Borders and Boundaries: Reading Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", "The Last Salute" and "Yazid"

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The things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.

– *Jawaharlal Nehru*

The Partition of India in 1947 is a critical watershed in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Casting a gloom on the aura of celebration underlining Jawaharlal Nehru's famous "Tryst with Destiny" speech delivered on the eve of India's independence, the inauguration of India and Pakistan as new nation states came with a grotesque accompaniment of genocidal violence. In fact, Nehru's implied reference to this cataclysmic violence unleashed by the Partition in his momentous speech as mere "pains of labour" (Nehru "Tryst with Destiny") not only naturalizes the largescale communal violence as an organic accompaniment in the attainment of nationhood, but also underlines the point that the "fecundity of the unexpected," to quote Pierre Proudhon, far exceeded "the statesman's prudence."(Proudhon qtd. in Hannah Arendt 7)

Echoing Nehru's general view of the Partition as an aberration, the nationalist history of India too elides its violent legacy as a unique "limit case" that defies historical reconstruction (Bhaba 250). Nevertheless, the vicious legacy of Partition lives within the liminal depths of the Indian subcontinent's alternative past occupying "an inassimilable place outside history" (Pandey 16).

Since Partition changed the socio-cultural dynamics of the Indian subcontinent, a reading of Partition as a corollary of Indian independence is

important. Such a reading will not only acknowledge Partition as an inescapable truth, but will also demonstrate the importance of borders as boundaries that separated thousands of people from their home and hearth as Partition unleashed one of the largest mass migrations of all time. It will also illustrate how the macro-politics that regulate such cartographic arbitration ignores the consequences that the negotiation entails in the psychosomatics of the citizens.

Research articles like Alex Tickell's '"How many Pakistans?" considers the border as a "contested space" and critically engages with the issue of interstitial space as determining national identity (Tickell 158). His paper in which he proposes an "academic reevaluation of the events of 1947" touches on a range of topics leading to a "postcolonial spatial awareness in the study of Partition literature" but lacks a central focus, leading to a lacuna (Tickell 157).

Michiel Baud and William Van Schendel in their study of borderlands, on which Tickell's work is based, talk about borderland dynamics and is extremely useful in understanding the idea of borders as the ultimate symbol of political status quo. Moving away from the hitherto relevant concern of borderland studies on "legal, geographical and geopolitical questions", Baud and Schendel direct their attention to the historical effect of borders and look at the "social realities provoked by them (212)." They use the term "border" for the "political divides that were the result of state building" and study how borders "all over the world became crucial elements in the new, increasingly global system of states," (214). In their paper they have argued that "from the perspective of national centers of authority, the border between countries is a sharp line, an impenetrable barrier" but from the perspective of the border "borderlands are broad scenes of interactions" between people on both sides of the border (216). This approach brings to mind Sven Tagil and his colleagues who note that "boundaries separate people (or groups of people) and the separating qualities of boundaries influence interaction between them" (14).

Taking a cue from the paradox of border studies underlined by Baud and Schendel and Alex Tickell, the present research paper seeks to re-evaluate the events of 1947 by directing attention to the spatial crisis of

the negotiation of national boundaries by reading three representative short pieces by Saadat Hasan Manto. These short works by Manto chosen as primary texts for the paper –"Toba Tek Singh," "The Last Salute" and "Yazid"— together critique the politics of Partition and suggest that the macro-political tendency of communal configuration of society by cartographic mediation of borders is anabsurd project. These three short works appraise the state-centered approach that pictures borders as "unchanging, uncontested and unproblematic" by dramatizing the "struggles and adaptations that the imposition of a border causes in the region bisected by it" (Baud and Schendel 216).

The paper seeks to read Manto in the light of the tradition of semiology developed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure thinks that a semiological system is any "system of signs that expresses ideas" (*Course in General Linguistics* 33, 160) and the two components of a sign—the signifier and the signified—share an arbitrary relation. This arbitrariness is a leitmotif in Manto's stories and is not only an integral part of his creative psychology but also the most important element he uses to bring home his belief that Partition in his view was farcical and "despite trying" he "could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India" (Jalal 146). By reading Manto's response to the cartographic negotiation of borders as an absurd political feat leading to myriad shades of violence, the paper attempts to underscore what Nietzsche proclaims: "things of the past are never viewed in their true perspective or receive their just value; but value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past". Although the paper uses Saussure's structuralism as its critical point of inception, it goes beyond its schematic parameters because Manto and his work defies circumscription of all kinds, academic or otherwise.

