

Pain, Agony, and Trauma in the Characters of ‘Toba Tek Singh’ and ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’

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Abstract—‘Toba Tek Singh’ is an Urdu Short story written by Saadat Hassan Manto and ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ is a French Novel Written by Taher Ben Jelloun. ‘Toba Tek Singh’ was perhaps written in 1954 and published in 1955 whereas ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ was written in 2001. There is more than four decades span between both works of literature. ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is pure fiction but ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ is although a novel but based on a true story or narration of a prisoner who spent eighteen years of his life in one of the worst prisons of the documented history. ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is written in the third person whereas ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ is narrated in the first person. This research will be referring here to a 2002 translation of ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ by Linda Coverdale in English. ‘Toba Tek Singh’ is a fictitious character who is a patient in a lunatic asylum. Before suffering from the mental illness ‘Toba Tek Singh’ was a landlord and during the partition of India, his village and his lands go to a Muslim majority country i.e., Pakistan. This research intends to study the effects of the pain, agony, and trauma on the psyche of the characters here.

Index Terms—pain, agony, partition, delirium, dementia

I. INTRODUCTION

‘Toba Tek Singh’ is one of the best short stories written in Urdu literature. The story revolves around the character whose real name is Bishen Singh and who is a landlord but, unfortunately, he loses his equilibrium and it becomes difficult for the family to handle him so they bring him to the lunatic asylum and admit him there. Bishen Singh has most of his lands in the District of Toba Tek Singh. Unfortunately, when Bishen Singh is already under treatment at the lunatic asylum the partition of the Subcontinent of India takes place on religious ground. The central idea of this short story is also about the partition of the country and the displacement of millions of people in the subcontinent. The district of Toba Tek is given to Pakistan, a Muslim country. Bishen Singh who comes to know about this fails to bear the pain and trauma of the fact that he has to leave his place and go to India. During the transfer of mentally sick patients in the two countries Bishen dies in tragic circumstances.

The novel ‘This Blinding Absence of Light’ is written by French Novelist Taher Ben Jelloun. The novel revolves around the prisoners who are convicted for the crime of an attempted coup d’état against the Hassan II the king of Morocco in 1972. The writer claims that the novel is based upon the narration of one of the prisoners who narrated him the story of the prison. The novel deals with the subject of the horrible conditions in which the prisoners lived in the

prison of Tazmamart and how several of them could not bear the pain and trauma of this tough imprisonment lost their mind and ultimately died. The novel is full of the pain, agony and trauma of several soldiers who even didn't know what they were doing. They were, indeed, following the orders of their commanders. The imprisonment, for those few who came out alive, lasted for 18 years. However, many died there.

Although a lot has been written on Saadat Hassan Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' but this is the first attempt to compare the mental state of the characters in his short story and the prisoners of Tazmamart. Although the mental state of these characters can also be compared with the mental state of Hamlet (1599-1601), one of the best tragedies penned by William Shakespeare but due to the paucity of space, it is not advisable to delve deep into the Shakespearian tragedies here.

II. A GENERAL NOTE ABOUT SAADAT HASSAN MANTO AND TOBA TEK SINGH

Saadat Hassan Manto (1912-1955) is one of the greatest novelists and short story writers of Urdu literature. He was born in 1912, in India and later migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India. Manto mostly wrote about the fringe elements of the society and openly discussed the women, sex and flesh trade in his novels and short stories. *Khol do* (Open it), *Bu* (Odor), *Kaali Shalwar* (Black Trousers), and the short story in question, *Toba Tek Singh* are some of his best works. Manto mostly wrote about the gory effects of the partition and how common men suffered the brunt of partition. He was known for his blunt comments against religion and its misuse by pseudo-religious people.

Manto had a bad academic career. He failed in matriculation examination twice and when he took the admission for graduation in Aligarh Muslim University, he had to quit the university due to his bad health and diagnosis of tuberculosis.

He lived in Mumbai (the then Bombay), Delhi, and Lahore in search of jobs. At the time of the partition of India, Manto was working with the Bombay Talkies, in Mumbai, as a movie scriptwriter. The partition of India into two countries was followed by horrific Hindu Muslim riots. Thousands of people were killed in these riots. Nearly 12 million people had to migrate to the countries of their religion since India was considered as a country of Hindu majority people and Pakistan was considered as a Muslim majority country. When flames of communal riots reached Mumbai, Manto decided to move to Pakistan and traveled by ship to Pakistan. Initially, he stayed in Karachi and then moved to Lahore. Manto was charged with obscenity and tried in court six times. Three times he was tried in undivided India and three times in Pakistan. In Pakistan, Manto was tried last time in court for writing obscene literature. During the trial, Manto asserted that he is not a pornographer but he is a short story writer. He writes about what he sees in society. He suggests the dirt of the society should be cleaned and should not be brushed under the carpet. Many literary writers gave testimony in favor of Manto and the judge let Manto go with a fine and stern warning that if he doesn't stop writing obscene literature he will be put behind bars for years. Manto was very upset with this warning from the court and to overcome the depression he took refuge in excessive drinking which eventually affected his liver and he suffered from cirrhosis of the liver and eventually died.

