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Precarious Homes in Saadat Hassan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh:" Insanity, Illness and Displacement

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Abstract. The short stories of Saadat Hassan Manto, who is acknowledged to be one of the pioneers of the Urdu short story, have been read variously as resorting to obscenity to demonstrate the obscenity of partition and attendant nationalism. The paper examines the short story 'Toba Tek Singh' arguably Manto's most well-known and translated story, to understand the interrogation of 'home' in the post-colonial future which is perpetuated through the fiction re-interpreted across time, space, and different frameworks. By focusing acutely on traumatized and split subjectivities, Manto demonstrates the performative potential of cultural memory to serve as a testimony of the enduring power of memory. Moreover, it depicts the determination and disruption of current imaginings of a 'self' shaped by a perpetual dialectic of exclusion and inclusion, lately accelerated by the rise of muscular nationalism. Manto's short stories protest the perpetual denial and postponement of the question of 'home', and hence provide a valuable insight into the postcolonial dilemma of imagining the nation as a coherent and linear space. This paper approaches this aesthetic of denial by examining the wide semiotic range of possibilities offered by an examination of the vocabulary of Manto, and thereby illuminate the contours of Manto as a practitioner of writerly writing.

Keywords. Manto, dislocation, memory, national culture, protest, language

Midway through Toba Tek Singh, Saadat Hassan Manto writes: 'Where is Toba Tek Singh?' (Manto 13). The question has been understood as alluding to Manto's concern with the theme of 'home', and 'belongingness' in keeping

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with the general tenor of partition studies as an allegory of the perils of nationalism. Anupama Vohra writes, for example that “Manto locates his story ‘Toba Tek Singh’ in a lunatic asylum and thus takes the theme of Partition to the world of the insane highlighting the political absurdity of the Partition itself and at the same time lodges a note of protest against the powers that be, who take such momentous decisions as splitting a country into two, without ever thinking of the consequences.” (Vohra 64) On a similar note, Alok Bhalla as claims that “there is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the partition and the horror, it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment”. Walia continues further that “this sense of bewilderment, the tormenting feeling of being trapped in an inhuman dilemma, which lies at the heart of the story Toba Tek Singh.” (qtd in Walia 254). However, the emphasis on the allegorical tenor of the story is a simplistic assessment of the anxious unease and uncertainty that plagues the story and its characters as they seek a ‘home’ for themselves. The dominance of the question: Where is Toba Tek Singh? draws attention particularly to the symbol of home. Manto plays with the notion of home, offering the images of his characters like Bishen Singh and his quest for Toba Tek Singh as a framing theme of ‘home’ and the problem of displacement.

Throughout the text, Toba Tek Singh is meant to denote a concrete place. At some moments, the character is introduced as ‘Bishen Singh’ but his real identity is not completely known. The text suggests that the lunatic Bishen Singh is looking and searching for home, an eyewitness to the partition and an individual who searches home wherever possible. While presenting the partition in the background, the quest or longing for home, constitutes the central focus of the story. Partition, therefore, is viewed in frames of home and belongingness.

A detailed assessment of the distinct nature of ‘home’ outlined in the story is warranted as being located in a Sisyphean dialectic of belonging and unbelonging, familiarity and unfamiliarity, sense and nonsense, event and reportage, material and ephemeral, kernel and residue.

The story commences with an inter-governmental directive that the inmates of lunatic asylums may be exchanged in keeping with the transfer of resources and liabilities occasioned by the partition. Madness, especially in the story, has been taken variously to refer to collective frenzy of communalism, anguish suffered by victims of partition or the complete breakdown of pre-partition routines and lives. Randhawa, for example, writes that “The victims (of partition) were either silent or lost their mental balance because of the burden of untold memories. It was difficult for them to remember those terrible moments and equally painful was to send into oblivion the valuable memories of their dear ones whom they lost” (Randhawa 30). However, Manto widens the contours of madness to include the inanity and triviality of a delusional and apathetic administrative