"Toba Tek Singh"

The locus of Manto's creative-imaginative work on Partition centers on his own obligation to come to terms with the unique contingency of the event. His oeuvre after the Partition betrays the following concern:

> Now that we were free, had subjugation ceased to exist? Who would be our slaves? When we were colonial subjects, we would dream of freedom, but now that we were free, what would our dreams be? Were we even free? …India was free. Pakistan was free…. But man was a slave in

> both countries, of prejudice, religious fanaticism, of bestiality, of cruelty. (Flemming 8)

The pathos of dislocation ushered in by the national-communal division of India and Pakistan is scathingly critiqued by him in his epochal short story "Toba Tek Singh". In the story sense and nonsense are inextricably concocted and the chaos of Partition is communicated by the comical stupefaction of the inmates of a lunatic asylum in Lahore to the news of the territorial division of India and Pakistan. As if to comment on the insanity of grafting somatically absent national borders to divide people who had a common cultural legacy, Manto situates his story in the company of raving lunatics. The spatial-temporal complexity that beset the citizens of the newly independent India and Pakistan is evoked by Manto as a crisis of location wherein the lunatics are dis-embedded from their former common lunatic seat to be appropriated as citizens of India and Pakistan respectively. Their incomprehension is embodied in the following passage:

> As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India? (Manto 6)

To avoid the puzzling contingency of dubious national belonging, one of the inmates stations himself atop a tree and declares his wish to neither live in India nor in Pakistan but to live atop the tree. This comical subverting of territorial belonging occasioned by the grand scale narrative of Indian independence further dims the euphoric glow of India's freedom at midnight and illustrates Manto's disavowal of the ideology of national affiliation. It is through the eccentricity of this lunatic that Manto represents the emotions of the "millions of people on both sides of the border (who) refused to accept the finality of the borders" (Chandraet al 502) and in doing so they challenged the "political status quo of which borders are the ultimate symbol" (Baud and Schendel 211).

Manto deploys his protagonist, Bishan Singh, to evoke the fragmented nature of self-identity from the point of view of a subaltern. His idea of selfhood is so inextricably related to his former village that he is consternated to learn at the border where the exchange of lunatics on the basis of their religious is to

take place that his village is now situated in Pakistan. Upon hearing the news, having no other option to defy this dis-embedding of his former cultural landscape of Toba Tek Singh, the protagonist positions himself in the territorial limbo of the no-man's-land. Here, evoking the analogous gesture of his mate who climbed a tree to avoid the eventuality of national belonging, Bishan Singh positions his petrified self in the territorial halfway house where he lets out a shriek of protest and dies. His death and his previous garbled speech deployed as a linguistic caricature is his subjective protest against "the content of the word 'Order'" that "always indicates repression," as Roland Barthes had said (Hiebert 95).The *order* here stands for Bishan Singh's position as a religiously appropriated masculine citizen of the Indian nation. His final shriek is a derisive critique of the violence and insanity of national-communal division.

The whole story revolves around the eradication of essentialist choices as ultimate. It underscores that the signifier of lunacy in Bishan Singh signifying mental instability or the borderland representing a "social reality" (Baud and Schendel) with continuing geographical fixity as indiscriminate and motivated only by social convention for, in reality, "There was no sign of …the border" and Bishan Singh and his subaltern friends were "just a sea of people who had swallowed up all the marks which demarcated one country from another" (Tickell 171).