Manto's health was rapidly deteriorating due to excessive drinking and Manto was not ready to quit it. At this time his family decided to admit him to a lunatic asylum in Lahore. This lunatic asylum was also a rehabilitation center for alcoholics at that time. It is assumed that the idea of writing the short story *Toba Tek Singh* took birth in his mind during his stay in the lunatic asylum. When Manto speaks about the lunatic patients under treatment in the hospital of Lahore he says, satirically, that the people in the outside world are equally or more lunatic than the people inside. In the first paragraph of his *Toba Tek Singh*, he says that the government of both countries decided to exchange the insane prisoners the way the sane prisoners were exchanged. In the final years of his life when Manto saw the inevitable death coming, he penned his tombstone that read, 'Here lies the great short story writer buried under earth wondering who, either he or god, is the greater short story writer'.

Toba Tek Singh: *Toba Tek Singh*, in reality, is the name of a city in Pakistan. The central character of the short story Bishen Singh is a landlord from Toba Tek Singh and hence he is known by the name of this city. The story is narrated in the third person. All the inmates in the lunatic asylum and the guards call him Toba Tek Singh. Manto did not mention in the short story in what circumstances Bishen Singh loses his equilibrium but he has just mentioned that Bishen Singh was brought in chains to the lunatic asylum by his relatives before the partition of the country. He was a landlord and he had his lands in Toba Tek Singh district. After the partition both the countries decide the exchange the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh lunatic patients, particularly the patients whose next of kin migrated from their places. The story is set around three years after the partition. By this time many Sikhs and Hindus who lived in Pakistan had already moved to India and millions of Muslims who lived in different parts of India had migrated to Pakistan. Unfortunately, some Hindu and Sikh patients in lunatic asylums in Pakistan were still there and some lunatic asylums in India still had patients whose relatives had already moved to a newly formed country. The governments of both the countries, first, decided to exchange the prisoners from the jails of both the countries then they started exchanging the patients of the lunatic asylums. Bishen Singh who is a Sikh by religion and whose family members left the district of Toba Tek Singh was also about to be moved from the lunatic asylum of Lahore. When the patients in the lunatic asylum of Lahore heard the news of their transfer from Lahore their reactions were shocking. The Hindu and Sikh patients who were originally from the region of Pakistan were in a kind of impotent rage and state of further dementia and anxiety. Unlike millions of sane people, they didn't want to leave their cities and villages. They did not come to terms with the reality of the

partition of the country. Manto used the gibberish words or the incomprehensible sentences uttered by Bishen Singh to satirize the decision of partition and to mock the idea of two countries. In the end when the transfer of the patients was in the final stage, amid the night, and when the patients were waiting at the buffer zone between both the countries, Bishen Singh denies crossing the border and stands between the borders of both the countries for hours and before the dawn he makes a heart-wrenching cry and dies on the border. This was indeed the cry of millions of people of both countries who had to leave their birthplaces and migrate to new cities and villages. This was indeed the emotional death of millions of people who lost their near and dear ones in the horrific riots after partitions. Manto expressed the pain of every individual, may they be from any religion, through the pain of Toba Tek Singh whose family had already migrated to India leaving him behind in a lunatic asylum. His final cry was the cry of thousands of people who did not understand the meanings of two countries in the name of religion but their lives had been sacrificed by the marauders on the altar of the ego of leaders from both the countries and their religious fervor.

III. A GENERAL NOTE ABOUT TAHER BEN JELLOUN AND THIS BLINDING ABSENCE OF LIGHT

Taher Ben Jelloun: Jelloun was born on 1 December 1944, in Fes, Morocco. He wrote several poems and novels in French. His first collection of poetry was *Hommes Sous Linceul de Silence* (1971; *Men Under the Shroud of Silence*). After moving to France from Morocco, he received his doctorate in Social Psychology from the University of Paris.

Cette Aveuglante Absence de Lumiere (2001; *This Blinding Absence of Light*) is a harrowing account of several prisoners' lives in the desert concentration camps which were, especially, created for these prisoners who attempted a failed coup d'état against King Hassan-II. Jelloun narrates that many of these prisoners didn't even know that they were leaving to stage a coup against the king. They left their barracks just following the orders of their commanders and ended up in prisons.

