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Politics of aesthetics: Reading Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" has been considered a masterpiece. It has been seen as a significant fictional narrative usually in the context of the partition of India. In reading the story solely as a partition narrative, its other formal traits have been relegated to the background. The present paper tries to examine the story from a modern philosophical perspective in an attempt to look at its politics. The analysis is based on Jacques Rancière's concept of 'the politics of literature.' The discussion of Rancière's concept of the politics of aesthetics of a work of art is followed by a comprehensive analysis of the story. The paper argues that the story implicitly as well as explicitly exemplifies the politics carried out by a work of literature.

Keywords: Politics of aesthetics, Saadat Hasan Manto's, Toba Tek Singh

Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) is acknowledged to be a writer of extraordinary brilliance. His short stories present his milieu in ways which are radically different from his contemporaries. In Manto's view, literature is the pulse of a nation or a community – literature gives news about the nation, the community to which it belongs, its health, its illness. Manto's writings are realistic observations and his characters mostly comprise of down-trodden and rejected members of society. Gopi Chand Narang observes that Manto introduced Urdu fiction to an absolutely new concept of art; i.e., the relative autonomy of aesthetic effect not subservient to any demands of morality or social reform (4). This paper focusses on Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh" in order to form a comprehensive view of his aesthetics and its politics. It endeavours to form new insights into the politics of literature that Manto tries to represent in the narrative. The paper focusses on Jacques Rancière's idea of 'the politics of aesthetics' in order to lay bare the varied forms of politics in Manto's fictional narrative.

Aesthetics, for Jacques Rancière, is not the name of a discipline rather it is the name of a specific regime for the identification of art that carries a politics within it. The relationship between aesthetics and politics consists in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration. In "Ten Theses on Politics", Rancière states that politics is not the exercise of, or struggle for power. Politics is a rupture in the logic of the *arche*, the conventional logic that presupposes a determinate superiority exercised upon an equally determinate inferiority. Politics does not simply presuppose the rupture of the 'normal' distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions 'proper' to such classification (1-4). Rancière maintains that political struggle is not a conflict between well-defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways. He further states that there are two ways of counting the parts of the community. The first only counts empirical parts – actual groups defined by difference in birth, by different functions, locations, and interests that constitute the social body. The second counts 'in addition' a part of the no-part. He calls the first *police* and the second *politics*. Politics is specifically opposed to the police. The 'police' is a partition of the sensible where a partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which a relation between a shared 'common' and the

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distribution of exclusive parts is determined through the sensible. It presupposes a partition between what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard from the inaudible. The essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible characterized by the absence of a void or a supplement; it is the exclusion of what 'there is not' (Ten Theses 8-9)

According to Rancière, politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable. It certainly addresses the question regarding the possession of speech. The distinction between humans and animals rests on the possession of speech. A human possesses speech that he uses to express himself whereas an animal possesses only voice that is used to signal pleasure or pain. In Rancière's opinion, those categories of people are not accepted as political beings whose words are not heard as discourse. He calls these people *demos* (Ten Theses 5). *Demos* is the name of a part of the community: namely the poor. The 'poor', however, does not designate an economically disadvantaged part of the population; it simply designates the category of people who do not count, those who have no qualification for being taken into account. The one, who is unaccounted for, the one who has no speech to be heard, is the one of the *demos*. "The one who speaks when s/he is not to speak, the one who part-takes in what s/he has no part in – that person belongs to the *demos*" (Ten Theses 5). Politics occurs when people who have no time and hence, no right to be at people's assembly take the time necessary to demonstrate that their mouths really emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 24). Thus, they perform a distribution and redistribution of places and identities, of the visible and the invisible, of noise and speech or, in Rancière's words, "the distribution of the sensible" (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 25). The present paper examines the ways in which Saadat Hasan Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh" attempts to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible in order to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. The paper, thus, focusses on the politics of aesthetics as illustrated in the text.

Saadat Hasan Manto is well known for his partition narratives and his story "Toba Tek Singh" is considered a masterpiece in this context. This story appeared in a collection of stories entitled *Phundne* (The Tassels) in 1955. The story is about the exchange of lunatics on the basis of religion by the respective governments of Hindustan and Pakistan, a few years after the partition of India. The story, no doubt, highlights the stupidity of the division of the country on communal basis. It was decided by the governments that Muslims in the lunatic asylums of India whose families have moved to Pakistan will be sent to Pakistan, whereas, Hindus and Sikhs in the lunatic asylums of Pakistan will be sent to India. The story focusses on a lunatic asylum in the city of Lahore where the news of exchange has created a great deal of confusion among the inmates. The narrative revolves round a Sikh named Bishan Singh who has been in the asylum for the last fifteen years. Once a rich landlord of a place named 'Toba Tek Singh', he had suddenly lost his mind one day and his family brought him in chains to the asylum. He has some peculiar traits. He has not lain down even once in the last fifteen years. His speech is a mix of sense and nonsense. Everyone in the asylum calls him 'Toba Tek Singh'.