When one reflects on this fact, one may remember that Saussure has repeatedly emphasized the social nature of language as a system of signs. He has seen language as a social fact, one that exists by virtue of "a sort of contract signed by the members of a community," (*CGL* 31, 14) and just like a language is a social product, conventions that are part of the cultural sign systems of a society are also an extension of the social fact. Therefore, certain signs conveying certain ideas is socially sanctioned by its users; nevertheless, Sausserian linguistics unequivocally point out that the symbiosis between a concept (signified) and a sound image (signifier) is unmotivated "that is they are not naturally connected" and are arbitrary (Holdcroft 53). Being "imprinted on our mind together" a signifier and a signified "are mutually evocative in all circumstances" (54). Manto subverts the rules of inclusion and exclusion that qualifies border restrictions and situates his protagonist in the no-man's-land

and underlines the idea that "National borders are political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power….they reflect…the mental images of politicians, lawyers and intellectuals" (Baud and Schendel 211). The intrinsic connection between borders (signifier) and boundaries (signified) is not a "spontaneous" expression "of natural reality dictated…by natural forces" but is the result of social convention that approves the connection (214). Manto questions the politics of Partition by separating the signifier (border) from the signified (boundary) and holds in sharp relief his protagonist Bishan Singh as a putative counter example underlining arbitrariness of the signifier-signified symbiosis.

"The Last Salute"

Baud and Schendel has importantly noted that "borderlands in which the border does not coincide with natural and cultural divides are potentially more complex than borderlands in which these distinctions are clearer" (226). "Symbols of national unity (…the flag, the national army…) take a special, more emphatic meaning in (such) borderlands" (233). "This display of statehood symbolizes the effort of each state to maintain exclusive control of its half of the borderland, and in this respect, the border is the ultimate symbol of national sovereignty. But this does not imply that the effort is ever wholly successful" (226). This lack of success is creatively illustrated by Manto in his story "The Last Salute". Here Manto critiques the paradoxical nature of borders as both unifying and separating people and thereby underlines the artificial nature of borders as "mental constructs" that "become social realities" (242). The concept of borders entrenching limits for people unearths the idea of the "self" and the "other,"differences that are, as Saussure says, "interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the other" (*CGL* 159, 114) Therefore, in Manto's story Rab Nawaz and Ram Singh stand as signifiers who "define each other's value" as border guards, custodians of Pakistani and Indian patriotism, without one, the value of the other is zilch.

"The Last Salute" touches on the dialectics of semiology and Saussure's famous thesis which states that the relationship between a sign and its representative physical signification is an arbitrary one. It illustrates how even context-bound nationalistic patriotism in the military as a given

is indiscriminate. There is nothing in the quality of patriotism that Rab Nawaz or Ram Singh display that denotes the specific meaning of communal partisanship in their role as vanguards of national border, a deified part in nationalistic terms. In fact, it echoes Partha Chatterjee's argument that in "Indian nationalism the civic demarcation of universal spaces of public and private selfhood conflicts with and fails to map onto, the cultural and metaphysical field where 'the indigenous national elite had imagined its true community'" (Chatterjee 159).

"The Last Salute", therefore, demonstrates this concern and presents India and Pakistan as identical twin images of one another. This uncanny replication of politically designated enemies is intended to critique the geopolitical tendency of inscribing borderlands as recognized national demarcations. In the story, the fighting sides are conspicuous by their absence to one another and the frontier resonates with personal abuses hurled from the opposing trenches. The abuses take the form of a nonchalant verbal repertoire between politically entitled enemies who were once friends working together in the erstwhile colonial Indian Army. This further underlines the grotesque doubling the story initiates as Rab Nawaz and Ram Singh, subaltern representatives of Pakistani and Indian army respectively, are relieved to discover one another in the opposing sides and exchange sporadic ammunition more as banter than real military standoff "…when he saw a familiar face among the enemy, he forgot for a while why he was fighting what was the compulsion of raising his rifle against erstwhile friends" (*Mottled Dawn* 29). Rab Nawaz, like the innumerable others dwelling in the black marginalia of society who are spoken for, given orders, and perennially silenced, comes to the natural conclusion that such "intricate matters" of high politics that validate friends and enemies based on demographic scope and religious identity are "beyond the comprehension of a simple soldier" (*Mottled Dawn* 30). Manto's story is a comment on the hyperreality of borders as a simulation of a non-existent social reality insisted upon by the nationalist political discourse.

In fact, the end of the story when the dying Ram Singh in his state of utter delirium mentally occupies a limbo like Bishan Singh forgets that

they were *fighting* "a war" and engages in nostalgic remuneration of the past with his friend Rab Nawaz who had accidently shot him by mistake and salutes his erstwhile Indian sergeant major, is a classic example of the inability of the consciousness to distinguish reality from the simulation of reality (*Mottled Dawn* 35). Only, in this case, the mortally wounded Ram Singh could see the reality clearly. The end of the story takes us back to the question that perturbed Manto: "Weren't the basic problems confronting Indians and Pakistanis the same?" (146). The palpable sense of self-destruction indicated by Ram Singh's death suggest a presence of a hermetically sealed social environment where an artificial sense of national homogeneity is set to replace relative social ties.

