

# NEW TERRITORIES

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These are tumultuous times. Talk of some goal, destination, direction and endpoint sounds vulgar. Yet, it's the only thing that keeps one sane: hope. Fervent hope for the pandemic to be over, for madmen to be out of power, for humanity to regain sanity. These are reasonable ends, yet they are unreasonable when the conditions we live in do not foster such hopes. Destinations might sound rational, but one has to wonder whether it is as evanescent as destiny. Why? Because the once solid pathways to ends and purposes have ceased to be pathways. They are as elusive as traces drawn on desert sands.

Linguistically we might cling to the word 'destination' or its plural, 'destinations' which holds out the hope for a plurality of ends, but I am afraid we are fated to face that old enemy: destiny. Destination derived from its Latin root contains within itself the elements of destining, appointing, foreordaining, purpose or end. Normally it is a concrete place, but not necessarily so. If humility was our strong suit, then we would regard every nanosecond as a destination. Live with it, enjoy it, savour it or fall with it. We are so habituated to seeing destination as a singular thing, that we forfeit its complexity. Hovering over destinations and destiny is the shadow of free will and human agency: are we the creators of our own fates in the age of technoscience or are we just bit players who are locked into larger systems of economics, politics and globalisation from which we are unable to extricate ourselves?

It is increasingly difficult to speak of any kind of future in concrete terms. Things are in constant flux, contingency is the order of the day. Once we discovered that our cosmos was neither fixed nor closed, but rather an open-ended and constantly expanding mass, then all the metanarratives we prized on earth, inherited from previous cosmological

eras from the fixity of nature to the altering character of the divine begotten in earlier times, began to unravel.

German historian Reinhart Koselleck explained that somewhere in the middle of the eighteenth century the idea of a future that looked very different from the past become more pronounced. In previous eras, a person who mounted a horse on a journey could reliably expect to encounter the terrain ahead to look similar from the space left behind. It would be different in modernity. Now, mounted on a saddle one could no longer hold the expectation that the terrain that lay ahead would be similar to what had passed. No wonder uncertainty and anxiety are the familiar features of the human condition. Those solid ideas and concepts of justice, truth, love and compassion, while resounding with continuities from times past, no longer deliver and mean the same thing. Concepts are not static, they have a destination in the sense of *şayr*, becoming; to emerge to newness with creativity. New problems must be posed, concepts have to be adjusted, sometimes shaven, supplemented and sometimes they need a complete do-over. As Gilles Deleuze put it, 'of course, new concepts must relate to our problems, our history, and, above all, to our becomings'.

Yet, it is in times of uncertainty that faith and tradition are often viewed as resources of stability. Revivalist Christianity, Hinduism and Islam have for part of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries been offering its adherents strong doses of faith and quick-fix doctrines as elixirs to stabilise the uncertainty of the times and in doing so, pointing them to destinations and utopias. Strap on saffron robes, clutch to Biblical faith, imitate the Prophet Muhammad in all his Arab cultural redolence, and *voila* you have authenticity. Each religion fuelled by high-octane doses of faith rather than grappling with a narrative of understanding the human condition miraculously promises earthly salvation of some sort. Even though the turnover among such enthusiastic groups is high, the damage to the human fabric wrought is often irreparable, yet there is no shortage to converts to such causes in almost every decade. As many people join the ranks of the formal religions as the number of those who leave each religion daily.

Increasingly the symbols of the most ancient religions have come under severe pressure to provide the certainty that belief in a sky-God or faith in elaborate mythical deities once provided. A return to the older master narratives doling out certainties is superficially appealing but intellectually

jarring. Absent is any literacy and practice providing depth and insight. Religions used to be about the otherworld, the beyond, afterlife and the place we cannot imagine: now it is all about the immediate and instant gratification, like fast food. Philosophers call this last-mentioned phenomenon immanence, meaning it only dwells in things or in us. Others, curse or lament the postmodern condition as a nihilism for giving up on the solid things, those certainties of old.

