

The Department of English
Raja N. L. Khan Women’s College (Autonomous)
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Study Material- 1
On
“Toba Tek Singh” by Saadat Hasan Manto
(General Introduction)

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❖ Introduction:

"Toba Tek Singh", written by Saadat Hasan Manto, is a short story based on the partition of India and is published in 1955. It depicts the mental condition of the inmates in a Lahore asylum. Some of those inmates are to be transported to India following the 1947 Partition. According to some critics, through the story, Manto has satirically depicted the Partition and the relationship between India and Pakistan. Many literary personae chose this issue as the main theme of their literary output over the years. Many depict the realistic pictures of the sufferings of the people, some others like Manto attacked satirically the Partition.

Toba Tek Singh is actually a place located in Pakistan. Manto has chosen the name of a place to depict his mind. Here, the lunatics also can understand the changes that are going to take place in their lives after the Partition. They are terrified. Though they are insane, they can feel the pain of rootlessness.

❖ Saadat Hasan Manto:

Manto (11 May 1912 – 18 January 1955) was a Pakistani writer, playwright and author born in Ludhiana, British India. He was writing mainly in Urdu, he added 22 collections of short stories, a novel, five series of radio plays, three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches to the history of literature. His best short stories are appreciated by writers and critics even today. Manto was basically giving voice to the hard and naked truths of society that no one ventured to talk about. He is best known for his stories about the partition of India, which he opposed, immediately following independence in 1947.

❖ Partition of 1947:

The Partition of India of 1947 is the division of India into two parts: India and Pakistan following an Act of the Parliament of United Kingdom. Today India is Republic India and Pakistan is Republic Islamic Country. The Partition created havoc problems to millions of people, some of whom were transported to the other places, many were displaced. Many refugee camps were made based on the religious identities. There was wide range of violence and that resulted in the loss of millions of people. The Hindus started to flee to India and the Muslims to Pakistan. And in that journey, many died. The violent nature of the partition created an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion between India and Pakistan that plagues their relationship to the present. Still now in modern times the hostility remained, based on the religious identities of human beings.

❖ A Quick Glance:

Born	11 May 1912 Punjab, British India
Died	18 January 1955 (aged 42) Lahore, Punjab
Occupation	Novelist, playwright, essayist, screenwriter, short story writer
Notable works	“Toba Tek Singh”, “Khol Do”, “Kaali Salwar”
Notable awards	Nishan-e-Intiaz Award (Order of Excellence) in 2012 (posthumous)

(Please read the attachment below.)

Saadat Hasan Manto

Author(s): Mahnaz Ispahani

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SAADAT HASAN MANTO

Mahnaz Ispahani

The best short stories of the Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto can make you numb. Like Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*, they have a stunning force. Manto wrote in especially ugly times. Most of his stories were composed between 1936 and 1955—the years of tumultuous and despairing aftermaths, beginning with the Amritsar massacre in 1919 and culminating in the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Manto dealt with the taut, bitter and wild lives of ordinary, often outcast, Indians and Pakistanis. In his two hundred or so short stories, the violence of history blends with the fantastic visions of a pockmarked imagination. Sanity dances with madness.

A selection of Manto's stories has recently been made available in *Kingdom's End and Other Stories* (Verso), a rather botched English translation by Khalid Hasan. Hasan has a crimped style and a weak ear ("And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India?"). Important stories are omitted from Hasan's collection, such as "Bu" (Odor) and the remarkable "Kali Shalwar" (Black Trousers). Still, the reader should try to reach across these obstacles; a significant writer, one of South Asia's most original modern writers, awaits.

Saadat Hasan Manto was born in the Punjab in 1912. He was a student agitator with a longing for revolutionary Russia; a translator of Victor Hugo and Oscar Wilde; an editor; a writer for the Bombay film industry and for radio; and most important, a prolific author. A popular writer, he was anathema to the authorities, political and literary. Raised in Amritsar, Manto moved many times, to Bombay, to Delhi, then back again; and finally, reluctantly, in January 1948, four months after India and Pakistan raised their tarnished flags, the Muslim Manto joined his family in the old city of Lahore, in Pakistan. Here Manto's spirits sank low. A job was hard to find, and harder to

keep; he drank heavily, and for his alcoholism he was confined briefly to a lunatic asylum. In his final years, Manto would turn out a weak story for the price of a strong bottle. At the age of forty-two, he died from drink.