machinery, to map a continuum of repressive governmentality between repressive pre and post partition state, and the easy transition from a colonial apathy to postcolonial indifference. He notes wryly that “It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to the decision. Final details like the date of actual exchange were carefully worked out.” (Manto 9) The news of the impending transfer reaches an asylum in Lahore eventually much to the consternation of its inmates. The asylum and the varied reactions of its inmates especially Bishen Singh – once a prosperous landlord from the now border village of Toba Tek Singh, and now a stark mad inmate with swollen legs with no sense of time or language for fifteen years, is the focal point of the story.

With such an unusual protagonist, the story revolves around the metamorphosis of Bishen Singh from an inconsequential inmate to Toba Tek Singh – an uneasy mixture of allegory, metonymy and eponymy. The land and person fuse in Manto’s quest of home and loss of home as the story concludes with a further postponement of any conclusive resolution of the question, since the protagonist lies dead sprawled in no man’s land. Manto codes the aporia of a splintered home not through the stock images of mass exiling of men, women and children, but by a graphic yet dispassionate portrayal of a cross-section of asylum inmates to allude to the violence and arbitrariness in imaginings of coherent spaces constitutive of nations that demand complete and unquestioning allegiance to their territorial limits. It also depicts the feeling of ‘homelessness’ and the ways partition landscape remains fractured in the social, political, and cultural lives. By its end, the story has relocated the concept of the ‘home’ variously from the asylum, to the top most branch in the tree, and finally no man’s land, all framed by anxious queries around home, and confounded answers as to its precise location. Together, they suggest that the search for home and identity morphs into an irresolvable and ahistorical crisis of land, belonging and perception rather than a bounded spatial and political space known as the nation, engendered by a historical event, long past and closed in time. The asylum and its inmates, especially Bishen Singh therefore, need a more detailed assessment to bear out this claim of an impossible home.

Speaking of Home

In Toba Tek Singh, finding home is a major concern of every character. The inmates of the asylum speak with lingering consciousness of home as they simultaneously speak ‘home’, and continuously look for home. Manto offers us two extraordinary images of searching for home.

In the first, an inmate from the asylum shouts the slogan, “Pakistan Zindabad” (Manto 9). Other inmates too find themselves in conversations about home, like the character Sardarji, who asks his fellow Sikh inmate

“Sardarji, why are we being deported to India? We don't even

Toba Tek Singh:” *Insanity, Illness...*

know their language." The Sikh gave a knowing smile. "But I know the language of Hindostoras" he replied. "These bloody Indians, the way they strut about" (Manto 9)!

Confusion reigns supreme in the story, as even the death convicts pretending to be mad to escape the noose can glean nothing concrete from either the newspapers or by eavesdropping on the conversations of the guards. They have to be content with the knowledge: "There was this man named Mohammad Ali Jinnah, or the Quaid e Azam, who had set up a separate country for Muslims, called Pakistan" (Manto 10). Yet another inmate portends the violence and splintering occasioned by Partition by claiming Pakistan is "the name of a place in India where cut throat razors are manufactured." (Manto 9) Yet another inmate disturbed by the prospect of being transferred finds refuge in a tree, "from which vantage point he spoke for two hours on the delicate problem of India and Pakistan." (Manto 9) Ignoring the stern orders of the guards, and their threats of punishment, he goes a branch higher and declares, "I will live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to love in this tree" (Manto 9)

These verbal constructs of home are interesting since they exemplify the helplessness and displacement due to Partition, thereby bringing renewed focus on the loss of home. The loss of home is the single-most source of terror, fear, and anger amongst the inmates. The broken and nonsensical speeches of the lunatics employ stylistic incongruity to depict rupture, dislocation and mourning creating an aesthetic of coalescing that far exceeds and suppresses the heterogeneity of its elements.