Globally we don't only face viral pandemics. Bigotry, racism and violence always stoked the embers of more fearsome fires of hatred. But global conditions around the world fired up the racists and bigots emboldening them to come out of their hiding places in the so-called advanced and not so-advanced democracies from Minneapolis in Minnesota to Kardampuri, a suburb of northeast Delhi. Everywhere black and brown human bodies are lynched by armed police, mostly white but not exclusively so. Or, brown mobs turn on other brown bodies and desiccate the bodies of their presumed enemies under the pretext of nationalist fervour or blasphemous outrage.

Talk about hell. For many of the wretched and not so wretched it is hell on earth. The Muslim scripture, the Qur'an promises to torment the bodies of disbelievers, malefactors of all types especially the arrogant for their ethical and other transgressions. They will be told: "Enter the gates of hell, to abide therein." How miserable the abode of the self-important.' (Qur'an 39:72) Hypocrites, and those who defiantly trash the teachings of the prophets and thereafter pompously boast: 'Why doesn't God punish us for what we say?' The reply to their scoffing is swift: 'All they deserve is hell. Where they will burn; and what a miserable destiny.' (Qur'an 58:8) But the Qur'an also adjudicates with fairness. It promises those who try to live by ethical values that ultimately their 'destination is to God' (Q 24: 42).

One special term used for destination in the Qur'an, almost exclusively for those destined to hell is *mathwā*, meaning an abode or destination with permanence. This is bad news for the inmates of hell. Another term used for destination, is *maṣīr*, a term divided almost equally to identify hell for the miscreants and heaven as the end of the virtuous. *Maṣīr* as a term is intriguing. Derived from the verb *ṣayr*, to journey, does not signify a comfortable journey; rather it means a journey involving effort. To do *ṣayr* or, to reach a destination (*maṣīr*) involves effort, to furrow, to dig one's way

out. And very interestingly, to do *sayr*, also means to *be-come*, the sense of an altered being. Destination thus is not a pre-given, but rather involves a journey of transformation. In Qur'anic parlance it is a journey towards the better and reaching God, abiding in God, as some possible meanings. The worst form of becoming is to turn into the anti-God polarity, where damnation and hellfire awaits. That too is another becoming.

Destination as a journey, rather than as some end that is foreordained appeals to me. But I have to quickly remind myself that I am too invested in my own agency and the agency of others because of the massive narrative of responsibility that Islam and other religious and secular traditions impose on adherents. Yes, we are invested with responsibility, otherwise why do we curse the racist bigots, violent terrorists and cruel human beings and prefer to see them behind bars and destined to some unsavoury place?

Responsibility does not only focus our attention on the things done and undertaken by unsavoury ones among our species. We also think of that colleague who was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer leaving behind five kids. The friend who will endure a lifetime of suffering because her young son or daughter committed suicide before reaching twenty. Or think of that family member who lost two adult children in less than a year, one to cancer and the other to Covid-19.

Destination as a journey is hard. Catechisms teaching predestination and free-will, in my view, just fail with their insoluble binaries: free-will vs. predestination. Nothing in life is that easy, left or right. Let's face it, sometimes life is just dismal. One can agree that life does not always go our way despite our most elaborate planning. Yes, we do despair. Faith teaches that it is okay to despair. What faith warns about is this: just don't go down the cauldron of despair to a point of no-return. Be like prophet Ayyub in the Qur'an and Job in the Bible who railed at God and finally recovered. In our happier moments, of course, we forget those painful agonies or we push them out of the way to see the sun shine and enjoy the smiling faces of people basking in the autumn sun in the park.

The last few years have been truly awful; and summer 2020 in America was truly abysmal. But the cause of my anguish was not only the virus or the virulent political bacilli dominating the country. Corruption in the

bastion of law and order, safety and security became visible in all its fatal virulence. America's policing system still view brown and black people as runaway slaves, especially black people, folk of African-American heritage. Don't listen to Democratic politicians or Republicans who say there are bad apples among the police, the majority are good folk. No! The system is corrupt, it covers up its wrongs. It is not a system of public safety. The police force was invented to entrench slavery, not for community safety, but to return humans to bondage. An encounter with the police means your life is at stake as a person of colour.

In my native apartheid South Africa we feared the police for rough treatment and dehumanisation in ordinary encounters as black and brown people, but rarely feared for our lives in such conditions. Yes, we feared the security police who came after political activists often to thrust them into detention without trial if you were lucky, or to face a tortuous death. In America 2020 the police torture their arrested victims in open daylight and their vile acts are recorded on cellphones. And yet large numbers of people, including the president, remain unmoved, despite the national outcry and demonstrations against police brutality and injustice.

