



No Man's Land: Reading All Quiet on the Western Front and Toba Tek Singh through Robert Frost's Mending Walls

Rashmi Sirohi

Ph.D Scholar

Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi

A day has its own attributes, so does a night have which distinguish them from each other. But what about the time where these antithetical entities no longer exist in their utmost form? That is the space or time where the identity of each of these entities crumbles down. No man's land is that space which is out of the clutches of boundaries and imposition of the nationalistic identity. The idea of this paper is to problematize the concept of no man's land by taking into account *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Eric Maria Remarque and *Toba Tek Singh* by Saadat Hasan Manto while dealing with the ambiguity of walls created by Robert Frost in *Mending Walls*. The paper tries to touch upon the national boundaries and not dwell in the microcosm of stately boundaries.

There is a very thin line between the opposites which is the zone of approximation and ambiguity. In this zone the black and white interact with each other and a feasibility of grey shade emerges which entails the presence of both the colors. The intersection might vary from a point to a region depending upon the confluence, that is, the degree of randomness depends upon the ability or capability of the structure to entertain the possibility of different sorts and not falling down to one side of the binary. In this zone the implied and the applied meanings get fudged losing the authenticity of the crude lines. Such space entertains

the contradictions, paradoxes and clashes exhibiting randomness of highest order where the co-existence of the opposites denotes the harmony of contradictions. The range of possibilities attains its highest peak when any structure is infused with the possibilities of contradictions because the clashes between the two opposite spaces generate disorder. Geo-politically, the walls between the two nation states overlook the ambiguity possessed by the symbolical no man's land where the identities of the opposite sides dissolve into a grey zone contributing as a diverse unification of the opposites and their coexistence. Geography here serves as destiny where the geo-political placement pre-decides the discourse of human life and contributes in the generation of a pattern mostly. A person born on war torn land will have different experiences in comparison to the one who gets cradled in a multi-faceted fast economic paced country of the first world. No man's land tears off the identity garb where a soldier of either third world or first world is just a soldier who feels the same way as the opposite one. No man's land metaphorically unites the diverse where the opposite flags may have their own discourses of destinies but the destiny of the insanity is in unison here.

Johannes Kepler, a German astronomer, says that each planet, in its motion around the sun, plays a melody that our ears are unable to hear as it lies in a different frequency range which is not audible to human ears. The human world gains shelter of meaning by seeking subjective coherence between things. Nothing has meaning yet everything holds a meaning where something denotes something else. In this gap lies the incoherence and ambiguity which tickle the rational and logical domain while marking a web of entangled roots beneath this hand carved shelter. What is visible to human eyes and comprehensible to human mind is symmetry. Ambiguity starts showering the hard surface of symmetry when one sees fractals, never-ending patterns and non-geometric shapes, in clouds, when "there is method in madness" (Shakespeare, Hamlet 2.2.195).

Frame or shape is necessary for the painting to exist but the form of the painting lies in the abstraction where there is a propensity to create more shapes and frames. The order and the disorder co-exist of which Friedrich Nietzsche has extensively talked about in his *The Birth of Tragedy* where he places the contradictory forces of order and disorder together in the context of tragedy but not limited to tragedy. His philosophical contestation of order and disorder is inclusive enough to be read universally.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche has talked extensively about the co-existence of the opposites. He described two different tendencies of tragic art namely Apollonian and Dionysian. The two artistic worlds have different tendencies and connotations with the help of which Nietzsche has tried to dive into the massive pool of nature and its unknown complexities. He calls Apollonian tendency as an artistic world of dream and he says

The seductive illusion of dream worlds, which every man is an accomplished artist in creating, is the precondition of any kind of visual art and of an important body of poetry. We take great pleasure in the sensual proximity of form, where all shapes speak to us, and nothing is listless or unnecessary. Nevertheless, even when this dream reality is manifested before us at the greatest pitch of intensity, we hold onto the impression, flitting in and out of consciousness, that it is still an illusion (68)

Nietzsche has placed the forms of aesthetics in terms of order and disorder, Apollonian and Dionysian, in order to deal with the gap between the known and perceptible to human eye of comprehension and the unknown and incomprehensible but which shows up in the hour of loss of form and shape. He takes about this peeking into the Dionysian artistic world while quoting Schopenhauer and he says