Hindu and Sikh lunatics are escorted by police to the border on the day of exchange. Many of them are unwilling to move

and resist their transfer. When it is Bishan Singh's turn, he wants to know if Toba Tek Singh is in India or Pakistan. When he is told that it is in Pakistan, he refuses to move to the other side of the border. When force is used to move him, he plants himself firmly on his swollen legs at a spot in the middle. He is allowed to stand there as he is a harmless fellow, while the exchange proceedings continue. Just before the sunrise, a sky renting cry emerges from the gullet of Bishan Singh. The officials come running to the spot to find Bishan Singh lying face down on 'no man's land' between Hindustan and Pakistan.

In *Another Lonely Voice: The Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto*, Leslie Flemming states that the story is an allegory, and the character of Bishan Singh is an allegorical one. She further elaborates that the insane asylum is an obvious symbol for the entire world, and, the institution with its inmates of various religions, political beliefs, occupations and temperaments, is a microcosm of Indian society. Bishan Singh symbolizes every isolated and bewildered individual caught up in the partition experience. In his tenacious refusal to give up his home (the asylum) and the country to which his ancestral village belongs, he stands for all refugees, on both sides, who were forced to leave their homes and lost their identities (83-84). This is a one-dimensional analysis of the narrative that has many layers to it. The story, no doubt, hints at the madness of the whole process of the partition but at the same time Bishan Singh is much more than just an allegorical character. He is one of Rancière's 'sans-parts' who refuses to remain confined to his assigned place and voices his claim to have a part.

The story voices the 'anti-Aristotelian statement', to borrow Rancière's phrase, in the choice of the protagonist who is an inmate of a lunatic asylum in Lahore. A lunatic is considered to be a person of unsound mind because he is not capable of forming a rational judgment. Hence, such a person is unfit to make decisions. He is no more than a mere noisy animal. The author in his choice of an insane inmate of the asylum as the protagonist does away with the rules of the representational regime of art. The distinction between high and base subject is overlooked. The choice is rather a conscious act at the part of the author in order to highlight and question the insanity of the whole process of the partition. The story not only questions the division of the nation on communal basis and the decision to transfer the inmates of lunatic asylums but also obliquely questions the denial of right to decision making to the inmates of the asylum.

In the opening paragraph, the author reveals that the fate of the so called insane people has been sealed by a decision made by the intellectuals on both sides of the border. He writes that a few years after the partition, it occurred to the respective governments of Hindustan and Pakistan that the lunatics confined in the asylums should be exchanged. This decision is questioned by the author in no uncertain words when he states, "It is difficult to say whether the decision was right or wrong" (Manto 192). The inmates of the asylum are Rancière's 'sans-part' who had no business being heard and seen because they do not possess a sound mind to form a rational decision for themselves. They are thought to be mere noisy animals incapable of speaking meaningful utterances that count as discourse.

The beginning of the story reveals the prevalence of Rancière's 'police order', where different people have different capacities and accordingly occupy different positions in a hierarchy. This regulatory framework assumes

that society is a whole of which all the parts are already known – already named and counted – and are arranged in the most harmonious and productive way. The prevalent order excludes the possibility of a dispute over the naming and counting of the constituent parts. The sane intellectuals occupy free space in the society. They enjoy the liberty to decide matters not only for themselves but also for the lesser mortals who lack sound reasoning capacity and are consequently confined in mental asylums. The story gradually attempts to shift the insane inmates from their assigned places and makes them visible in the public sphere where they had no business being seen earlier.

Rancière states that politics is antagonistic to policing. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it in the police order. “It makes visible what had no business of being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (*Disagreement* 30). A conversation between two inmates of the asylum is noticeable in this context:

A Muslim lunatic who had been reading *The Zamindar* regularly for the past twelve years, when asked by his friend, “Maulvi Sahib, What is this Pakistan?” then, after a serious deliberation, he answered, “It is a place in Hindustan where they make cut throat razors.” (Manto 192)

From the above conversation, it can be conferred that the Muslim lunatic, in fact, possess a sound mind that can reflect upon a complex issue of the creation of Pakistan. The description of Pakistan as a place where cut throat razors are manufactured is quite apt. It points towards the necessity of a careful handling of a cut throat razor as well as the issue of Pakistan. It is noticeable that if a cut throat razor is mishandled it can cause a serious injury leading to loss of blood. Similarly, the mishandling of Pakistan issue has created a lot of bloodshed and loss of life.

