows where that particular terracotta is. So that particular territory becomes unimportant. It becomes insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Then Bishan Singh again mutters the moong ki daal refrain talking about the commenting about worsening condition of moong ki daal and he walks away.

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Finally all the preparations for the exchange were complete. The lists of all the lunatics to be transferred were finalized, and the date for the exchange itself was fixed.

The weather was very cold. The Hindu and Sikh lunatics from the Lahore madhouse were loaded into trucks under police supervision. At the Wahga border post, the Pakistani and Indian officials met each other and completed the necessary formalities. Then the exchange began. It continued all through the night.

It was not easy to unload the lunatics and send them across the border. Some of them didn't even want to leave the trucks. Those who did get out were hard to control because they started wandering all over the place. When the guards tried to clothe those lunatics who were naked, they immediately ripped the garments off their bodies. Some cursed, some sang, and others fought. They were crying and talking, but nothing could be understood. The madwomen were creating an uproar of their own. And it was cold enough to make your teeth chatter.

<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/toba-tek-singh>



Now next we come to the final section of the story where the exchange day happens, the day of the exchange takes place. All the madmen are brought together and it is very bureaucratic. They are ticked off against their identities, their religious identities, and accordingly sent across the borders. We have the Hindu madman in Pakistan across the border and with the Muslim madman across the border in India, and there is an exchange program going on.

The absurdity of the whole visual narrative is important for us to understand. Visualize there is a group of madmen across the borders, who are sent across borders because of religious affiliations. Obviously, they could not care less about the religious affiliations. All they want to do is go back to their original locations, their original neighborhoods, original villages, which is obviously an unavailable option for them.

The unavailability of option, unavailability of agency becomes important over here as it is throughout the story. "Finally, all the preparations for the exchange were complete. The list of all the lunatics who were to be transferred were finalized and the date for the exchange itself was fixed. The weather was very cold. The Hindu and the Sikh lunatics from the Lahore madhouse were loaded into trucks under police supervision."


"At the Wagah border post, the Pakistani and Indian officials met each other and completed the necessary formalities. Then the exchange began. It continued all through the night." Again, look at the entire bureaucratization of the whole process. It becomes a cold, clinical, bureaucratic process with complete indifference to the human emotional needs, with complete indifference to human emotional wishes or desires or nostalgia and nothing there is important.

There were lists of paper, a list of people and they are ticking against you know the paperwork that is there. It becomes a bureaucratic exchange, just a cartographic division that caused the partition and the violence ensuing it. "It was not easy to unload the lunatics and send them across the border. Some of them did not even want to leave the trucks."

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You can have this entire ruckus as a spectacle over here, the madwoman screaming and some madmen are taking their clothes, the guards are trying to tame them. But the entire anarchy over here becomes interesting because the entire anarchy, the spectacle of anarchy over here becomes a reflection of the confusion that the partition created in the minds of people.

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Most of the lunatics were opposed to the exchange. They didn't understand why they should be uprooted and sent to some unknown place. Some, only half-mad, started shouting "Long live Pakistan!" Two or three bravos erupted between Sikh and Muslim lunatics who became enraged when they heard the slogans.

When Bhashan Singh's turn came to be entered in the register, he spoke to the official in charge. "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked. "Is it in Pakistan or India?"

The official laughed. "It's in Pakistan," he replied.


Hearing this, Bhashan Singh leapt back and ran to where his remaining companions stood waiting. The Pakistani guards caught him and tried to bring him back to the crossing point, but he refused to go.

"Toba Tek Singh is here!" he cried. Then he started raving at top volume: "Upar di gur gur di annexe di be-dhiyana mang di daal of di Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan!"

The officials tried to convince him that Toba Tek Singh was now in India. If by some chance it wasn't they would send it there directly, they said. But he wouldn't listen.

Because he was harmless, the guards let him stand right where he was while they got on with their work. He was quiet all night, but just before sunrise he screamed. Officials came running from all sides. After fifteen years on his feet, he was lying face down on the ground. India was on one side, behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side, behind another fence. Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle, on a piece of land that had no name.

¹ "The Landowner" ² Literally: "The lack of contemplation and lentils of the annexe of the above raw sugar of the lantern." ³ "Gornament": Punjabi pronunciation of the English "government."



Now, most of the lunatics were opposed to the exchange. So again, the question of agency becomes important. Just because you are a particularly religious person does not mean you have to be sent across the border, if you do not want to. But wanting or not wanted becomes completely secondary over here. So most of them were opposed to the exchange, and they do not want to be exchanged at all.

But obviously, they have no agency here. So it is decided for them. And they have to just obey what has been decided very reluctantly, and sometimes violently. They did not understand why they should be uprooted and sent to some unknown place. The whole question of familiarity and home becomes a sort of radicalized away because the idea of home becomes important because their home is where they are from.

Then they are not told the home is somewhat different because of your religious location. Again, we come back to the original point that the religious identity becomes the overarching identity.

All other identities, linguistic identity, gastronomic identity, cultural identity, spatial identity, all become secondary compared to the grand narrative of religious identity.

If you are a Hindu or a Muslim that is the deciding factor in terms of sending across to a particular place. So they did not want to go. All of them opposed the movement and they did not know why they should be uprooted and sent to another place. "Some only half mad started shouting, "Long live Pakistan." Again, the madmen were shouting long live Pakistan.