The surging dread that washes over man when, all of a sudden, he loses his way among the cognitive forms of appearance, because the principle of sufficient reason, in some form or other, appears to have become unhinged. If we add to this panic the dreadful, blissful ecstasy awakened by this fragmentation of the principium individuationis (principle of individuation), which rises up from man's innermost core, which rises up from within nature itself, we are permitted a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian (69)

The subjectivity of a person in Dionysian world becomes a complete forgetting of the self. He talks of the primal unity where the artist's subjectivity is lost in the dream illusion of the reality and the artist leads onto the pure contemplation of images. This primal unity comes in the form of art, art form which has higher

degree of randomness and is aesthetically formless such as music, painting and tragedy. In this primal unity the artist is merged with the “pain and disjunction” (Nietzsche 70) and he says

under the influence of the Apollonian dream, this music is revealed to him as an allegory- a dream image. The reflection of ecstatic pain in sound, free of images and concepts, moderated by illusion, goes on to create a second mirror image as a single allegory, or example. The artist abandons his subjectivity in the Dionysian process. (70)

Aesthetically, beauty and truth are the components which are a function of order and disorder, Apollonian and Dionysian. Beauty and truth do not lie either in order or in disorder rather it lies in the sense of balance between the order and disorder. They do not fall on one side of the binary rather they become the tool to dissolve the binaries and it depends upon the capability of the art and the artist to create aesthetics which showcases the co-existence of the opposites. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* says

Apollo appears to us as the apotheosis of the *principum individuationis*. Apollo, considered as an ethical god, commands moderation from his followers, coupled with self-knowledge in order to maintain it. Thus the admonitions “know thyself” and “nothing to excess” coexist with the aesthetic necessity of beauty; while, on the other hand, hubris and excess are considered to be malign spirits of the extra-Apollonian realm; qualities of the age of the Titans, of the world of the barbarians. (73)

Without order Dionysian has no meaning and without disorder Apollonian cannot exist with sublimity. It is with the co-existence of the two contradictory senses that the aesthetics is evolved and the consciousness is developed. The illogical logic of the truth, the irrational rationality of the beauty, and the purposelessness of the purpose make a balance between the contradictions which is not like an assumed equilibrium rather a contestation. Nietzsche says that “Apollo could not live without Dionysus” (73). He further adds on to explain this coexistence and he illustrates

If we make a determined effort to stare into the heart of the sun and turn away blinded, we see dark-colored patches before our eyes, acting as what we might call remedies. The light-image manifestations of the Apollonian mask are the inevitable products of a momentary gaze into the terrifying core of nature: light patches to heal the wounded gaze scorched by the terrible night.(74)

If illusion prevails then Dionysian world becomes self-destructive where nothing holds onto anything and a quagmire of chaos which has no ray of light. It is dark and scary if the chaos is not peeked into with some order. On the other hand if categories and binaries prevail in terms of manifestation of the reality then there is no scope for aesthetics, beauty and there is no truth in that. “Everything that we now refer to as culture, education, and civilization will one day kneel before that infallible judge, Dionysus” (Nietzsche 76) and at the same time “the Apollonian wrenches us out of Dionysian universality. With the tremendous impact of images, concepts, ethical teachings, and stirrings of sympathy, the Apollonian lifts man out of this orgiastic self-destruction” (Nietzsche 76).

No man’s land is an area which has got various manifestations. Firstly, in terms of geography it is an area between two national boundaries which is not ascribed to any of the one sharing that boundary. Second manifestation is ideological where the two conflicting ideas come into a communicative platform. There is a generation of “Third space” which is a conceptual space as proposed by post-colonial theorist Homi.K. Bhabha. Although Bhabha is talking in the context of colonizer-colonized relationship and is commenting on the third space in terms of culture but the concept is very much readable in the context of no man’s land. This is a space where negotiation takes place or is possible either through dialogue or some other means such as war. But will it be called a negotiation when it is being carried out through violent means? In the context of First World War, this third space was rendered to dwell in vacuum while denying the scope of dialogue happening and if at all there was dialogue happening it was violently ruling out the time-space graph to retain its curvature. The violence makes the time-space graph to be static and there is a sense of loss of involvement.