After protesting and agitating over the summer, I returned to reading Toni Morrison (1931–2019), the Nobel prize novelist spoke to me in *Song of Solomon*. It is a powerful story that hovers between a past ancestor, Solomon, some of whose descendants live in Michigan in the early part of the twentieth century. It is a complicated story but I read it as an allegory – a veiled moral and spiritual meaning of black suffering in America. Unable to flee their bondage some of the African-American ancestors also told stories of finally flying away from slavery and to be liberated in the skies at death. But they leave their traces in the woods and rock formations in sounds and blooms for generations to hear their song.

Remaining on earth centuries later is a father with a curious name, Macon Dead, who in turn has a son by the same name, but the lad is nicknamed Milkman. Milkman is friends with a more wounded young man, called Guitar. His suffering, loss and experience as a black man witnessing injustice makes him join a clandestine vigilante group known as 'The Days' who avenges the deaths of black people at the hands of white authority. Milkman protests this kind of action and disagrees with his friend. Their exchange reveals the portrait of the black experience in

America and Morrison cunningly sketches the experience of everyone who lives in a white world. White people, Guitar says to Milkman: ‘They want your life, man. . . . Look. It’s the condition our condition is in. Everybody wants the life of a black man. White men want us dead or quiet—which is the same thing as dead. White women, same thing. They want us, you know, “universal”, human, no “race consciousness”. Tame, except in bed. But outside the bed they want you to be individuals.’

Morrison was an extraordinary commentator on American life and fully understood the nuances of black American life. To say she was prescient would be trite. What one learns and observes is that the conditions for several centuries have not changed for black people in America in any substantive manner despite civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr, and the first black president of the USA, Barack Hussein Obama. Milkman in his exchange with Guitar protests the revenge killing of a white person for every black life a white person had unlawfully taken. When forced to explain why he kills, Guitar is pressed and in frustration gives the most honest answer. ‘It *is* about love. What else but love? Can’t I love what I criticise?’ Vengeance is about love, albeit a flawed mode. Black Love Matters as much as Black Lives Matter, one suspects Guitar would say. He would say, love is prior to life.

In the very year Toni Morrison earned her master’s degree in American literature at Cornell University, a short-story writer and journalist, Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955) died in Lahore. Born in colonial India, Manto, barely 42, died in the newly-formed state of a divided subcontinent, Pakistan. A man frequently portrayed for lurking in the demimonde, writing about prostitutes and the forsaken, his mention in Muslim culture is associated with his hard drinking.

One theme Manto frequently portrayed in all its barrenness and nakedness in a few pages was the human condition. One question that tortured Manto’s soul was this: is the human condition made and unmade in material conditions? Or is the human condition sometimes an unbreakable fate? Is it a destination? He leaves you with more questions than answers, perhaps because he played with fewer words than Toni Morrison, since she was a novelist and he a master of the short-stories.

So, thinking through the agonies of this summer of discontent, I also returned to Manto. Particularly to a short story that gripped me before, but now it made me reflect even more on our condition. It is titled in Urdu as '*Three-and-a-half annas*.' An *anna* is one-sixteenth of the colonial rupee, in short, a paltry sum. Using American currency as the benchmark of conversion, the title could be translated as '*Seven Cents*.'

Siddiq Rizvi, freshly released from prison overhears the narrator, Manto and his friends, converse in a coffee shop. The friends were debating whether prison actually reforms individuals. Uninvited, Rizvi yells over from the adjoining table before pulling his chair closer to their table: 'Why did I kill? Why did I soak my hands in the blood of a human being? That is a long story. Until I do not inform you of the consequences and passions embedded in the act, you will not understand anything – but at this moment you guys are talking about crime and punishment, a human being and prison – and because I was in prison, therefore my opinion will not be inappropriate.'

America has a prison-industrial complex. A stain on the character of a nation that promised to experiment in a new form of liberty and habitation, breaking from Europe. And, in Europe brown and black bodies fill the prisons in disproportionate numbers. I often shiver at the thought of being deprived of one's freedom and to be destined to a small cell, or forced to share a space without any choice with others for decades as punishment. Miscarriages of justice have kept so many innocent persons behind bars for decades. Prison like hell is an awful destination. And most studies show that prisons only further dehumanise in their current form.