Manto spoke Punjabi, but he wrote his stories in Urdu, mastering a language whose roots lie in Persian, Arabic, Old Hindi and Old Punjabi. Urdu was (and remains) the language of high Muslim literary discourse in the sub-continent. It is also the language of Pakistan's national conversation. Urdu was originally used in unrefined surroundings, as the language of the imperial army camp (the word is derived from the Turkish word "ordu," or horde); but by the early nineteenth century, literary Urdu had become precious and ornate, highly Persianized in its symbols (birds, gardens, paradise), its themes (the celebration of love) and its forms (ghazals and masnavis, lyric poems for recitals at court).

Manto broke with this linguistic tradition. He renounced its lush aestheticism and chose new, less pleasant subjects. At its best, his Urdu is simple yet expressive, the perfect vernacular instrument to lift into art the situations and the psyches of the isolated, the degraded and the forgotten. Manto's characters inhabit the monumental fringe of Indian society.

In his work—in his choice of material and especially in the structure of his stories—Manto is often compared with Guy de Maupassant. (The comparison is made, for example, in a thoughtful study of Manto by Leslie A. Flemming, *Another Lonely Voice: The Urdu Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto*, University Press of America.) The comparison is apt; Manto's work is characterized by an almost journalistic naturalism, by epiphanous passages about alienation and sexual violence, by blighted endings. His stories tend to be controlled studies of the irrational and the instinctual, turbulent yet crisp. Some of the best of them are no more than three or four pages long. The comparison between Maupassant and Manto, however, is broken down by history, and its special subcontinental savagery. What Manto saw, Maupassant could not have imagined.

The strange and subtle tale of "Babu Gopi Nath" nicely illustrates Manto's talent. He conjures up the relations and mores of a whole society and the peculiar difficulties of judging good and evil among outcasts. Babu Gopi Nath is a man who has spent his years in the company of whores and soothsayers, who has about him addicts, drunkards, madams and hangers-on; he humors and supports them all, squandering his once substantial inheritance. At first Manto (as in some of his other stories, the writer is himself a character) seems to take his hero for a weak-willed fool who does not comprehend the hardness of his own surroundings. But swiftly we understand that Babu Gopi Nath is no fool at all. He knows the rapacious nature of his companions and has chosen to live at peace among them.

Babu Gopi Nath wants to establish Zeenat—his young, distant, passive, incompetent prostitute girlfriend—on her own, or find her a rich patron before his own money runs out. He himself plans to go from a youth spent at the *kotha*, or courtesan's quarters, to an old age spent at a shrine: "Both establishments are an illusion. . . . Everyone knows, of course, that in a *kotha* parents prostitute their daughters and in shrines men prostitute their God." Babu Gopi Nath tries to entice patrons for Zeenat by buying her a car, installing a phone, inviting men to the house. The girl willingly goes with the men, but they do not stay. (She is too "wifely.") And while Babu Gopi Nath is away on a trip, she is worked daily as a prostitute by his associates.

Zeenat is not tainted for Babu Gopi Nath, despite the ugliness of her existence. He loves her, she is "so naïve," "so simple," so undemanding. Finally Zeenat is made an offer of marriage by a reputable man. And the magnitude of Babu Gopi Nath's dream becomes clear: this odd man, richly mixed of good and evil, this lover and pimp who transforms himself into a father, succeeds in giving his Zeenat away as a traditional bride with a dowry, a dress, a wedding ceremony and a flower-strewn bridal bed. Babu Gopi Nath insisted on rising above his own reality to realize his greatest illusion. It turns out to be the disabused Manto whose understanding seems so limited. In the

bridal chamber, he asks, "What is this farce?", intruding upon, and shattering, Babu Gopi Nath's and Zeenat's final, shared fantasy.

Manto's prose is obsessed with women. In his female characters, Manto most starkly evokes the physical and psychological degradation of the losers and the poor. But sometimes the darkness seems too unrelieved, too much a narrowness of vision; his emphasis on the disfigurement of women's spirits and bodies is rarely relieved by a portrait of a woman of whole character, with independent emotions and an undamaged mind. In story after story, Manto links their fate to sexual vulnerability: his women suffer sexual humiliation, seduction, domination, rape, pregnancy, abandonment, prostitution, murder. They are almost always victims, with the power only to occasion their own destruction.