We are all mad here: Language and Un-language in the Asylum

The effects and affects produced by the intersection of language and space have been well documented, among others by the likes of Foucault, the post structural theorist. He argues that the abnormal, and deviant is the criterion and prism through which the normal, and generic are established. Through a close examination, observation and chronicling of the deviant, the limits of normativity are drawn such as to maintain hierarchies of power. O'Farrell argues that Foucault held that:

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, madness formed a kind of general conduit for what he terms the 'tragic experience' – namely an awareness of texts, truth, other realms and the general fragility of ordinary everyday life. People who were mad were as a consequence granted a sort of grudging respect. However, this was to change in the 17th century, with what Foucault terms the 'Great Confinement', a movement across Europe which saw the establishment of institutions which locked up people who were deemed to be unreasonable (O'Farrell 36).

If the ghazal tradition were to be considered one form of alternate history of attitudes and beliefs, the attitude towards madness was not radically different in the east either. Harbans Mukhia notes that:

Longing itself is a value, an end (in the ghazal). Thus, gham or pain, but better understood as 'eternal longing', ghazal, is celebrated and courted rather than lamented. Majnun (the one possessed, the one obsessed with his beloved - Laila in the Arab legendary romance) model for the ghazal poet: a man in tattered clothes, of total failure in life and even in love, yet a failure obsession with love to the point of insanity, stones being cast at him, subject to social defamation, yet evoking a silent magnificent obsession, his contempt of temporal image the ghazal-poet most empathizes with (Mukhia 874).

Manto's Bishen Singh, therefore, draws from a well-established tradition of madness, where madness is a synonym for a species of prophethood and an oracle, as he voices the anguish of the teeming millions on the margins, traumatized beyond measure by the splintering of British India. His prophetic cry with slight variations: "Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhyana the mung the dal of the laltain", puts on in the mind of Ghalib who lamented:

*yā-rab vo na samjhe haiñ na samjheñge mirī baat
de aur dil un ko jo na de mujh ko zabāñ aur* (Ghalib 147)

Lord, they have never understood, nor will ever understand me
Bestow on them a different heart,
Were a new language not revealed to me.

Whereas the tradition celebrates madness by employing it as a shorthand of transgressive passion in ornately and meticulously crafted and structured verse, Bishen Singh performs madness through action and especially speech, which occasions a continuous undermining and deferral of all plausible prepositions and possibilities of consensual meaning sanctioned by rational mind. Through this perpetual indeterminacy, he lays bare the anxieties of finding home in both material and linguistic space. The erasure of Bishen Singh and its replacement by Toba Tek Singh – actually the name of the village he is presumed to belong to, is interesting first because it depicts a conflation of person and geography. Moreover, the inmate who has declared himself God also coalesces the place with Bishen Singh's person arguing he had not yet issued orders on whether Toba Tek Singh was in India or Pakistan; in effect Toba Tek Singh - the place, was frozen in the same limbo as Bishen Singh who "lived in a kind of limbo, having no idea what day or the week it was, or month or how many years had passed since his confinement." (Manto 12) Through this stasis, Manto draws attention to the logic or partition which is informed by the logic of nostalgic recovery of a pre-colonial past interrupted by the colonial rule. Anthony Smith has identified the triad of

nationalist histories that fueled anti-colonial movements as against the British that culminated in partition: 'a) a myth of a golden past b) a myth of a decline c) a myth of regeneration and salvation.' (Smith 580). He points out further that, 'the relationship of shared memories to collective cultural identities: memory, almost by definition, is integral to cultural identity, and the cultivation of shared memories is essential to the survival and destiny of such collective identities' (Smith 10) By freezing and erasing memory except of the lost home, Bishen Singh dramatizes the struggle and anxiety occasioned by a splintering of home and consequent sense of rootlessness. Formerly, home in Toba Tek Singh was a space of privilege and plenty being a rich landlord with presumably a loving family, who visit him in asylum. The asylum replaces the village but replicates the intimacy and coherence of home by not just maintaining a sense of security (via the guards) but also a kinship through role play, as the mad choose to assume various roles like God, Master Tara Singh, and Qaid-e-Azam, while the sane assume the role of madmen to escape the wrath of law. Since the asylum is to be shifted wholesale to another asylum across the border where presumably the same order of things will be followed only in an unfamiliar territory, it follows that the displacement doesn't entirely constitute a total uprooting: some vestige, some residue of former home will be left in the new home.