Manto writes in the voice of Rizvi: 'Agreed, prison does not reform a human being. But this truth is repeated so frequently that it sounds like an oft-repeated joke, maybe a thousand times at social gatherings. Yet it is not a joke, for despite knowledge of this reality, thousands of prisons do exist – just as handcuffs, those shackles of a naked humanity – I too have worn these ornaments of the law.'

Manto the literary figure pokes a hole in the encyclopedic knowledge of criminal justice, theology and moral ethics. He re-stages the fragments of the political and the theological at once. These are questions encountered in real life as well as embodied in the lives of persons with whom we can relate inside and outside prison. In this prison story, it is not Rizvi who is the moral exemplar but rather someone most unexpected to be cast in that

role. While it is typical of Manto to show us the moral lives of prostitutes, this time he picks from among that large mass of humanity who on the Indo-Pak subcontinent are marked as the 'untouchables' or, Dalits.

One of the most moving narratives is the plight of a Bhagu, who belongs to the *bhangī* caste among the untouchables, those who undertake the menial tasks such as sweeping and cleaning toilets. Rizvi narrates the story of this fellow inmate who received a one-year sentence for stealing seven cents, three-and-a-half *annas*. Why did he steal? Bhagu apparently told the court: 'For two days I was hungry and out of desperation I had to put my hand in the pocket of Karim the tailor.' In his naivety or honesty, he further tells the court, his goal actually was to take a sum of five rupees from Karim as these were his arrear wages for two months owed to him. As he confesses his guilt, he also mitigates the condition of his employer. Karim too was not at fault for not paying him, he explains, because many of the tailor's clients had not paid him for services rendered. Instead of finding the five rupees in Karim's pocket, Bhagu, it appears, could only lay his hands on three-and-a-half *annas* (seven cents) from the empty pockets of the broke Karim. Ironically, Manto does not omit to tell us that the paltry sum was safely repossessed and in the custody of the court's treasury because Bhagu was caught for the theft and the money was unspent. It must be obvious how Manto mocks the legal and political system by subtly pointing to the fact how the item a poor and desperate man stole is kept in custody. The question that comes to mind is, who is policing the ill-gotten gains of the rich and the powerful?

At his trial, Bhagu willingly confesses to a litany of prior petty thievery. He stole ten rupees from the purse of some rich woman for which he got a month-long penalty. Once he took a toy made of silver from the house of the deputy commissioner to defray costs 'because my child contracted pneumonia and the doctor demanded a huge fee for the treatment.'

'Sir,' Bhagu addresses the judge in mitigation: 'I am not telling lies. I am not a thief. Some conditions forced me to steal. And the situation was such that I got caught. There are bigger thieves around other than myself, but they have yet to be apprehended. Sir, now I have neither child nor wife. To my misfortune, I still possess a belly. If my belly dies then it will put an end to all these troubles. Sir, pardon me!' But as Manto's character, Rizvi



explains, the court did not pardon Bhagu, but instead sentenced him to a year of hard labour for stealing seven cents.

Manto shifts the conversation to a philosophical and moral quandary. Why do we only think of truth and honesty in terms of the good? Why is good always the standard and yardstick? 'In the eyes of the law,' asks Rizvi, 'I do not know what the law views as honesty and integrity (*īmāndārī*)? But I know one thing: that I killed with great integrity. And I believe Bhagu *bhanghī* too stole three-and-a-half *annas* with great integrity.'

Integrity seems to be the driving force in Manto's narrative. But integrity is not only a moral virtue, but for him it is an affective virtue, tied to the human drives, something viscerally experienced. Integrity is a desire, an assemblage of multiple granular emotions and feelings. But integrity is not monochromatic and Manto, through Rizvi, challenges that once-revered teleological destination of right and wrong, black and white. The human soul is constituted by compositions of desire which in turn are directed and mobilised by the passions that bring the assemblages into play. There are no direct and fixed lines to a future, except through the experience of time, one which we embody.