Civilizational matrix thrives on ambivalences, paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities of different sorts in different spectrums. The degree of randomness is high and cannot be contained in linear equation

which is why civilization is a curvature that hovers along the dynamism of multifold. The elasticity of a culture, the fluidity of different cultures at the point of confluence, the intermingling of traits of different cultures, and the shades where distinction between two different cultures dissolves becomes the facilitators of the spatial conglomeration of diverse spaces. The possible engagements with the possibilities lay the foundation of the idea of relativity. Any idea may not have an independent meaning. Its coherent dependence on the other ideas marks its revolution in intersection with other's revolution in random space. This intersection makes an idea lose its sense of particularity. In this intersecting zone one finds grey shades where the typicality of one is lost, where binaries dissolve and fudging of ideas takes place. Here "fair is foul and foul is fair" (Shakespeare, Macbeth 2).

Expression is that scientific, psychological discourse that tries to minimize the gap between what is known and what is unheard. It channelizes the temporality in undecipherable ways. Space is a concept which attains its existence through a supportive system shared by temporality. One is topographical space and its constitution in terms of design and layout another is topological space which cannot be measured as it retains its existence in terms of knowledge. Together temporal and spatial reality constitutes the curvature as seen in civilizations, psychological dilemmas, philosophical contestations and narratives. In time-space graph, depicting the curvature of spectrum, ideas are tangentially connected with each other. Coming back to the network of ideas, the ideas are not connected in a singular, linear and congruous manner rather they share the time-space graph tangentially. Human existence is surrounded by strand of idea some of which are within the reach of human mind creates one interconnection between the concerned ideas and it is assumed that a strong hold can be exerted on these interconnections. On the contrary the truth is that these interconnections if imagined in a larger domain touch one's sensibility like a signal and leave in a state of sublime confusion. In the process of this sublimity with respect to the factor of chances some strands of ideas evolve and develop an interconnection. Meanwhile some strands are bound to be left behind and some are beyond being conquered. The cosmos of abstractions entails ideas where no idea revolves in isolation. Each idea has a tangential chord meeting with the other. The tendency of human comprehensive capacity is to draw interconnections between the ideas in order to generate a definite meaning. The matter is of choice as the

ideas are in the zone of probable and improbable. This is choice of direction where some are selected in this process of evolution.

Reality thus becomes a function of perception and cannot be complete as it entails a sense of incompleteness because of being multifaceted. When boundaries are created and fine lines are drawn on the lands it somewhere or the other limits the possibilities of perceptions. Binaries downplay the aesthetics that could emerge out of the diversity. No man's land provides a scope for the possibilities to see the reality of geography and its crude impact on the generic lives worldwide. Power structures and power grids function in binary terms but no man's land escapes the binaries and engages with aesthetic judgment of human lives. Aesthetic judgment is not analytical in nature as one cannot analyze beauty. It is rather a reflective judgment because there is difference between what one perceives and what the reality is. Complete judgment cannot be made through empirical analysis; reflective judgment is important. Geographical boundaries are empirical and lack aesthetics of human life and its collectivity whereas no man's land is the third space between the fine lines which thrives on reflective judgment.

Now the question arises who divides and who decides these boundaries?? Is a clear-cut demarcation possible? Nature in its pristine form does not have the concept of this division, it does not divide. So, boundaries are a political, ideological and cultural construct and this construction is based upon the political, ideological and cultural differences and motives. Nature did not create any boundary; it is man-made in every sense geographically as well as ideologically. Therefore, these boundaries are not permanent in terms of existence but gains permanence in terms of projection. First World War happened to be the first ever war which completely disassociated the glory attached to war. The invention of trench warfare, gas warfare and other such inventions made it easier to wipe out the whole generation either through loss of life or loss of balanced consciousness which has been talked about by various war writers such as Virginia Woolf in Mrs Dalloway and Wilfred Owen in his war poems. The idea here is to critically analyze trench warfare which romanticized the concept of war. The boundaries there keep on shifting as trenches keep on shifting. Sometimes one side has an edge and comes forward so as to force the other side to take a step back. Those areas of Jammu and Kashmir which are supposedly a part of India but are captured by Pakistan belong to

nowhere so in what territory do they fall in? So geographically as well the boundaries are not permanent. The zone between the two fighting nations becomes no man's land because it is not attributed to any of the one.

