



# “Memories of Partition: Identity Crisis and Trauma in Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh*.”

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## Abstract

Epoch defining events like the French Revolution or the American Civil War have always inspired literature, The partition in India in 1947 is no exception. This event divided India into two states for Muslims and Hindus: The Dominion of Pakistan and the Union of India. It was described by Lord Mountbatten as one of the greatest administrative operations in history.

While the historical and historiographical works about partition have their own place and value, literature has a vital role to play in preserving events in collective memory, and interpreting the implications for posterity. Partition literature exists across all major literary forms: novels, short stories, poems and non-fictional prose.

Among short stories, *Toba Tek Singh* is perhaps the most famous. Written by Saadat Hasan Manto, it was published in 1955, the year of his death. The story is set in a mental asylum in Lahore a couple of years after Independence (achieved of course with the great price of partition). Manto generates comedy and uncomfortable satire. After Partition the Governments of India and Pakistan decide to exchange Muslim, Sikh and Hindu lunatics. One lunatic is so bewildered with all the talk about partition that he climbs up a tree and refuses to come down saying “I don’t want to live in India and Pakistan. I’m going to make my home right here on this tree.” The insane mutterings of a Sikh inmate in a mix of Punjabi, Urdu and English, though nonsensical, evidently transmit disdain for the very idea of Pakistan and India, and the displacement it creates. The story ends with him dying in no-man’s land between the two countries.

Key Words: Partition, war, identity crisis, agony, lunatics, trauma, displacement, bewilderment

## Introduction:

The partition of India is much more than just a historical fact. It is a compelling literary theme that continues to inspire creative outpourings by writers. Perhaps it is both an attempt to process the tremendous trauma created by partition and to bear witness to the forces of communalism, class divide and patriarchy behind the violent division, which continue to play out across the Indian subcontinent today. As evidenced by historical facts and narratives, borders usually remain like dormant volcanoes- a perpetual source of tension for it can erupt hostility at any time. There remains no permanent solution to the strife created by drawing borders and physically separating people from their native domain to which they are connected in a manner which is far more than being only physical. Indo-Pak border is just an example which I have taken up in this paper for the purpose of my study, to underscore the fact that the wounds, in every sense, this partition

has created are still miles apart from being healed, for both the countries. The fact that stands out as all the more striking is that besides the boundary that divides India and Pakistan, it is their radically opposed ideology that divides them all the more. India believes in secularism where all religions and faiths are given equal importance and the state itself has no religion of her own. On the contrary, Pakistan has laid its origin on the idea of a separate nation on the grounds of religion. Eventually what follows is, despite the nations sharing common geographic, cultural and economic links, the relationship between the two countries remain strained, fraught with hostility and tension always.

The holocaust of partition that severed the subcontinent into two parts, created an indelible imprint on the lives and narratives of the writers who were trapped in the inhuman dilemma of that historical moment. So much has been written on this subject that a complete genre of what is now called Partition Studies has become an integral part of literature. In this context, this paper seeks to explore the short story of Saadat Hasan Manto, namely *Toba Tek Singh*, as it is arguably the most renowned in its portrayal of the chaos and dilemma, caused by the partition of India and Pakistan and its aftermath of violence, despair, crisis, agony and displacement.

### ***Toba Tek Singh:***

This paper seeks to illustrate the agony faced by a traumatized man in the event of partition. Partition was a major event that gave new shape to the history of the subcontinent. Manto criticizes the barrier between India and Pakistan that separates man from man, causes forced displacement, abduction of women, and leads to identity crisis. Relocation in no manner can heal the traumatized minds. Men eventually remain bewildered as they fail to realize as to where they truly belong: India or Pakistan? Manto, being a writer of that decade, was an eye witness to the horridness of partition. He also perceived how the separation of 1947 traumatised people by making them homeless and placing them in a situation where they have to search for their identities. It is this state of bewilderment and pain that Manto has depicted in the story under discussion: *Toba Tek Singh*. Besides questioning the border between India and Pakistan, Manto also criticises the evil consequences of partition upon society.

The story begins with an image of the partition ridiculing political leaders on both sides and reflecting the confusion of identity. The story takes us to an asylum and focuses on the main protagonist, an old Sikh inmate Bishan Singh, but who is called Toba Tek Singh because he had been a wealthy landowner in a village of that name. On hearing of his intended transfer he tries to find out where his native village is. He cannot comprehend why he is being uprooted from his home. When he learns that his homeland is in Pakistan, he refuses to cross the border. When all persuasions fail, he is left standing by himself between the two border stations, where he dies just before sunrise. This no man's land where Toba Tek Singh lies perhaps puts forward the author's symbolic rejection of the division of the country. To quote Gilmartin:

“The desperate attempt to maintain the linking of place, ancestry, sanctity and moral order was cast against the backdrop of a fixed Partition of territory that symbolically tears these linkages asunder. No work of literature encapsulates this more dramatically than Saadat Hasan Manto's Urdu short story *Toba Tek Singh*”.