This familiarity within unfamiliarity intensifies the trauma of displacement, since it serves as a constant reminder of loss and reenacts traumas. Bishen Singh's nonsensical cry therefore is not mere gibberish, rather it is constituted of actual words and shows variations according to context. For example, at the inception the utterance is: "*uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dyanan the mung the dal of the laltain*". Soon, the word laltain is replaced by Government of Pakistan, as the news of the creation of Pakistan filters into the asylum. More proof of Bishen Singh's part awareness of context is demonstrated by his insertion of the Sikh war cry: "*Guruji da Khalsa and Guruji ki fateh*" into his catchphrase: "*uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dyanan the mung the dal of Guruji da Khalsa and Guruji ki fateh the laltain*" (Manto 13). Further, when Fazal Din a former neighbour comes to visit him, his query is worded without any distortion or ambiguity. The interaction is as follows:

'Where is Toba Tek Singh?' he asked

'Where? Why, it is always where it has always been.'

'In India or in Pakistan?'

'In India....no, in Pakistan' (Manto 13).

Disappointed by the lack of a clear answer, Bishen Singh dismisses him by adding the exclamation "*duur fittay moun*" (Be Gone from me, cursed face) to his catchphrase: "*uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dyanan the mung the dal of the Pakistan and Hindustan dur fittay moun*". However, interestingly the phrase is preceded by "Pakistan and Hindustan" altering the Toba Tek Singh:" Insanity, Illness....

meaning of the phrase to: Be gone from me, your cursed Pakistan and Hindustan.” At the conclusion, when he receives a definite answer to the question of Toba Tek Singh from the official behind the register, he refuses to move announcing: ‘This is Toba Tek Singh. uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dyanan the mung the dal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan’. The omission of Hindustan from the phrase is in agreement with his action to run towards the side of Pakistan, indicating his fear of severance from his original home: Toba Tek Singh. The omissions and additions are of importance since they demonstrate that sanity and insanity coexist in the person of Bishen Singh and alongside the conflation of space and person (Toba Tek Singh, the village and Bishen Singh the person are fused as Toba Tek Singh) are signposts of a splintered subjecthood. Like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, Bishen Singh suddenly undergoes a metamorphosis from a happy landlord to a raving madman – vermin of the sane world, hence locked away, though in an inversion of Kafka’s giant vermin who has pitifully thin legs, Bishen Singh’s legs are grotesquely swollen from standing (sentinel) all the time (on his home for fear of it being snatched. Yet, in his metamorphosis he too exhibits the degrading power of alienation from routes and routines of belonging as the central tenet of nationalism is its reconstitution of populations through narratives that distinguish themselves through “distinct narratives of collective life (which) always implies setting forth an entire dynamic of inclusion and exclusion withing the very social formation it claims as uniquely its own and with which it declares itself identical” (Mufti 13).

Through his conflation of person and space, Toba Tek Singh demonstrates his exclusion from the narrative of nation-making and belonging, since he feels emotionally invested in a village that falls on the wrong side of the dividing line. His nonsensical utterances exhibit a splintering of subjecthood and consequently language wrought by the great trauma of partition, and constitutes an oblique attack on the disturbing reality of existence as a newly minted post-colonial subject. Imperative to point here that Bishen Singh’s utterances without the iterations are not all ostensibly nonsensical words like gur gur, rather most words in his exclamation like annexe, uper, mung, dal are all valid words in both urdu and Punjabi, while di is a preposition in Punjabi that expresses the relationship between a part and a whole as in the English preposition ‘of’. The nonsensical nature of the utterance, therefore, draws from the syntactic and collocation aspect, rather than the semantic aspect of the sentence. In simpler words, the words in isolation are valid but turn nonsensical when used in conjunction with each other in the peculiar order they are used. The paradox of his speech lies in its unreadability: while it doesn’t exceed the idiom of routine language in the most part, the ordinariness of his words refutes any claim of his speech being in an esoteric, or a supra-metaphorical language. This paradoxical breakdown of language can be understood again as indicative of retraumatizing function of part-familiarity: after all both nations were

