



NEGOTIATING NATION: A READING OF 'TOBA TEK SINGH'

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ABSTRACT

Short stories written in various Indian languages have always been a storehouse of such narratives that enthuse critics belonging to all the schools of criticism because of their thematic diversity. This is precisely the reason why the act of translation is now considered a necessity especially in the Indian context. The narratives written on the theme of partition has been accorded a special status in the study of Indian literary tradition for it has not only affected the geo-political conditions on the Subcontinent but has also initiated many such discursive enterprises that form part of a number of contemporary theoretical frameworks. The present paper aims to elaborate on the issues related to one such prominently debated concept of nation.

Key words: Indian narrative tradition, partition literature, nation, mass deportation, trauma

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Literatures written in various Indian languages enjoy a unique status of being an autonomous body of literature written especially for the consumption of a special target group belonging to that specific linguistic community alongwith having a cherished, chartered identity (an identity that is defined without a hyphen!) that directly links it to the larger frame of reference that we generally refer to as Indian literature. It indicates both the making and unmaking of a corpus that has very special features of being something most promptly designated by a single marker and in the same manner, most readily objected to. Indian literature *per se* is both a definite as well as an indefinite category that chiefly thrives on its inherent 'summary' status, a status that, like all the other socio-political theories, surveys and calculations, keeps on changing with the changes born out of the inner as well as the outer circles created by various

whirlwinds at certain intervals. It creates space for the debate on authority and status of one language over the other in the same breath as it studies the strands that bring all of them together. If the literature created in the areas nearby all the three Presidency centres were, in the beginning, thoroughly influenced by the European models during the colonial rule, it is also a fact that the chief practitioners always kept their eyes open to the contemporary native tendencies. The reason, no doubt, was that celebrated legacy of having inherited that never ending tradition of creativity that could easily adapt, immerse through and reproduce something that could be attested by the time to come.

Indian narrative tradition has always attracted the attention of the critics not only because of its thematic exuberance, multifarious and multidimensional structural and stylistic

experimentations but also due to its discursive tenacity. The most significant factors that have provided prose narratives an edge over all the other genres in India are their innate capabilities as an ever growing body of literature that reciprocates to all such events that give shape to human history. Although novel has undoubtedly emerged as the most popular of all the genres, it is the short fiction that can boast of being the most ancient among all of them. Beginning with the narratives written to educate the prince, to enlighten the common readers on the grave philosophical, social, political and moral issues to the extent of creating wonderlands and the worlds of stark realities and struggles, short narratives have created a space that is undeniably make their status indispensable. Episodes of the freedom movement and the tragedy of Partition have also been fictionally presented by the writers writing in almost all the languages of India. In the present paper I propose to present a critique of a short narrative originally written in Urdu and later on translated into English—‘Toba Tek Singh’ by an eminent figure of the first half of twentieth century, Saadat Hasan Manto. The story is a panoramic portrayal of paranoia and trauma of the early post-Independence period. It wonderfully projects how the two nation theory viciously wrestled with the theory of nation.

‘Toba Tek Singh’ begins with a sharp ironic description of a situation emanating from the partition of India that demands the mass deportation of the common people and exchange of not only the ordinary prisoners but also of the mad ones. It sounds more to be an act of throwing away the unbearable burden of the useless beings than to be a decision taken on the humanitarian grounds. The nation that had common cherished history of centuries was divided into two due to certain unusual emergent developments caused by many such seemingly unavoidable situations whose accountability is yet to be fixed. But before dealing with the narrative in hand any further it would be better trying hands at problematizing the concept of nation specially in the context of this event that has far reaching impacts and results not only on the Subcontinent but also on the whole world and that still creates a lot of mess around. Let us first take a

look at what the inaugurator of the debate on nation in Western academia, Benedict Anderson who created an enviable space for it, has to say on it. While defining the concept, the first important ever existent factor that he counts is the ‘cultural roots’ that started the move of bringing the far flung beings together, at times due to their earnest urge to document the unaccounted for miseries and at times because of their faith in the authority of the unknown. The process that might have triggered off only as the offshoot of something yet- to- be explored, further got enhanced by the use of a particular language both in oral and written form that brought into knowledge many such things that were common. Anderson counts many more factors including history, patriotism, racism, census, map, museum, memory and what not but what is of the greatest value in the present context is his chapter on “Official Nationalism and Imperialism” where he, while discussing the situation on the Continent and beyond in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries proposes the concept of official nationalism which was in no way a voluntary affair. Apart from taking up the issues related to the formation of nations and at times, even forced nationalities, he charts out how these procedures preferred to suppress many legitimate claims in favour of building up the nations as he later on writes in the chapter entitled “The Angel of History”:

Contemporary nationalism is the heir to two centuries of historic change. For all the reasons that I have attempted to sketch out, the legacies are truly Janus-headed. For the legators include not only San Martin and Garibaldi, but Uvarov and Macaulay... ‘official nationalism’ was from the start a conscious, self-protective *policy*, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial-dynastic interests....The one persistent feature of this style of nationalism was, and is, that it is *official*—i.e. something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost. (Anderson159)