The first light of independence came besieged with the severed limbs and blood-sodden bodies of innocent men, women and kids: this is the nightmare on or after which the subcontinent by no means completely recovered. The gigantic human catastrophe of the Partition and its progressing repercussions has been better conveyed by insightful, ingenious writers and artists like Manto in his short stories, than by historians. Most of his writing is fairly gruesome and gives the reader chills, predominantly about the Partition. The two holocausts, that is, The Second World War and the Partition of India launched the bloodiest butchery the world had ever seen. As for the Partition of India, Muslims run off from India to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India. In the knowledge of the mohajirs (Refugees) who found themselves dug up in the Procedure of Partition, exodus necessitated a computation with imagery of native soil that projected into the past as well as the future; and for many, a consciousness of the betrayal of political space meant that personal identity became a portable space in itself. The expatriate fiction, which deals with emotional problems, clearly reflects the pathetic condition of the modern man. Getting uprooted from the native cultural traditions and values, the loss of indigenous language, man's position as a mere outcast or un-accommodated alien, together with multiple injuries and lacerations of the psyche, all

account for the theme of identity deterioration in many of Manto's short stories. Bharti Mukherjee – an expatriate writer – has admitted: ... the finding of a new identity ... the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture. Manto was so hard done by a related identity crisis that it was, to a degree if not utterly, accountable for his alcoholism and ultimate death about eight years subsequent to the partition. The twinge and torment that Manto personally experienced during the Partition of South Asian Subcontinent in 1947, is mournfully portrayed in his most acknowledged short story "Toba Tek Singh". "

"Toba Tek Singh" is a stupendous work of Manto that expressively illustrates the individual's identity crisis. Set in a madhouse, the narrative uses lunacy as a metaphor for sense. The madmen in the Lahore asylum are a microcosm of the social order; through them all subdivisions of society are mocked at and among them is Bishen Singh, who wants to subsist neither in Hindustan nor Pakistan. Hindustan and Pakistan are identities that have been purposely fashioned and Bishen Singh effectively refuses to accept all efforts for any such identity to be pushed upon him. He wants to depart back to Toba Tek Singh, the hamlet where he was born, which is his innate identity. Manto, therefore, is probing not just the two-nation hypothesis but also the very thought of nationhood as the fundamental root of identity. Bishen Singh would rather like to stay alone in no man's territory than make a preference between Hindustan and Pakistan. Subsequent to the Partition of India, it was decided that the lunatics, like prisoners, should be exchanged. Muslim lunatics should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindus to India. After several official meetings the day of exchange was decided. It can be said that in a way Manto has ridiculed upon the higher authorities of both India and Pakistan about their decision of forming separate nations for the Hindus and Muslims: A couple of years after the Partition of the country, it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistan asylum should be sent to India. (11) These lunatics had no idea about where India or Pakistan was. Even those prisoners who were kept in asylums to avoid capital punishment were unable to judge the distinction between India and Pakistan. There was a vague idea that a man named Quaid-e-Azam (The Great Leader) had set up a separate for Muslims called Pakistan. One of the lunatics climbed up a tree and expressed his desire to live on the tree and not in India or Pakistan. The Anglo-Indian lunatics had their own fear of eating Indian chapatti rather than western breakfast. But there was one strange lunatic named Bishen Singh who was a prosperous landlord in Toba Tek Singh and had suddenly gone mad. He had been standing on his legs for the last fifteen years because of which his legs were swollen. Usually nothing bothered him but he too had grown interested in the current debate. He was also confused about the happenings and could not figure it out what had happened to his home town, Toba Tek Singh as Sialkot which used to be in India is now in Pakistan.

"the man who had spent all the nights and days of the last fifteen years standing on his feet, now sprawled on the ground, face down. The barbed wire fence on one side marked the territory of India, another fence marked the territory of Pakistan. In the no man's land between the two barbed wire fences lay the body of Bishen Singh of village Toba Tek Singh" (Manto, p.117)

And thus, through his own death, the so called lunatic of the asylum, dismantles and terminates the dilemma that he himself could not endure in life; Bishen Singh does make the ultimate choice in a world governed and administered by decisions taken by the so called sane- people.

Nevertheless, he was a harmless old man with white beard and hair which gave him a little frightening look. He used to ask only one question to everyone where Toba Tek Singh was, whether in India or in Pakistan. Nobody could answer him. It once happened that one of the lunatics declared himself to be God. Bishen Singh begged him to solve his problem but even the so called god disappointed him. He says, "You don't answer my prayers because you are a Muslim God. Had you been a Sikh God, you would have been more of a sport" (16).

It is noteworthy that the life of the author himself reflects on the protagonist of the story- Bishen Singh. Manto himself had undergone the agony of homelessness when he was leaving for Pakistan, moving asunder from Bombay. He said: "I found it impossible to decide which of the two countries was my homeland- India or Pakistan?" (as cited in Hasan, 2007, xi). This

partition and transition was not easy at all for him to manage . Thus, in the final years of his life, seven years after partition , Manto wrote the story Toba Tek Singh where he vents out the agony and dilemma that traumatized him after the partition.Manto was a relentless writer who had witnessed the complete chaos of a devastated moral order.He could neither forgive nor forget and thus his bottled up agony found ruthless expressions in his stories,which force the readers to face the ignominy of human rage that ravaged human lives on both sides of the border, in a time when no moral or political reason was available.

Manto's short story Toba Tek Singh was also coloured by his own mental health problems, namely addiction to alcohol and possibly depression- a natural outcome of the crisis faced on account of partition and its aftermath . In *Toba Tek Singh* , what strikes the readers the most is the character of the protagonist Bishen Singh.The protagonist is a symbolic commentary on the psychological trauma and anxiety of the human displacement brought about by partition.Manto's work started as a trend of writing about mental ailment and partition.*Khol Do*, is just another example. *Toba tek Singh* was written by Manto when he himself was an inmate in Lhore's mental asylum. The story is in many ways reflective of his own dilemma and identity crisis that followed the partition movement.Could the life of the protagonist be saved? Was there a way to save Manto's life, who died prematurely at the age of forty three?Perhaps the precious lives could have been saved or perhaps not. We may never know the answers but one thing is certain: the urge of creation demands a high price. Modern medicines may not offer a panacea to the wounded artist but a sympathetic ear and a compassionate heart can do marvels in helping people heal and continue to fight against their inner demons.

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