previously one nation, share common histories and acknowledge equally that the only languages permitted by postcolonial states are dehumanizing and collective violence; yet unfamiliar as they are divided by allegiance to religion and perception of its relationship to the state. This splintering of language transforms the asylum into an allegory of impossible home where history is conceived in language existing beyond sphere of normativity and normalcy. No wonder, then Bishen Singh and the other inmates find themselves at a permanent loss – a radical ungrounding that defies textual representations since the reliance on language to mediate meaning necessarily occasions losing some of the emotive impact and extent of the traumatic event. Since the audience's experience of the madness is primarily through linguistic interventions of the inmates of the asylum, it follows necessarily that it must be at a relation of loss to the total experience of loss and displacement faced by the inmates especially Bishen Singh. The impossibility of home when confronted with “metastasizing (of) utopian dreams of liberation from colonialism into the nightmarish horrors of fratricidal violence” (Waheed 116) is laid out in full detail by this impossibility of representation.

Urduphones and exile in Urdu

The question of representation and the aesthetic of protest adopted by Manto demands an investigation into the contexts that shaped him and the modes he adopted. It is insufficient to consider Partition and its attendant horrors as the sole determiner and fount of Manto's art. Rather, Manto's story writing and dissenting voice existed in a continuum of protest and progressive literature that far preceded him, as it originated in the early encounters with colonial modernity. As Sara Waheed points out, “Even as he was censored by the state and dismissed as “perverse” by some of his contemporaries, Manto still saw himself as a heir to a literary tradition -one that encompassed dissent and had long accommodated and even celebrated iconoclastic figures who had challenged the limits of social propriety of their time” (Waheed 99).

To understand his iconoclasm, one must therefore turn immediately to the aftermath of the unsuccessful revolt of 1857 against East India Company rule, Urdu Literature witnessed a cataclysmic shift since it had now to contend with “increasingly (being) put up in the new debates about national cultural practice, with their reliance on such emerging concepts as the indigenous and the popular.” (Mufti 112). Filtered through the efforts of the two great modernizers, Muhamad Azad and Altaf Hussain Hali, Urdu had begun its engagement with modernity “based on an imperfect but well-meaning conviction about the social and literary usefulness of what must be described as a narrowly utilitarian and Protestant-didactic view point...that pushed for ameliorative, social useful and ‘natural’ direct connection between a people's social and moral state and poetry ” (Farooqi) Though

Farooqi restricts her argument to poetry, it is not a leap of imagination to assume that the connection was sought for literature as a whole, for which poetry served as a shorthand. As Supriya Chowdary notes tersely, “the literary achievement of progressivism makes impact on the writers like Azad, Hali, Ismaili and Meeruthi as they try to rescue literature from the effects of melancholy, despair, escapism and fantasy and propel it towards realism, hope, and optimism.” (Chowdhary 16) By the middle of 1935, this ‘modernist’ tilt had catalyzed the formation of All India Progressive Writers’ Association whose manifesto proclaimed its intention to create and translate literature that deals with “the basic problems of our existence today – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection, so that it may help us to understand these problems and through such understanding help us to act.” (Mir and Mir 5) Mir and Mir note further that, “While the inaugural meeting of the PWA was a huge success and included representative figures from many language groups, the longevity of the association and its legacy is primarily linked with Urdu Literature.” (Mir and Mir 9) This longevity largely derives from the fact that Urdu allowed a unique vocabulary of longing through an “individual inciting an ethical critique of state and society at risk to their own reputation” which had been perfected and fashioned in the “period of perceived political and social decay, the twilight of the Mughal Imperium” (Waheed 6) Urdu poetry, especially, was primed therefore with an ethos of irreverence and dissent that befits any medium that yearns for change. However, the appropriation of Urdu as the language of revolt and revolution had an unintended effect: Urdu became associated with a specifically Muslim identity that culminated in the formation of Pakistan. Tariq Rehman notes:

It (Urdu) became part of the Muslim identity and contributed, next only to Islam itself, in mobilizing the Muslim community to demand Pakistan which was carved out of British India in 1947. In Pakistan, Urdu and Islam are important symbolic components of the national identity and resist the expression of the local indigenous languages. This (Pakistani Muslim) identity is mainly supported by right-wing politics and is antagonistic not only to ethnic identification but also to the globalized, liberal, Westernized identity based upon English which is the hallmark of the elite (Rahman 93).

The illustration of the contexts of Progressivism and Urdu aided nationalism are especially crucial to understanding Manto, since he straddled both strands, yet displays a marked discomfort with both strands. His writing was a conscious intervention in the debates on ‘national culture’ by adopting a peculiarly and particularly individualistic and iconoclastic voice that dramatized the tensions between the metanarrative of an integrated Muslim state and peculiar and diverse cultural experiences of its citizens that it sought to coalesce through a moral sovereign into a nation. Manto’s first and

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lasting intervention then was the upending of the tradition of Urdu, its elitism and Muslimness. As an irreverent heavy drinker and university drop out, who found his true calling in films, Manto was the perfect decadent antithesis of the middle-class morality that prides itself in conforming to normative respectability, which found perfect equivalence in the insistence on adab and sharafat as guiding principles of an ideal citizen. Sarah Waheed, therefore, observes that Manto's "writing was a self-conscious departure from notions of refinement embodied in adab and sharafat, and his literature vernacularized the language of mundane, everyday life, instrumentalizing local idioms to establish himself as an iconoclastic writer who defied middle class norms" (Waheed 99) A detailed analysis of this strand is beyond the scope of this paper, but through a brief examination of Toba Tek Singh the contours of this strand can be illuminated.

The choice of the protagonist: Bishen Singh, a Sikh is interesting, since the only Muslim characters in the story are minor and comic characters: one falls on the floor while shouting slogans, while another expounds from a tree. Fazal Din – the Muslim neighbour too is of interest only as an agent of (false) news (about Roop Kaur -Bishen's daughter), and a reminder that partition had left families dispossessed. However, the more important intervention of the story is that Bishen Singh speaks no Urdu, rather a mixture of Punjabi and a smattering of English. Exiled from meaningful language owing to his insanity, Bishen is in violation of one of the foundational aspects of nationalist imagining – Urdu, and hence is to be shipped off from the nation. His insanity represents a fundamental incongruity with the "normative constructions of the national subject at a time during the process of assembling a nationalist project in newly independent South Asian states and emblematic of...creative efforts that may not be congealed into a dominant argument or a master narrative" (Ali 5) "Toba Tek Singh" therefore provides access to modes through which Manto sees and observes partition, and illuminates the means through which the practice of storytelling, actually narrates the myriad facets of the partition and attendant dislocation as well as trauma. This emphasis on the storytelling, a minor genre in Urdu with its established tradition of poetry, is itself a search for home manifesting in the figure of Toba Tek Singh whose echolalic utterance of '*Upar di gur gur di*' testifies to both endangered home and precarious survival. Thus, when Toba Tek Singh makes his appearance in the middle of the story as 'Bishen Singh', in a sharp contrast for traditional partition memoirs, he creates a cultural inter-generational memory which still haunts the subcontinent.

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