He has a special place in his stories for that most preyed-upon creature, the urban prostitute. Manto's prostitutes die horribly (one is cooked by a jealous rival in "The Wild Cactus," another dies trying to save her ex-lover's new love in "Mozail"), or else they live horribly, sometimes violently (one smashes open her pimp's head with a brick in "The Room with the Bright Light"). In the few instances in which Manto endows women with power, it is usually the power to destroy. In "Black Trousers," perhaps his most impressive tale of prostitution, Manto evokes in poignant detail the physical surroundings, lonely days and frantic imaginings of a prostitute whose business is failing. In her straitened circumstances, Sultana is concerned less about jewelry, food or shelter than about being unable to afford black trousers for Muharram, the religious month of mourning. Thus Manto often tied the failed universe of the prostitute to the failed universe of religion.

Even in "Odor," his languorous, graphic tribute to sex, Manto's ideal of womanhood is hackneyed. The plot is simple: the odor of an earthy country girl with "mud colored" breasts fastens itself wonderfully upon a well-to-do man in an unplanned encounter during the rainy season. The memory of this woman nourishes the man in a way that the savvy Anglo-Indian prostitutes he frequented,

and even his new, educated, milky-white wife, never could. (For this story Manto was charged with obscenity.) It appears, finally, that Manto the writer and Manto the man were opposites, as his nephew Hamid Jalal (who was also the author of a textured translation of his work, *Black Milk: A Collection of Short Stories by Saadat Hasan Manto*) recounts: this great chronicler of prostitutes was “conservative, almost reactionary” in his personal views about education for women, about their presence among men in society.

Manto wrote often about the haphazard relationship between great events and small people. While the masters politicked—while Mountbatten, Jinnah, Gandhi and Nehru were negotiating their ideological, confessional and geographical partings in the mid-1940s—Manto observed the servants, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, all who were flailing about in the net of partition, struggling to make sense of a tossed political sea. “The New Constitution” is a story about Mangu, an affectionately drawn, feisty, proud, impatient horse-cart driver. It is about the hope, confusion and despair occasioned by the relationship between rulers and ruled. Mangu is fond of holding forth on politics at the horse stand. He is thought to be “in the know” by his associates. But he commits a tragic mistake. One day his hopes are kindled by snatches of political conversation which he overhears in his buggy. He comes to believe that the Government of India Act of 1935 is going to change the hateful relationship between the British and their subjects; and on April 1, April Fools’ Day, when the new constitution is to come into force, Mangu suddenly boils over: he grows defiant, he beats up an imperious Englishman. Eyes aglow, Mangu declares that “Those days are gone, friends, when we were just good for nothing. There is a new constitution, a new constitution. Understand?” He is promptly jailed. The poor man never understands why this new constitution did not change his place, or the world.

The stories which Manto wrote about the 1947 partition are some of his most important work. He was a remorseless student of partition’s wreckage, of its broken

souls. The ecstasy of violence in Manto's partition stories may strike a Western reader as overwrought, but these fictions were no stranger than fact. Partition's horrors are easy to document. A recent British television documentary, *Division of Hearts*, included an especially haunting interview, for example, with a one-eyed, middle-aged Sikh woman who seemed straight out of Manto. The woman lived in a small Punjabi town during partition. She recalled how Sikhs and Muslims in her town killed each other on the basis of a series of telephone messages which mistakenly identified the area now as part of Pakistan, then as part of India. The woman remembered wandering with her friends through the houses of fled or slaughtered Muslim neighbors, collecting their pots and pans and quilts; it was the Sikh girls' way of assembling their dowries.

Manto took no sides in the religious and political wars being fought around him. In his partition stories, he reflects not on politics or history but on the meanings of loyalty and dishonor, sanity and insanity, good and evil, in a time when Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs killed an estimated half million people in their wars against one another. In "The Assignment," for example, a Muslim family—an ailing father, his daughter and son—stays on in a place that other Muslims have abandoned. The father is a judge, a rational man. He is convinced that the communal killing will soon stop, as it always does in India. But this time it does not stop. One night a young Sikh man knocks at the door. The daughter is terrified. The man identifies himself as the son of an old friend of her father's, a Sikh who was in her father's debt. She is relieved, and unbolts the door. The boy enters with a gift, announcing that he had promised his father on his deathbed that he would continue the tradition of taking a yearly gift to the judge. And even in the middle of all the trouble, he is here to fulfill his duty to his father, to thank the judge for his kindness. His present is accepted and the Sikh boy leaves. Turning the corner, the good son encounters four masked Sikhs, carrying torches, kerosene and explosives. Here Manto makes his characteristic, demonic, utterly truthful twist. One of the men asks the boy:

“‘Sardar ji, have you completed your assignment?’”