"Yazid"

One of the central concerns of Manto's writing on the Partition is his critique of sociopolitical violence and linguistic communalism. In "Yazid" Manto critiques the modern validity of classical archetypes and "discusses the power of names to engender violence or to change the course of history" (Bruce 2). The writer here reconfirms that the relation between the signifier and the signified is capricious and always follows a social convention. Sans that convention, the essentializing tendency of a signifier, the name Yazid, in this case, signifying a relative social history is defunct. The binary of negativity gone, Yazid could indeed be a sign that could be decoded or interpreted in a light other than its given negativity.

In the context of *langue* (a particular language) and *parole* (speech), Saussure argues that *langue* is "both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty." (*CGL*, 25, 9) Effective intercommunication between members of a linguistic community underlines the social fact that administers the use of langue because when a group of people engage in conversation "all will produce— not exactly of course, but approximately— the same signs united with the same concepts." (*CGL*, 29, 13). Therefore, language here functions as "a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking (parole), a grammatical system that has potential existence in each brain, or more specifically in the brains of a group of individuals. For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity." The reciprocated familiarity of the

values of signifiers of a given language is, consequently, determined by social conventions that are, according to Lewis, "regularities in action, or in action and belief, which are arbitrary but perpetuate themselves because they serve some sort of common interest. Past conformity breeds future conformity because it gives one a reason to go on conforming" (4). Therefore, the value of a linguistic term validated by convention, sustains its linguistic and social importance through continued usage.

In "Yazid" we see Manto's deliberate attempt to re-signify a socially crystallized signifier that has a common impression of negativity on the minds of the speakers. Here, the very act of naming as confirming communal identity is ironically subverted. Manto invokes the *Marsiyah* narratives of the Shia community that detests the name Yazid "as a usurper of Islamic political authority" and as a "metonymy of un-Islamic and tyrannical rule," and attempts to voluntarily dismiss their cultural value (qtd. in Bruce 9). Observing the post-Partition South Asian culture through the kaleidoscope of names, Manto here underlines the absurdity besetting the signifier-signified relation and points out that "there is no natural link" between the two (Holdcroft 124). The crucial point here is the link between naming and the rhetoric of violence that surrounds the act of naming. The value-laden archetypical name of Yazid as the enemy of the righteous mediates between a mythical history of violence and an actual history of Partition trauma wherein the Islamic community is labelled as the victim (read Husain) of the atrocities of the former. The binaries Hindustan-Pakistan, enemy-friend, self-other, victim-predator are cast in sharp relief in the story to invite us to logically consider the violence of difference. Additionally, the story proposes a break from the passive assimilation of a social fact which, according to Durkheim, involves "any way of acting…capable of exercising over the individual an external constraint" (Lukes 59). Manto here plays with two essential and interdependent characteristics of language—its generality and its externality. The latter establishes that an "individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community," (*CGL*, 101, 69) and the "community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language." *(CGL*, 104, 71) Manto intends to disrupt this convention of linguistic stability in "Yazid" by reconstructing the communally endorsed practice of naming an individual. His

counter-cultural opposition to perpetuate the archetypical linguistic legacy is an executive act of *parole* (speech) intended to "dislocate the 'rule-governed creativity' of the kind involved in the ordinary everyday use of language" (Chomsky 23).

Further, a close reading of the text suggests Manto's earlier preoccupation with the politics of naming, a theme he chose for his "Some Thoughts about Names" published in 1954 in a collection entitled *Bitter, Sour,* [and] *Sweet.* The first essay in this collection, 'Writing on Walls', extolls the virtues of creative freedom engendered by the bathroom walls in a mosque and suggests the idiosyncratic and grotesque inappropriateness of naming a place as foul when, in actuality, it acts as the microcosmic utopian chamber affecting freedom from all kinds of censorship.

