

Manto's Search for a Home on some No-man's-Land

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Abstract

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The paper intends to focus on the failed idea of security and refuge associated with 'home', taking in account two short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto. The stories, namely, *Toba Tek Singh* and *The Dog of Titwal*, were written against the backdrop of the independence of India and the India-Pakistan partition that followed. Both the stories put light on the burning issue of partition and the consequent chaos that the lives of people of the two countries were engulfed into. The immediate effect was a sense of homelessness, rootlessness and identity crisis. In *Toba Tek Singh*, Bishen Singh, throughout his life, had been in a dream to return to his home, the town of Toba Tek Singh. He had become identical to the town. This dream had kept him sane and grounded in his own way. But when the state intervention divided him and Toba Tek Singh into India and Pakistan, he was disillusioned, it was as if he lost his identity. He was alienated and insecure, and ended up on the no-man's-land. In case of the story *The Dog of Titwal*, Manto had shown how state machinery acted as instrumental to decide upon the fate of common lives. The dog, used as a metaphor of the numerous homeless refugees, had been given and taken away off an identity in a playful levity. It is as if the dog is a puppet, undeserving of any security and warmth associated with home or the macrocosmic homeland. The dog is tossed as a coin in a game and then shot dead, again on a no-man's-land. Both the stories prove how 'home' can be alien to people, can be instrumental to alienation and ensure identity crisis. It is the same painful infliction that Manto himself had suffered throughout his life, when he was forced to leave Bombay and migrate to Pakistan, due to his religio-cultural ethnicity. **Keywords: home, partition, alienation, identity crisis, state machinery and intervention.**

Keyword: Partition, Home, homelessness, identity crisis, state machinery, state intervention, independence

"It may be seen in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, or urge to reclaim...that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands..." (Rushdie,10).

This quotation from *Imaginary Homelands* by Salman Rushdie perfectly echoes the sensibility that has been driving Saadat Hasan Manto while writing the partition stories. Home, in both its macrocosmic sense of being a nation, and in microcosmic sense of being a place with four walls, is supposed to be ensuring security, warmth and safety. Closely associated with the concept of 'home' is that of identity, an identity of stability, rootedness and belongingness. Ironically enough, the stories that this paper intends to take into account, shatter these apparent notions associated with home. The stories in question are "Toba Tek Singh" and "The Dog of Titwal"- both written against the backdrop of Indian Independence and the India-Pakistan Partition that followed. However, the Independence and the consequent Partition did not come without cost; bloodshed, revolution, struggle against the Raj, communal riots, the displacement of people, refugee crisis

- these were the immediate results. The birth of two self-governing countries on an August midnight, 1947 "displaced over fourteen million people along religious lines, creating overwhelmed refugee crises in the newly constituted dominions."(Wikipedia)

In the story "Toba Tek Singh" , the author made us witness the chaos and the underlying panic-stricken terror that the partition had brought in. The Radcliffe line that was made to demarcate boundaries of India and Pakistan, now extended to the lunatic asylums. The

'respective governments' had decided to 'exchange' the lunatics according to their religion, that is, the Muslim inmates should be transferred to Pakistan and the Hindu and Sikhs to India. While the inmates are confused about where their fate would take them to, for Bishen Singh this political secession became fatal. For long fifteen years, Bishen Singh had been in the dream of going back to "Toba Tek Singh, 'a small town in Punjab which was his home'. It was his idea of this very 'home' that kept him sane, kept him standing on his legs for this long period, quite literally. With the speculation of the upcoming political exchange, the confusion increased 'where Toba Tek Singh was to go?' Bishen Singh being a Sikh was bound to be sent to India, but the location of his ideal home was allotted in Pakistan. With this predicament, Bishen Singh collapsed. On the day of exchange, his act of running away from the place where his religion has assigned him to, left him on the no-man's land: "There he stood in no-man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus... 'This is Toba Tek Singh', he announced." (Manto,16-17)

The town and Bishen Singh were so intimately linked to each other that Toba Tek Singh was the only thing that he had kept in his mind even in his lunacy. Bishen Singh himself became known as Toba Tek Singh, with the implication that they were actually identical. At the end, when his own idea of 'home' had been taken away from him by a partition line, it was as if his whole life, his very identity had been a lie, an illusion that eventually shattered. It was as if, both the person and the place had been sharing the same pain of rootlessness and displacement. India, the 'home' that was assigned to Toba Tek Singh, aka. Bishen Singh, and was supposed to provide him comfort and security, actually became alien to him, it was this very home that stripped him off his identity. He didn't feel that connection with this allotted piece of land, it was an other, alien land, a 'heterotopia' that failed to assure him solace and refuge. First brought into limelight by Michel Foucault in his Preface to *The Order of Things*, heterotopia denotes some "cultural, institutional and discursive spaces that are somehow 'other': disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory or transforming."(Wikipedia). Though it refers to texts rather than socio-cultural spaces, the concept can be easily taken into account here. From a heterotopia of deviation, i.e., the lunatic asylum, he had been sent to another heterotopia, against which he protests. His

protest against this unruly rule of stripping him off his identity exemplified in death. His death became his weapon to protest and reclaim his homely dream as he ended up on a No-man's land. On that unmarked space he found his safe haven, his own nation, his home: "In between, on a bit of earth, which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh."