"Two or three brawls erupted between Sikh and Muslim lunatics who became enraged when they heard the slogans. It became a very hostile environment again, a very cold climate. When Bishan Singh's turn came to be entered in the register, he spoke to the official in charge, "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" he asked. "Is it in Pakistan or India?" The official laughed. "It is in Pakistan," he replied."

"Hearing this Bishan Singh leapt back and ran to where his remaining companions stood waiting. The Pakistani guards caught him and tried to bring him back to the crossing point, but he refused to go." He is just told and obviously the person who told him that he was mocking him. He had no idea either. He said it was in Pakistan. By hearing this Bishan Singh refused to leave Pakistan because he wants to stay where Toba Tek Singh is.

That is the home for him. That is identity for him. That is religion for him essentially. "Toba Tek Singh is here!" he cried. Then he started raving at top volume "Upar di gur gur di annexe di be-dhiyana mang di daal of di Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan!" Again, the moong ki daal question comes back. That is his sustenance, that is his metaphor for sustenance and nourishment.

He wants to know, he has found out, he has realized, he has been told, and he is convinced now, that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan. "The officials tried to convince him but Toba Tek Singh was now in India. If by some chance it was not there they would send it there directly they said. But

he would not listen." So obviously it is a false promise made to him. The officials are telling him to get rid of him.

'Oh, it is in India, do not worry about it. If it is not in India we will send it to India' - as if they have the agency, as if they have the power and authority to do it. However he would not listen to them anymore. He is completely convinced now that it is in Pakistan and they are trying to uproot him from where he is. And he would not want to be uprooted.

He does not want to be dislocated from his identity, because Toba Tek Singh is his identity essentially. "Because he was harmless, the guards let him stand right where he was, while they got on with the work." Again, the bureaucratization of process becomes important, becoming a mindless machine carrying on executing a particular work, which is pre-programmed to do.

"He was quiet all night, but just before sunrise he screamed. Officials came running from both sides. After fifteen years on his feet he was lying face down on the ground. India was on side behind a barbed wire fence. Pakistan was on the other side behind another fence. Toba Tek Singh lay in the middle on a piece of land that had no name." That is where the story ends.

Here if you take a look at the spatial location with which the story ends it is very symbolic. It is between India and Pakistan. It literally becomes no man's land. He becomes no man's land. He morphs into space as it were. This morphing into space becomes important because that is the only identity he can claim. His last act standing in the no man's land and dying becomes the last act of ownership.

The last act of reclamation as it were. The last act of the agency where he is just saying I am going to own this land and he owns Toba Tek Singh. He becomes Toba Tek Singh. Thus, Toba Tek Singh and sub space with no name, the space with no face, the space with no classification. In the process he morphs into an identity that is desired for.

Again, we can find out how that story ends over here. Trauma or madness over here becomes interesting enough, the agency becomes an instrument because only through trauma and madness can he reclaim the space. Because you belong to that order of space. You belong to the order of space in the mind and he refused to move on.

If you look at trauma as a condition, which does not allow you to move on. In this particular story, trauma becomes an act of agency because you refuse to move on. You do not want to move on because you have been forced to move on to a territory that you do not want to go. You have been forced to move on to a time and space or a space time that you do not want to go into.

So a new national history is about to begin, a new national territory is about to happen, and you do not want to be part of it. You want to go back in time, you want to retain yourself in time, you want to situate yourself in time and fix yourself in time.

That fixation in time, the fixation space which is sometimes seen as an example of a traumatic situation where you get transfixed into a particular space and time and you are not really moving in time and space that over here becomes interesting as an instrument of agency. One of the things which we will do in this particular course is look at trauma from different perspectives.

Not just medicalized not just politicized, but also look at the way in which trauma can sometimes be an instrument, can sometimes be used as a performative category, as a cognitive category, as a spatial category, as an agentic category, and Toba Tek Singh obviously, combines all these categories. Thus in the process this becomes a very complex and profoundly political short story.

It is about the bio-politics of identity formation. It is about the fetish of identity formation. It is also about the claiming of identity, the ownership and identity to a performative process. The last bit is interesting when he lies on the ground between India and Pakistan, which becomes literally a no man's land. Also that no space as it were, becomes a space of oblivion as he does not want to be remembered - "re"- "membered", into endless two spaces.

He chooses oblivion or the no man's land or the space between two memories or the no man's land between two memories. We have a very interesting relationship here between space and time, in mind. Toba Tek Singh becomes a state of mind. Toba Tek Singh becomes a state of memory.

That claiming of memory, which will then vanish subsequently is important over here because it is refusal to mix into the grand narrative, it is this reclamation of an agency and identity. The final bit in the story is about reclaiming a particular identity. It is about him wanting to be in a particular space, which is not allowed to him. Thus he becomes the space instead.

It almost becomes performative. His suicide or his death, or his slow death obviously in the end becomes an act of agency or becomes an act of asserting agency, which is otherwise unavailable to him. This story obviously is very complicated, very complex, is about madness, is about asylum, is about different kinds of symbolic spaces. You can look at the Lahore asylum as a particular symbolic space or where subversion can be played out, sometimes spectacularly sometimes funnily.

Also the degree of carnivalesque which inverts the hierarchy and the constant illusions of gods and different gods, carnivalesque gods or whimsical gods become important in this particular story. This is the first story of this particular course Trauma and literature. I hope you found something interesting out of it. We will obviously continue conversing about the story.

We will continue to allude and refer to the story in the subsequent lectures also. With this particular lecture we formally end Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hasan Manto. We will move on to a new text from the next lectures. Thank you for your attention.