Manto conceives of moral assemblages and desires of right and wrong, good and evil through Rizvi's eyes. 'Honestly speaking, I am now thinking to myself, what is good and evil after all?', Rizvi poses a rhetorical question to the gathering of friends. Then almost philosophically he adds: 'One thing can be good for you and it can be evil to me. In one society something is deemed good and the same thing is deemed evil in another society. We Muslims believe that growing the hair under the armpits is a sin, whereas Sikhs are indifferent to such growth. If growing armpit hairs was truly a sin, then why does God not punish the Sikhs? If there is any God, then my request to the divine is this: for God's sake please smash these laws of humans and tear down the constructed prisons. And kindly build the jails in your heavens. You yourself can punish humans in your courts, after all, you are God!'

Echoes of Friedrich Nietzsche's subversive questions in Manto's narrative resound, in his bid to upend the standard narrative of morality. Fragmentation and singling out episodes from the immeasurable complexity of human life is one way for Manto to interrogate his social conditions. Morality, he seems to say, is not only the binary between right

and wrong, but morality might want to explore multiple shades of the right and shades of the wrong.

And then when he turns his attention to the jails and prisons he acknowledges that he wishes to see movement, both literally and figuratively. Manto becomes a conceptual persona: he personalises thinking, he invests new energy in concepts. He not only proposes to move (deterritorialise) the prisons and relocate them to heaven (reterritorialise), but he also wants to move and relocate divine justice to the heavens and make it an affair of God. The idea of dispatching transcendent forms of justice to the heavens and delaying it to the afterlife is a transgressive and subversive idea. Perhaps there is an element of despair: humans cannot meet justice; the impossibility of realising justice on earth. Today we might say Manto tried to relocate old justice and old law to the 'cloud,' a metaphor for the paradise of information. Except that today the cloud is paradoxically everywhere, accessible and governs and monitors our minute movements, dictates our information and regulates our judgments with exacting speed and consequence. One wonders whether relegating things to heaven or the cloud is actually a good thing.

What I think Manto really wants to do is for good and evil to become immanent: one growing into the other, not easily separable and definable. Good and evil can be relative and relational, not absolutes. Good and evil can also hover outside of chronometric time. It can be a heterotopia, as Michel Foucault explained, beyond the reach of normal systems of law and political systems. Graveyards, hospitals, madrasas, prisons are all heterotopic spaces rebelling and challenging the utopias of the nation-state and neoliberal capitalism. Manto pushes good and evil into a heterotopic space, the unwanted space and thinks against the grain. Challenging the inviolable binaries of good and evil, which are yet to be broken, making both collide and clash in order to reveal something else.

In Manto's eyes Bhagu epitomised integrity. But human conditions made him resort to crime, an act he himself never desired. Survival forced him to perpetuate the wrong. To prove his case, Manto makes Rizvi narrate two incidents as a testimonial to Bhagu's character in prison. Bhagu frequently ran errands, acquiring a weekly stock of 20 precious *bidis*, leaf-rolled thin cigarettes, fetched from Rizvi's friend Jorji in another section of the prison. Bhagu dutifully delivered the entire stock, never cheating. In return

for his services he received one *bidi*. But he was never shortchanged. A day before Bhagu was to be released, Rizvi sends him to Jorji with a note urgently requesting ten rupees. Bhagu again brings him the money with a note from Jorji. The reply note read: 'My dear friend Rizvi, I am sending these ten rupees, by way of this common thief. I hope by God, you get it, because tomorrow he is to be released from prison.' Staring at Bhagu the thought crosses Rizvi's mind, that if this guy got a one-year sentence for stealing seven cents, I wonder how much time he would do for stealing ten rupees. The motif shifts back to integrity (*īmāndārī*).

I have been reflecting on these two portraits of Bhagu inside and outside of prison. Controlled conditions of human life. In bondage but with his belly fed; outside prison where his desperate poverty forces him to go against his better angels. There is very little difference in the sweep of these stories – the stories of people in other lands and times and the stories occurring in our neighbourhoods under multiple pandemic conditions. The viruses and the political bacilli that undoes the body politic, rendering us inert and frozen, are infesting our societies at a rapid speed. What is needed is to seek a mode of being and existence with new concepts and vocabularies that will ensure that we continue to seek integrity, albeit in different registers. Destinations need new territories.