This Blinding Absence of Light explains two things: First, the horrific conditions of the jail where several prisoners were kept for almost two decades. The second thing is the endurance of some of the human beings who emerged alive even after living almost eighteen years in those prisons. The prisoners were given starch as food and coffee which tasted even worse than the horse piss.

Though Ben Jelloun worked closely with a prisoner who narrated the whole story to him, on the other hand, his detention for 18 months in 1960 helped him narrate the story in picturesque details.

This Blinding Absence of Light: This novel is narrated in the first person. Linda Coverdale translated it from French. The novel revolves around the prisoners who are convicted for the crime of an attempted coup d'état against Hassan the II, the king of Morocco in 1972. The prisoners were brought blindfolded and hence they didn't know where they were. The prisoners spent the next 18 years of their lives at that place. This is about the prisoners who suffered and died and who suffered and survived. Many didn't survive and died in the prison. Those few, who survived, Jelloun narrates, looked like living cadavers and had shrunken to at least one foot. The prisons where they were kept were five feet high and ten feet long and nearly five feet wide. There was no washroom or sink but there was just a hole in a corner for pissing and crapping. There were no beds or cots for the prisoners but rather two very old blankets were provided to them. Every prisoner was provided with five quarts of muddy water every twenty-four hours.

IV. NARRATORS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Saadat Hassan Manto himself was admitted to a mental asylum for reasons not known Anwar Sadid writes, he was admitted since he was suffering from the habit of excessive drinking (Manto ke sau afsaane, Chaudhary Academy Lahore, April, 2017) whereas Leslie Flemming says he was admitted to a mental asylum due to traits of abnormal behavior. (*The Life and Works of Saadat Hasan Manto*, Leslie Flemming, VBL Publications, 1985).

When Jelloun was narrating the story of the prisoners in Tazmamart prison, perhaps he recalled some of his own experiences when he was in jail in 1960 for eighteen months. Hence this paper can conclude here that both the writers had directly experienced the pain and agony through which their characters were suffering. Perhaps this is the reason that Manto sympathizes with his character Bishen Singh and Jelloun sympathizes with all the inmates of the prison. It seems, through the narrator, he mourns the death of every prisoner.

V. PAIN AND AGONY OF THE CHARACTERS AND THE REASON FOR THEIR MENTAL ILLNESS

Bishen Singh the central character of 'Toba Tek Singh' was already suffering from mental illness when he came to know about the partition of the country and how his village and his lands went into the Muslim majority Pakistan. His mental illness, after this news, reached the culmination point and he succumbed to the pain and agony and at last, passed away.

Bishen Singh spent fifteen years in the asylum and he used to mumble just one incomprehensible sentence all the time. For fifteen years during the day and night, he used to say the same sentence.

When the governments of Pakistan and India decided to transfer the patients of mental asylum based on their religion, many of those patients could partially understand what was happening were disturbed and in mental agony, trauma and pain.

Bishen Singh was also one of the patients who were about to be transferred to India. On the day when prisoners were being transferred, Bishen Singh stood in the buffer zone and died. Saadat Hassan Manto did not describe the reason for his death but it was obvious that Bishen Singh died of the pain and agony he was suffering due to the partition of the country and the displacement of his family.

The story of characters in 'This Blinding Absence of Light' by Taher Ben Jelloun, is no different than the story of Bishen Singh. Toba Tek Singh depicts just the suffering of one character whereas Ben Jelloun narrates the story of not one but several characters who were arrested and imprisoned in one of the worst jails of history for at least eighteen years.

While narrating the story of characters, the narrator generally calls them by number. Number 12 Hamid, who could not bear the pain and agony and lost touch with reality, used to just stare at the roof and go on talking in a state of delirium. Jelloun says the delirium of Hamid was a way of leaving his prison mates and calling death. In a state of trance, he bashed his head against the wall several times and after several long cries, his breath stilled. This is the story of one prisoner who succumbed to his pain after a mental delirium. He lost his mental equilibrium when he lost hope of seeing his family and relatives ever again in his life. Perhaps, for him, death was the only way to get out of prison.

Larbi, the number 4, who was a chain smoker could not bear the urge to smoke and when he gave up after requesting the guards to provide him with some cigarettes he announced that he saw his death coming and he died after one week. He simply died because he did not get cigarettes to smoke.

When Mustapha, number 18, who died of scorpion sting, was being buried Moh, number 1, jumped into the grave to end his own life too. He was somehow pulled out but after this incident, the pain of being away from his family became unbearable for him, and he lost his mental balance. He used to talk to his mother and cook food for her and feed her in his imagination. As the time passed his mumbling grew fainter and slowly he embraced the death. His memories of his past were the harbinger (sic) of his death.