Manto’s story is a non-hierarchizing egalitarian space where sane and insane people jostle with each other. The inmates of the asylum are not only the mad men but also the murderers and criminals who have their sanity intact. As the author remarks, “There were some lunatics who were not really insane. Most of them were murderers, whose relatives had bribed officials to have them sent to the mental asylum, to save them from the hangman’s noose” (Manto 192-93). The story underlines the fact that the inmates of the asylum were labelled ‘dangerous’ for some activities but the people who committed same dangerous acts in the world outside the asylum were hailed as great leaders. The author describes an incident where a fat Muslim lunatic named Muhammad Ali announces that he is Qaid-e Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Another Sikh lunatic pronounced himself to be Master Tara Singh – “To avoid the imminent bloodshed, however, both were declared dangerous lunatics and confined in separate cells” (Manto 193). It is noticeable that these lunatics and the political leaders behave in similar fashion but both have been assigned appropriate places according to the regulatory framework established by the police order. The mutterings of the lunatics are heard as noise whereas the rhetoric of the political leaders is understood as discourse. The police order excludes the possibility of these ‘sans-part’ lunatics being seen in the public domain. They are confined in cells, the place reserved for them by the police order whereas the political leaders enjoy liberty to roam freely and incite the passions of people on communal grounds.

The protagonist of the story, Bishan Singh, is another sans-part of Rancière who has been confined in the asylum for the last fifteen years. His voice is heard as noise not only in metaphorical sense but also in literal sense. He is introduced by the author as a Sikh, who has been in the asylum for the past fifteen years. Manto writes:

These strange words were always blurted out from his tongue: “opar di ghar ghar di annex di bedheyana di moong di daal of the laltein.” He slept neither at night nor during the day. The guards said that he had not slept a wink in the long period of fifteen years; he did not lie down even, though sometimes would lean against a wall. His feet and calves had swollen from standing, but despite his physical discomfort he would not lie down to rest. (194)

For Rancière, the political nature of human animal is attested by the possession of the logos that is of speech, which expresses while the voice simply indicates pleasure or pain (*Disagreement* 2). Bishan Singh has been robbed of legitimate speech; his utterances are a mix of sense and nonsense. He does not employ voice to indicate his pain that has been caused by his physical discomfort. He utilizes his speech to express his thoughts and feelings, though this expression is unintelligible. He expresses his opinion regarding Hindustan and Pakistan and the proposed exchange of the lunatics in the same string of strange words, “opar di ghar ghar di annex di bedheyana di moong di daal of the Pakistan government” but later “of the Pakistan government” is replaced by “of the Toba Tek Singh government” (194).

It can be maintained that Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh” qualifies as, what Deleuze and Guattari, call ‘minor literature.’ In “What is minor Literature?” Deleuze and Guattari state that “A minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16). In minor literature, language is affected with a ‘high coefficient of deterritorialization’. Every language implies a deterritorialization – of the mouth, of the teeth, of the tongue as these organs have their primitive territory in food. In devoting themselves to the articulation of sounds, they deterritorialize themselves. “Ordinarily a tongue compensates for its deterritorialization through a reterritorialization in meaning. No longer the organ of sense, it becomes the instrument of Sense” (20). But the word that does not belong to a sensible language, though derives from it, deterritorializes itself absolutely.

Manto’s Urdu is a deterritorialized language, appropriated by him for ‘minor’ use. It is noticeable that Manto failed thrice in Urdu language in his Matriculation examination. He became famous and notorious, to some, for his short fiction written in this language itself. The use of Urdu by Manto in his short stories is, no doubt, a minor use. The language used by him in the stories is not chaste Urdu which is employed by him in his non-fiction works particularly his essays. The language of Manto’s short stories is an amalgamation of Urdu and Punjabi. It is Urdu intermixed with Punjabi and Hindi that allows him the possibility of invention.