The concepts of boundaries are imaginary in truest sense but this imaginary concept of boundaries attains permanence because of the politics or by the politics. This human construction is in the name of identity be it religious identity, nationalistic identity or any other conceptual marker of identity. The paper here is dealing with the creation of nationalistic identity which accounts to the topical idea of no man's land as land here is in the connotations of nation. If one looks at the contemporary issue of India-Pakistan there one finds how the imaginary base has taken a strict form which cannot be dismantled even if wished. Furthermore, if at all any gap appears then in the process of mending that gap the situation is infused with tension by the players. They play on these gaps which Frost says in his poem "Mending Walls".

Partha Chatterjee in her essay "Nationalism as a Problem" problematizes the idea of nation and its construct. Sometimes language becomes a tool to associate with any particular identity, sometimes culture and some other time nation becomes that associative tool. Such associative tools harness the natural flow of consciousness while constricting and channelizing the institution of identity making. It leaves no space for the approximation where identity is not simply governed by the crude boundaries between the two nation states. The fundamental radicalism projects identity as a reflection of binaries while ruling out the possibility of identity as a complex grey idea. The association with a certain shape of identity generates binaries and the sense of us versus others. Such divisions fail to contemplate on the impossibility of boundary as with every moving step geographically blends the diversity. No man's land is a space where all these identity construction dissolves down to nothing. Artificially designed boundaries impose the division on the culturally blended group of societies. Bhishan Singh in *Toba Tek Singh* on the no man's land does not belong to either of the nations. Similarly in the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* when anyone dies Paul Baumer says "He died on the no man's land" (78). This idea is portrayed by Frost in his poem "Mending Walls" where he says during the spring mending-time "But they would have the rabbit out of hiding" (8).

The imaginary concept of national consciousness which becomes a part of our collective conscious as said by Carl Jung does not allow one to counter that construct. *All Quiet on the Western Front* portrays

brutality which is a product of this conscious dwelling upon an imaginary base. The frame given by Robert Frost in “Mending Walls” is creating an ambiguous space where by mending Frost does not mean that to actually take a stance in favor of mending the wall but rather he is problematizing the idea of wall and the possibilities and repercussions of mending. In the novel by Remarque it has been shown how mending of walls through war makes the innocence suffer. The character of Paul Baumer is significant to understand this suffering. How the naïve young ones have been subjected to such atrocious conditions because somebody decided to mend wall. This is the same attack on innocence found in Bhishan Singh of *Toba Tek Singh*. They both are “rabbits” as said by Frost.

The mending of wall which takes place is a mutual construction wherein both the sides have a unanimous vote to keep the wall through violence. In *All Quiet on the Western Front* the building of trenches across the boundary falls under this mutual construction and in *Toba Tek Singh* the soldiers standing on both the sides represents the same idea which is aptly given words by Frost when he says “and on a day we meet to walk the line/ And set the wall between us once again” (13-14).

This setting of wall once again is the mutual incorporation of an idea of reconfiguring and reasserting the constructed notion of sacredness of one’s land. The attacking on each other’s trenches becomes a game of demolishing yet retaining wall because of the mutual function. The metaphor of game itself is very significant here when Frost says “oh just another kind of out-door game” (21). Does it not appear like a game where as Remarque says in the novel that “sometimes they come out of the trenches and attack and sometimes we come out and attack” (110)? It is the same game played on the innocence where Bhishan Singh ends up landing on no man’s land. So, mutual understanding is there for the creation of wall and the mending of that wall but how does this mending happens or being carried out and who mends the wall is the larger question to ponder upon.

The retaining of wall is again based upon the ideological paradigm. The opposing sides mend the wall according to their own ideology, motives and gains. In the First World War walls were being mended in such a violent manner according to the personalized politics of the opposing Triple Entente and Triple Alliance. In the process of mending, exchange of stone is not taking place as Frost says because both are fixed and

stubborn about their ideology. Similarly, partition was looked and taken differently by India and Pakistan and therefore mending becomes different according to their own understanding and motives. And who die and suffer in between are Bhishan Singh and Paul Baumer.