The young man nodded.

"Should we then proceed with ours?" "

"If you like," the young man replied and walked away."

Many of Manto's stories are about how men and women crack, spiritually and morally, in a time of evil unrestrained. The events of the 1940s and after led Manto to find evil not only in power but in weakness; he saw how reality is mixed up with illusion, how monstrousness can grow in the breast of the most mundane man. Manto painted a world of almost intolerable complexity, a world in which everybody was capable of both good and evil. Consider, for example, "The Return," one of his most powerful tales. (Its representation of his fellow Muslims earned him official condemnation in Pakistan.)

The story opens with an aging father regaining consciousness in a refugee camp after a train journey from Amritsar to Lahore. (As in the Holocaust in Europe a few years earlier, the trains played a macabre role in the savagery of the subcontinent; their passengers massacred along the way, the trains would pull daily into the stations carrying a cargo of corpses.) The man slowly recalls the manner of his wife's death, then suddenly realizes that his daughter, whose death he cannot recall, is missing too. He wanders around the refugee camp, searching; and comes upon a group of armed young Muslim men whose mission it is to cross the bloodied new border to recover Muslim women and children stranded on the other side. The father describes his daughter to them, and they promise to find her.

They do find her. But Manto does not tell what happens next. Instead he returns us to the father, waiting in the camp, praying for the success of the young men. Finally he sees them; but they merely reply again that they will find her and go off. That same evening an unconscious young woman is carried into the camp hospital. The old man recognizes his daughter. And again Manto delivers the climactic truth. When the doctor says, "Open the window," the girl rises slowly, in agony; loosens, then drops her trousers and opens her thighs. The senselessness of her fate is almost impossible to bear. We are left only

with her father shouting with joy, “She is alive! My daughter is alive!”

As a young man, Manto was associated with the group of aspiring, socially conscious writers who, between 1934 and 1936, coalesced in the Progressive Writers Movement. This was the most important literary movement of the period. Its members supported India’s political independence and promoted a literature of engagement, a role for the writer in identifying and addressing India’s many economic and social ills. At first this literary Left embraced Manto for his realism; but as Manto’s focus shifted, it cast him out as a reactionary obsessed with the abnormal and the obscene, as an artist without a commitment to the improvement of things. His work was not remedial, it only reflected what he saw: plain individuals bound to hypocritical communities and wantonly flung about by history’s cataclysms.

Manto’s critics decried him as a tawdry purveyor of perversity and violence, but Manto always defended himself as an observer of India’s days. He was right. In his partition stories Manto conveys, as no historian could, as no politician would, the disorientation, the mystification, the shroud of nonsense that fell upon the subcontinent in 1947. And in such a mad world, his stories ask, who will dare to judge? It is no wonder that Manto grew increasingly cynical, as his later stories about India and Pakistan attest. If his work was hard to read, he argued, the crime was not of his imagination but of the world he witnessed. “If you cannot bear these stories,” he told a group of students in 1944, “that means this is an unbearable time. The evils in me are those of this era.”

Manto’s most famous story is, oddly enough, an allegory. “Toba Tek Singh” is a tale about identity. It is about the inmates of a lunatic asylum located inside Pakistan. The asylum represents nothing less than the subcontinent. It houses a Hindu lawyer, a Sikh landowner, a Muslim political party worker, a couple of Anglo-Indians, parted lovers and criminals. It is a few years after partition, and the Indian and Pakistani governments have decided upon a mutual exchange of their Hindu, Muslim and Sikh lunatic populations; and as the tale is told, one begins to ask

whether the asylum's inmates might not be more sane than the authorities who have elected to dislodge them. Manto records, with compassionate humor, the odd, often astute responses of the lunatics to the news about their imminent displacement. Prisoners of a natural confusion, they are not quite sure where India is, or where Pakistan is, or where the asylum itself is. One lunatic climbs a tree and declares, "I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree."