There is no doubt about the fact that India prior to the arrival and emergence of the British as a dominant political power in the country, was

basically a collection of states who used to fight with each other to prove their superiority and were always involved in invading each other's borders. But on the lines of culture and religious practices etc., Indians had, somewhere down the line, a common shared memory that always brought them together. In their endeavour to rule India properly, the British created many hierarchical positions and ultimately stationed a Viceroy who was delegated with all the powers that were needed to administer the whole of India. It made the route to freedom all the more easy because here once again we find the birth of national consciousness taking place due to the unending agonies of the people who, more importantly, went through more or less the same ordeals generating out of the mischievous acts of the same agency, an agency that was too empowered to even demonstrate the theoretical humility towards anything that was native as Dipesh Chakrabarty during his discussion on the issue of misrepresentation of the Indian past, writes:

The British conquered and represented the diversity of 'Indian' pasts through a homogenizing narrative of transition from a 'medieval' period to 'modernity'. The terms have changed with time. The 'medieval' was once called 'despotic' and the 'modern', 'the rule of law'. 'Feudal/capitalist' has been a later variant. When it was first formulated in colonial histories of India, this transition narrative was an unashamed celebration of the imperialist's capacity for violence and conquest. (Chakrabarty227)

These 'homogenizing narrative(s) of transition', no doubt, aimed at mockingly generalizing the Indian past *en masse* and at proving the superiority of everything that was Western (or to be more precise, British). This process of (mis)representation was highly informed by certain preconceived notions about the East that could be anything but surely not a study based on rational thinking and empirical knowledge. It was more of a charlatan's fake chauvinism than anything else that was born out of their achievements as an imperialist power. Moreover it was also an issue of their own inherited outlook as Edward W. Said while dealing with this

issue as how these generalizations were made and what affected their outlook the most in the context of Orientalism, observes:

My thesis is that the essential aspects of modern Orientalist theory and praxis (from which present-day Orientalism derives) can be understood, not as a sudden access of objective knowledge about the Orient, but as a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, redispersed, and reformed by such disciplines as philology, which in turn were naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism. In the form of new texts and ideas, the East was accommodated to these structures. (Said122)

But what it ultimately achieved was an astounding realization on the part of the natives was that the British were violently trying to counter everything that was native. This realization created a space for what we generally refer to as Indian Renaissance which forced Indians to look back to their own roots in the later part of nineteenth century. This did not only lead to many social reform movements that brought about many major changes in Indian society but also engaged the Indians in political reformulations of their fate with their own hands. This process certainly was not as simple and easy as it at times seems to be but it surely contributed in a very significant manner in the making of a nation. The 'official' restructuring ended up with the resurgence of a nation. This 'official nationalism' that Anderson talks about in the paragraph quoted above was thrust upon the Indians for the sake of administrative ends but it brought the people belonging to different regions, religions and linguistic groups together. While commenting on the role played by the British as an imperialist power, no one can deny the fact that they also contributed immensely by introducing India, its traditions and the Indian texts of literature, philosophy and religion etc. to the world. The initiative and the interest shown by the Western scholars to begin with a totally new branch of study called Indology cannot be belittled only on the ground that it was done by them. Said may, once again, be quoted here for he

also highlights this move of opening up the gates for the study of the Orient as sort of an action of resurrection:

Their inauguration of Orientalism was a considerable feat. It made possible a scientific terminology; it banished obscurity and instead a special form of illumination for the Orient...it put into cultural circulation a form of discursive currency by whose presence the Orient henceforth be *spoken for*....The more Europe encroached upon the Orient during the nineteenth century, the more Orientalism gained in public confidence. (Said122)

So apart from various political reshuffling resulting in the reconstitution of India that took place during the colonial rule, the socio-religious movements in the late nineteenth century and various academic and literary revisions of what was once considered to be lost or outdated gave a shape to India as a nation. It was precisely this nation that was once again planned to be divided, though thankfully only in two parts.

The story 'Toba Tek Singh', as has been pointed out earlier, captures episodes from the days immediately after two nations were created out of the one. It presents a unique case of the exchange of the lunatics from one side to the other and aims to recreate the episodes of the unbearable plight of the people who were so innocent and helpless. The story narrates how nation sticks even to a mad man's memory as an ineradicable presence that he longs to fondle till he breathes. It begins with the account as how it all dawned upon the governments of Hindustan and Pakistan to discuss the eventual exchange of the mad men who were put in the asylum before Independence as their respective families have by now reconciled with their fate in the newly constituted nations. So some 'high-level' meetings among the officials belonging to both the countries were held and 'the whole matter was thoroughly gone into' and a date was decided. The author beautifully captures the reactions of the ones who were considered 'mad' from all the standards of society and through their voluntary unstudied reactions, tries to situate a full fledged debate on 'normalcy' pitted against 'madness'. These prisoners

hardly had any idea about what partition of the country meant. So they innocently enquire from each other as what exactly is going to happen and why they are going to be separated from each other when they have no complaints against anyone. Manto does not forget to describe their childish queries and equally simplistic answers. Someone visualizes Pakistan to be 'a place in Hindustan where they make cut-throat razors', someone calls himself to be the Qaid-e Azam and proposes the fate of everyone else, someone abuses all the Hindu and Muslim leaders who joined hands and created a new country but one very pertinent question, that bothers all of them, speaks volumes about the meaninglessness of the whole affair:

If they were in Hindustan, then where was this Pakistan, and if they were in Pakistan, then how was it that a little while ago, though staying in the very same place, they had been in Hindustan? (Manto188)

The story centres round a character whose name is Bishan Singh but he is called by the inmates and the authorities by the name of the place he belongs to, Toba Tek Singh. He is such a character in the story who hardly ever bothers anyone for he is all the time lost in himself walking around muttering the most meaninglessly unmatched collection of words like 'Oper di rumble-tumble di annexe of the thoughtless of the green lentils of the lantern'. Once a well-off landlord of his village, Bishan Singh was admitted to this asylum some fifteen years ago 'when suddenly one day his brain tripped'. Since then he has never slept a wink and tirelessly walked around that has left his feet swollen and calves 'distended'. He hardly ever knew about the days and months but interestingly enough, always remembered the day when someone from his family had to visit him and always made special preparations for that by taking bath, combing his hair and wearing his own clothes. Once the country was divided and the family was forced to shift to India, these meetings and visits all of a sudden came to an end but that also did not seem to worry him much. The only thing, however, that really worried him was the news of being shifted from here to somewhere across the border. He has never gone out of this place for the last fifteen years but his

serious concern to understand this whole episode of partition of the country shows how much he cared for the place he belonged to. The simple question that he always tried to attract the attention of others to, is the location of his village. When the exchange of all the mad men was finalized and his friend Fazaluddin from the village came to meet him for the last time, he asked just one question to him:

'Where is Toba Tek Singh?'
(Manto193)

His friend replied with a lot of surprise:

'What do you mean, where is Toba Tek Singh? Well, it's right where it always was.'
(Manto193)

Toba Tek Singh clarifies by asking whether it is now 'In Pakistan or in Hindustan?' to which Fazaluddin falteringly answers by saying that it had now gone with Pakistan. Toba Tek Singh does not say anything and leaves muttering the same aforementioned sentence as if he was deciding on something. On the day of exchange when all of them were brought to Wagah border, Toba Tek Singh stood right in the middle of both the borders, in no man's land, remained there still as a statue throughout the night and 'just before dawn a cry that rent the air came out of Bishan Singh' and he was found lying 'on the strip of no man's land'; he preferred to die neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan but in a country that was entirely his own. Just as a matter of reference and to draw a parallel to a situation that is not exactly the same in nature but shares many things in common with the one narrated in the story, let me remind the readers of an equally moving episode in another text that came out in 1964, a play called *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad. In Scene VIII of the play an old soldier, while talking about a situation born out of the famous and ambitious but whimsical decision taken by Muhammad bin Tughlaq of shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, recounts the plight of his family to a young soldier when the latter showed his curiosity to know as what exactly had happened that he lost the whole of his family on the way to Daulatabad. He could not control his emotions and spoke with a lot of bitterness and hatred:

Oh no. The merciful Sultan had made perfect arrangements. But do you know, you can love a city like a woman? My old

father had lived in Delhi all his life. He died of a broken heart. Then my son Ismail. He was six years old---would have been ten now! The fine dust that hung in the air, fine as silk, it covered him like a silken shroud. After him, his mother. (Karnad193)

It is certainly not only the geographical boundary of a place that matters, instead, what matters most is the cultural rootedness that Anderson also highlights. Staying at one place for such a long time, as for one's lifetime, means the association of the person with that particular place at multiple levels including with that of the surrounding, neighborhood, tradition, memory and above all, a sort of innate sense of belongingness. By presenting the character of an inmate who climbs up the top of a tree announcing that he would never like to be shifted anywhere else and would rather prefer to live on the branch of a tree for it belonged to the sky and not to the land which is always prone to be divided, Manto succeeds in making a harsh commentary on it. This kind of forced/forged 'official' nationhood blurs and outdoes the very essence of what a nation normally stands for. It does not only deny certain basic natural rights of a tribe/community/human being but is also capable of inciting a fresh debate on whether conceptualizing a nation or trying to frame the boundaries of a nation is at all required. What Anderson pointed at were the stages or the turning points that triggered off the process of nations coming into being whereas the present story is a thorough exposition on how these procedures that are deemed necessary in modern times, create a lot of unnecessary fuss in the life of the common mass. Bishan Singh's gesture and reaction to this whole episode are both historic and histrionic; historic in the sense that he stood against this move since the day of its declaration and histrionic in the sense that he showed his willingness to protest against it even at the cost of his life to make people realize that this sort of an act of creating nations on the lines of religion, creed and community is perhaps one of the greatest shams in the whole course of human history. Such bifurcations end up creating only 'the shadow lines'.

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