Now what becomes important here is to look how these differences in ideologies are given shape and how are they strengthen by the hunters of Frost? The movie *Khamosh pani* very aptly captures what has been said by Frost when he says

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls

We have to use a spell to make them balance

‘Stay where you are until our backs are turned!’ (16-19)

The propagation of ideas takes place through slogans, incendiary activities and speeches done by the game players. How in the movie *Khamosh pani* directed by Sabiha Sumar the rise of fundamentalism is shown by games set by few radicals while making it stricter. Definitions of identity are constructed and imparted by the governing power to maintain their balance of power. But this power praxis is challenged by the madness of Bhishan Singh on the no man’s land in the form that can this natural body, which is land, be attributed to anybody? Coming to *All Quiet on the Western Front* this propagation is shown through the educational system where young people are infused with the concepts of nationhood, walls and then places the onus of protecting the constructed notions on their naïve soldiers. There is an incident when Paul Baumer’s friend imagines a ring where the governors of both the sides are fighting for their difference because of which they instigated war. Here Eric Maria Remarque is attacking in a subtle manner the system where political motives are imparted and soldiers are forced to fight for a constructed identity.

The building of walls or developing the idea of nation becomes a problem when nations are turned into a kind of enclosure and all other things are overlooked. This destroys the element of humanness, hampers the human evolution and delimits the human potential. The idea of nation build on the edifice of

clashes does not let the prospects of identity prosper in the manner it could otherwise. National identity given a structure of radical approach is devoid of the multidimensional aspect of human life and the values it thrives upon. Such identities based upon strict boundaries cannot weave the texture of human civilization. The dehumanizing game forces Paul Baumer and Bhishan Singh to lose connection with the actual world. The loss of sensitivity, disorientedness and the loss of sense of belonging attributed to Paul in the novel is an attack to these boundaries because he could not find any connection with the normal world. He says “I belong here” (98) when he is back to the front from home. Where does he belong then? He stands with Bhishan Singh then on the no man’s land.

The negotiation taking place in the third space which has been discussed initially is through war. Another means of negotiation at the no man’s land is negotiation through madness. The madness of Bhishan Singh is a way of personal negotiation which finds no space in the political space. This happens because it does not fit into the domain of so-called rational idea constructed by few and given finality by those few. Therefore, this insanity becomes unacceptable in the rational domain but ironically this insanity is the actual sanity as it transcends all the constructed, imaginary notions of identity. But there comes suffering with this sanity which is beautifully written by Don McLean in his song Starry Starry night

Now I think I know

What to tried to say to me

And how you suffered for your sanity

And how you tried to set them free

They would not listen, they’re not listening still

Perhaps they never will

Bhishan Singh, Paul Baumer and the rabbits of Frost stand on the no man's land where the strict binaries of sanity and insanity are dissolved. The nationalistic radical identities gets diluted where the warp and the weft, they vacillate on a loom as they create form, patterns and ultimately weave a texture is nothing but a metaphor which appropriates to the maximal- human emotions, thoughts and values.

List of works cited

Bhabha, Homi. "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences." *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2004.

Chatterjee Partha. "Nationalism as a Problem." *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

Frost, Robert. "Mending Walls." *Robert Frosts Poems*. Pan Macmillan, 2002, pp. 48-49.

Khamosh Pani. Directed by Sabiha Sumar. Performances by Kirron Kher, Aamir Malik and Shilpa Shukla, Shringar Films, 2003.

MacLean, Don. "Starry Starry Night." American Pie, Songs of Universal Inc., 1971. The Van Gogh gallery, www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starrynightlyrics.html.

Manto, Saadat Hasan. "Toba tek Singh". Trans Aatish Taseer. *Manto: Selected Stories*. RHI, 2012.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Trans Shaun Whiteside. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Penguin Classics, 2003.

Remarque, Eric Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Ballantine Books, 1987.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Signet Classic, 1999.

---. *Macbeth*. Signet Classics, 1999.