It is in the same vein that the story "The Dog of Titwal" was written. Manto did not make it difficult to understand the dog was a metaphor to those numerous homeless people who suffered the partition and communal riots. Again there were two parties- Indian army and Pakistani army, again there was a land in between, again there was a stray entity. On the hills of Titwal, where a troop of soldiers of the two armies had been positioned, one day a stray dog showed up on the side of the Indian soldiers. As an amusement, there named the dog Jhun Jhun with a chit on his neck, branding it with Indian identity. When the dog wandered around the opposite side of the Pakistani soldiers, they were visibly enraged with the sight of the chit. They stripped off the chit and "counter Jhun Jhun with Shun Shun...a Pakistani dog"(Manto,177). It then became a matter of entertainment to the otherwise bored and tired soldiers to toss the dog from one side to another. In a game of playful levity, both the parties shoot at the dog simultaneously, while the dog was struggling hard to escape, to find a safe place on either side, failing to understand what's happening around and then dying a 'dog's death', quite literally. The horrific shamelessness with which the dog had been murdered revealed the nature of a state machinery that was divided by a boundary line, but united by their devilishness.

It is where we can call for Derrida's concept of hospitality, or rather a logical possibility of this concept. For Derrida, "...the notion of hospitality requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country or nation (and hence controlling)...the host must also have some kind of control over the people who are being hosted. This means, for Derrida, that any attempt to behave hospitably is also always partly betrothed to the keeping of guests under control, to the closing of boundaries, to nationalism, and even to the exclusion of particular groups or ethnicities"(Reynolds,IEP).This was in the same way the dog, metaphorically used to denote the

refugees, had been first hosted hospitably, given food and names, and then treated as a hostage to exert power and control. For the dog, as with the thousand homeless people out there, 'home' itself became an alien idea to even hope for. They were being constantly tossed in insecurity and instability. The dog had been given and taken away off his identity as that of a puppet for entertainment.

Here the state machinery in the figure of the soldiers was instrumental in deciding over the fate of people. The British Raj, along with the leading leaders of the country had agreed upon dividing the country into two, they had decided where would the countrymen go, what would their identity be without allowing them to say anything on their behalf. Mountbatten's claim to look over the matter that 'there are no communal disturbances anywhere in the country' fell flat on face with the growing incidents of massacre, with the increasing numbers of people getting homeless and murdered. Jagmohan, in his book *Soul and Structure of Governance in India* has rightly said that this was the 'glaring failure of the government machinery':

...the last years of the British governance in India were tragically inglorious. The political and administrative governors of the time...created chaos, confusion and human tragedies...These were also the years which showed...how neighbours fell upon neighbours with the ferocity of mad dogs, how the governance machinery with a corrupted soul acted as an instrument of disorder rather than of order... (Jagmohan,50)

The sense in the characters of being alienated, uprooted and displaced seemed to be so burning a sensation because the author himself had shared this suffering as that of his characters. Born in Amritsar in undivided India, Karachi, Bombay, and Delhi had been Manto's dwelling places up until Partition happened. He spent a large chunk of his life serving All India Radio in Delhi, producing large number of radio plays. It was, however, Bombay that he fell in love with. For him, the boundary lines only brought about the infliction of pain and grief. In his memoir of his friend, the actor Shyam, he uttered his pain-stricken feelings about Bombay and the trauma of Partition and his departure for Pakistan: "I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was now my homeland—India or Pakistan?" (Manto,xi). He

could identify with the alienated because he had felt that alienation in his own life. His wife Safia wrote to one of Manto's Indian biographers, Brij Premi, on 6th April, 1968: "He was always treated unjustly by everyone. The truth is that he had no intention of leaving India..." However, on a day in January in 1948, he left the newly formed India and headed towards Karachi, the first capital of the new Muslim homeland of Pakistan. It wouldn't be too far-fetched a concept to speculate that despite being an artist, somehow Manto's religion and his cultural ethnicity could be a reason behind this decision of leaving a country, a home that he loved so much.

His stories, "The Return", "Kingdom's End", "The Wild Cactus", "The Room with the Bright Light" to name a few, that's why, always carry a load of rootlessness and homelessness. The stories always play with the reader's idea of 'home' as a safe haven. 'Home' has always been presented in such a way that marked a grief of displacement, violence and chaos, rather than safety and stability. His stories has been a mirror to his surrounding, his society and his nation. The condition that his characters were in, was no different from Manto's own predicament. The Partition had positioned him in-between, on a no-man's-land as a perpetual refugee. It had made him search for the 'imaginary homelands'.

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