Manto revisits the theme of the rhetoric of naming to further comment on the absurdity of national borders as heightening animosity between neighbors in "Yazid". Written in face of the political contingency of India blocking water supply to Pakistan, "Yazid" immediately brings to mind the tyranny of the licentious and inebriated Ummayad caliph Yazid toward the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, Husain, in Karbala. The text of this archetypical religious legacy is metonymically grafted into the present day post-Partition landscape of Pakistan where India threatens to become the infamous army of Yazid blocking water and killing the innocent. The binary tectonics of a righteous, un-Islamic and tyrannical India and a victimized and brave Pakistan is obvious, only Manto refuses to cast his protagonist Karimdad as the martyr Husain and invokes, instead, a critic of the religious and sectarian identity. Thereby, he disinclines to be a party to the exclusionary discourse of borders acting as boundaries separating the *otherized* enemy.

Set against the backdrop of intercommunal Partition violence that killed the protagonist Karimdad's father and his brother-in-law, the story touches upon the dialectic of "transpositional understanding," of the enemy's point of view (Sen 163). Karimdad refuses to join in with the villager's vilification of India as an unjust enemy and declines any association between India and the claque of the Yazid thereby refusing to "implicate himself in the discourse of enmity and the violence it engenders"

(Bruce 13). His response is centered on the logic that in the face of imminent war it is foolish to expect justice from one's enemy. Addressing the villagers he says: "Why do you forget that they are not only our enemy? Are we not their enemies? If we had a choice, we too would have stopped their grain and water" (*Mottled Dawn* 106).

This exchange underscoring the age old adage that everything is fair in love and war, unmistakably indicates a collapsing of the fixed positionality of India as the vindictive *other* and Pakistan as the vulnerable victim, validated by mythology. Following his interaction with the villagers, when Karimdad returns home he is greeted by the happy news that his pregnant wife has given birth to a son. Delighted and overjoyed, Karimdad names his child Yazid. When his consternated wife asks him how he could defile his child by naming him after a tyrant, Karimdad replies, "It's just a name; it's not necessary that he too will be the same Yazid…that Yazid shut the river water; this one will let the waters flow again," (*Mottled Dawn* 108). His intention of destabilizing the category of an enemy can be regarded as a subaltern's gesture of alternating the essential historical narrative that reinforces nationalist intolerance and "naturalize[s] preexisting notions of fundamentally opposed Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities" by a constant "retailing [sic] of tales of sacrifice and war,"(Pandey 176). With the invocation of Yazid as Karimdad's son, as opposed to the archetypical enemy of Islam, Manto performs the difficult task of decolonizing the mind. Commenting on the story, Ayesha Jalal says it "reminds us that the archetypical villain not only resides in all of us but, with a measure of empathy, can also dissolve differences with the other to become the ultimate purveyor of peace,"(Jalal 206). The story aims at a resignification of baby Yazid and an eradication of his subject from his conventional symbolical parallel in Muslim cultural history.

Conclusion

Critiquing the normative discourse of exclusionary politics, Manto's texts direct their attention to the exploration of the feelings of confusion and uncertainty in his characters as an interventional strategy to the politics of differentiation. The three representative short stories critically read in the paper are unequivocal documentary evidences of the testing time of the Partition. But, apart from

that, what strikes them as singular is their tendency to subvert the homogenizing trend of historical narration. While "Toba Tek Singh" questions the ideas of home and nation, the farcical nature of national boundaries, "The Last Salute" questions the efficacy of inter-communal violence and the notion of patriotism by presenting the historical antagonists as mirror reflections of one another and "Yazid" challenges the *essentializing* social conventions that easily *otherize* the enemy merely on face value. By taking a cue from Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, the paper has attempted to examine Manto's texts as principally delineating the socially motivated, arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, the sign and its meaning. It has shown how Manto's short stories deny contingent national belonging, defy the politics of cartographic negotiation and re-examine the history of Partition from the point of view of the residents of the borders and the boundaries of the society— the subalterns. Manto's writings engage in an iconoclastic disruption of traditional and contemporary approaches to religious identity and offer the reader an outlet to reexamine a history of an essential seminal moment in the subcontinent that still informs psychosomatics of its residents even after several decades of the Partition of 1947. The paper reads Manto through the lens of Saussure's structuralism but attempts to go beyond the parameters of Structuralism because Manto and his work cannot be restricted to boundaries, academic or otherwise.

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