Bishan Singh’s utterances are without doubt deterritorialized sound as it no longer belongs to a language of sense, even though it derives from it. It is an amalgamation of Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and English on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it is a mix of sense and nonsense. Manto collaborates with Bishan Singh in order to deterritorialize language by robbing it of its particular character or purpose. Bishan Singh’s utterance always comprise of a string of

words where the latter part of the sentence is usually altered according to the context. His speech cannot be labelled as gibberish, an error committed by many translators such as Khalid Hasan and Muhammad Umar Menon, to name a few. It certainly serves a purpose in the story; it has been used as a tool by a 'minor' writer writing in a 'major' language. The author relates another incident where Bishan Singh asks a Muslim lunatic, who calls himself 'Khuda' (God), whether Toba Tek Singh is in Hindustan or Pakistan. He laughs loudly and answers, "It is neither in Hindustan nor in Pakistan because I have not given the orders" (195). Bishan Singh begs the Khuda to pass the orders but to no avail. One day, losing his patience, Bishan Singh bursts out: "Opar di ghar ghar di annex di bedheyan di moong di daal of Waheguru ji ka khalsa Waheguru ji ki fateh." He probably means to convey that the Khuda is of Muslims, had he been the Khuda of Sikhs he would have listened to him (195-96).

Bishan Singh starts the formation of coherent and intelligible speech only towards the latter half of the story when he is concerned about the location of Toba Tek Singh. The first intelligible sentence uttered by him without the use of strange phrase is "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" (196). For the last fifteen years Bishan Singh has remained confined in the asylum. He has never bothered about the location of his ancestral place Toba Tek Singh. But the Hindustan-Pakistan conflict and the process of exchange of lunatics bring about a change in him. He is concerned because he does not want to leave Toba because Toba has become the very core of his identity. He shares such a strong bond with the place that he is called Toba Tek Singh by the inmates as well as the officials of the asylum. He is a very calm and composed person but when he is unable to get any clue about the location of Toba, he begins to lose his composure. He expresses his anger through the uses of abuses, "Opar di ghar ghar di annex di bedheyan di moong di daal of the Pakistan and Hindustan of the dur phitte munh..!" (196).

Bishan Singh's desire to know the location of Toba Tek Singh and his wish to stay in the country, to which Toba Tek Singh belongs, slowly and gradually, convert him into a political being. For Rancière, the sole principle of politics is equality. Politics is a matter of subject, a mode of 'subjectification'. Rancière states that subjectification is disidentification; it is a space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no count are counted (*Disagreement* 33-36). Bishan Singh who has identified himself with the inmates of the asylum for the last fifteen years wants to discontinue this identification. He is not ready to occupy the space allotted to him by the police order. He denies accepting the police logic. He emerges as a political subject with this decision. He decides to think for himself. He is no more prepared to let others decide for him. He, though of no count in the police order, asserts his right to be counted through his actions on the day of the exchange.

It is noticeable that during the partition of India and consequent migration every person was given the right to decide for himself. Urvashi Butalia writes in *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* that at the time of partition, every citizen had a choice, at least theoretically, in the nation he/she wished to belong to (139). However, the lunatics in the story are denied this right. The majority of lunatics are against the exchange because they cannot make out why they are being uprooted from their place. But Bishan Singh is adamant; no one can relocate him against his will. The narrative relates the day of the exchange of lunatics. All

the inmates are taken to the border where the process of transfer begins. When it is Bishan Singh's turn, he asks the concerned official, "Where is Toba Tek Singh...in Pakistan or Hindustan...?" (197). The official laughs and answers, "In Pakistan." This was the first time when Bishan Singh gets a clear answer regarding the location of Toba Tek Singh. Till now, everyone has given him a confused reply; neither the guards, nor other inmates, nor a former neighbour in Toba Tek Singh who has come to visit him has given him any satisfactory answer. As soon as he hears the reply, Bishan Singh leaps to one side and runs back to his companions. The soldiers try to push him forcefully to the other side of the border but he refuses to move. He says, "Toba Tek Singh is here!" and he starts shouting, "Opar di ghar ghar di annex di bedheyan di moong di daal of Toba Tek Singh and Pakistan" (197). He is very clear about his decision to stay in Pakistan. The officials try to persuade him that Toba has gone to Hindustan but he is resolute. He is allowed to stand there while the exchange proceedings continue.

Bishan Singh registers his resistance to the process of forcible exchange just before sunrise. A sky renting cry emerges from his throat and when the officials reach the spot they find Bishan Singh lying on his face. The author writes, "Over there, behind the barbed wires was Hindustan. Over here, behind the identical wires was Pakistan; in between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (197-98). Bishan Singh, a sans-part, plays his part.

The story demonstrates the part of sans-part that is, no doubt and contradictory to the police logic. The political subjectification of Bishan Singh opens up a space where anyone can be counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part. This is a position within a structure which can and has been occupied by the insane Bishan Singh. The story demonstrates that those whose share in the community is denied, who are wronged by a status quo which refuses to recognize their political existence, respond in the name of equality. Thus it can be maintained that the story "Toba Tek Singh" performs its politics through the character of Bishan Singh as well as other inmates of the lunatic asylum. It is an evidence of the politics of Saadat Hasan Manto's aesthetics.

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