Gradually we are drawn to one inmate, one Bishan Singh, a former Sikh landowner who is known as Toba Tek Singh after the village he left behind. Toba Tek Singh is quite other-worldly in his madness. In fifteen years nobody has caught him asleep. He stands on his huge swollen feet and utters strange nothings. One day the man Toba Tek Singh suddenly starts to ask where the village Toba Tek Singh is—in India? in Pakistan? He receives no satisfactory answer. On the night of the exchange the madmen and madwomen resist their expulsion from the asylum. Brought to the border, they begin to tear off their clothes; they scream, sing, chant, weep and fight in the icy darkness. Toba Tek Singh the man is laughingly told by an officer that Toba Tek Singh the village is in Pakistan. Hearing this, the old man begins to resist wildly his transfer to India, and runs away. A few hours later, he lets out a single, loud scream, and falls dead on a strip of no-man's land between the barbed wire separating the two countries. He is Manto's supreme hero: the uprooted man, the man robbed of home, the victim of partition, who wins a strip of land all his own only in death.

Manto died in 1955, less than a decade after partition and independence. But his disillusionment about the costs and the consequences had grown rapidly. Two stories in the new collection, "The Last Salute" and "The Dog of Titwal," are set during the Indo-Pakistani conflict in Kashmir. Manto had only scorn for such a war. In "The Dog of Titwal," a stray dog wanders back and forth between the similar, tea-drinking Indian and Pakistani encampments in lovely Kashmir, until it is caught in a foolish, deadly game being played between the two sides, is shot, limps desperately back and forth between the two

sides, and is finally killed. After partition, Manto described his own quandary: "I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was now my homeland—India or Pakistan." A dog's death was his image for the fate of those who lived, haplessly, as he did.

Manto was a daring innovator. He spoke his scarred mind simply, in a pristine common speech. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, India, and later Pakistan, desperately needed glue to hold together a mixed society and provide for a civilized survival. But as Manto never tired of demonstrating, the glue was not found; the subcontinent became unstuck, and people were swept aside and away. Manto was a bitter, withering humanist. His stinging prose was a response to the evidence of his own senses. In his mature work, he did not glorify any class or any ideology nor talk rhetorically about exploitation nor even about hope. He preferred the pedestrian truth.

When independence is bloodied by partition, new experiments in nationhood are stained for many years. The trauma and the animosity of parting lasts long. In a time of national exaltation, Manto wrote not about the glories of independence and the fruits of sovereignty but about the ambiguities and the debris. For that reason (as well as for his sexual themes) Manto was controversial in his time. But Pakistanis and Indians born after partition should respond to his prose, for it casts light upon their society, and upon the price of what they have inherited. Recently, in Pakistan, Manto's works are enjoying a modest revival. And in India, bitter controversy surrounds the television serial *Tamas* (Darkness), which for the first time depicts the communal violence of the partition years as experienced by ordinary people. *Tamas* has jogged the collective memory of India.

Ruled by its soldiers for more than half its history, and sullied by massacres which gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971, Pakistan still has not answered the question of its existence in a way that would have satisfied a man with Manto's concerns. In Pakistan, the war for the identity of their truncated territory continues to be fought between fulsome fundamentalists and shrinking secularists, between civilians and soldiers. Today India, too, would dis-

hearten Manto. The secular democracy and egalitarian society Nehru reached for now founder on the rocks of dynastic rule; on communal battles between Hindus and the Muslims who remained; on the durability of such ancient Hindu horrors as suttee (the ritual immolation of widows) and dowry deaths; on a bloody new war by the Sikhs for yet another new state in the Punjab, Khalistan. Indians and Pakistanis face each other across armies, prejudices and silences. The shaking and bloodying of the earth in 1947 notwithstanding, the old patterns of life in the subcontinent endure.

Manto lived his life as a provocateur. Before he died, he chose an epitaph: "Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto. With him lie buried all the arts and mysteries of short story writing. Under tons of earth he lies, wondering if he is a greater short story writer than God." Of course there is the vanity of a writer in those lines. But there is also the despair of a man who had lost respect for what God had done. It was what he saw of creation that made Manto taunt the Creator.