Majid, number 6, believed that those who died are not dead indeed. In his state of mind, he claimed that they are just pretending to be dead and they are waiting for a chance to free all the other inmates. He had hallucinations about the inmates who were already dead. In his imagination, he thought they are calling him and he, somehow, managed to commit suicide in a cell that was hardly five feet high.

After twenty years of imprisonment when the narrator was taken for medical treatment before his release, he saw the mirror for the first time after almost two decades. He took time to process in his mind after seeing his image in the mirror on a dentist's chair. He was shocked to see his face and appearance.

When the narrator was released, his younger brother and sister came to receive him from the local police station. They had tears in their eyes when they saw him, but the narrator did not or could not show any emotion. This is because he did not know what emotion he needed to express at that time. He was completely clueless. The narrator expresses that after spending almost two decades in the prison his later life after the release too was not normal. Perhaps the memories of pain, agony, and mental trauma haunted him permanently.

VI. MENTAL ILLNESS AND SPIRITUALITY

Almost every character lost its mental equilibrium and then died. There is not even a single character in the novel that suffered mental illness and survived. The narrator of the story who was spiritually strong and kept on praying regularly and involved himself in teaching the religious scripts to others did not suffer any serious mental disorder. This research can conclude here that involving yourself in spirituality and religion may keep your mental equilibrium intact.

VII. ELEMENT OF SCHADENFREUDE IN THE INMATES

When, Number 12, Hamid died, everyone saw a ray of hope of seeing the sky soon and getting released from the pigeon coops for at least a little time during the burial of the deceased. They all enjoyed the open sky and the narrator says he kept his eyes and mouth open to suck as much sunlight as much possible. In the evening, the narrator felt ashamed of enjoying the sunlight on the death of an inmate instead of mourning his death. The condition of the inmates had reached such a miserable state that they enjoyed the burial of one of their inmates. This was the reason they had a question in their mind, 'who is the next?' Perhaps, the jail authorities realized that the living inmates are enjoying the opportunity of burial of their dead prison inmates hence they decided not to allow them the luxury (sic) of taking part in the burial.

When Baba, the Saharawi, died, the inmates took his tunic before burial and sewed trousers, shirts, and underpants. The death of an inmate was a boon for the other inmates since they could get some extra clothes. The prison authorities did not provide any. When Jama, another inmate, showed the signs of insanity, the narrator was optimistic about getting his tunic since he could not bear the piercing cold and had developed an ache in his testicles.

VIII. WAR AGAINST PAIN AND SUFFERINGS

The narrator in *This Blinding Absence of Light* says they are fighting a war against an invisible enemy. This enemy is pain, agony, dementia, and even hallucinations. If the hope was the denial of reality the memories of the past were comparable to cyanide, a poison that gives you immediate death. Hence the narrator decides to keep the memories of

the past days at bay. Those who turned mad or lunatic had perhaps indulged in thinking too much about the beautiful past and their beloved relatives and friends. Whenever memories tried to invade the storyteller, he mustered all the energy and pushed them out. A resistance against negativity was not a requirement but a survival tactic for these inmates. Although the food which was being provided to them was barely enough to survive, the writer says most of those who died did not die of starvation but hatred. They felt a deep hatred against everyone responsible for their plight. I think the same was the case of Bishen Singh in *Toba Tek Singh*. He had developed deep hatred against those who supported and asked for the partition of the country.

To keep the pain and delirium and dementia away the inmates used to tell the stories of movies. The narrator himself was the storyteller of the prison. Sometimes, he used to concoct the stories on the line of the Hollywood movies and tell other inmates. He used to take them on a tour of different countries and cities in their imagination. Sometimes, the stories were about beautiful girls and their lovers.

IX. END, BUT NOT THE CONCLUSION

It will take further detailed analysis of the psyche of the characters of both the works to conclude this paper about the pain, agony, and trauma of the characters. However, it can be concluded here that pain, agony, and trauma have close relation with the mental equilibrium of an individual and this is the reason almost all the characters in question here died after suffering from a mental disorder. It can also conclude here that at the highest point of pain and trauma an individual loses his mental equilibrium.

This is the reason that the narrator of *This Blinding Absence of Light* says if the hope was the denial of reality the memories of the past were comparable to cyanide, a poison that gives you immediate death. Why memories are considered cyanide here is because memories lead to further mental pain and agony. The mental suffering of all the characters was the reason behind their death.

The reason behind the death of Bishen Singh was agony and pain. The reason behind the death of Hamid, Majid, Moh, and many others was not the disease or accidents but the pain, agony, and trauma from which they were suffering.

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