



MADNESS BEYOND BORDERS: SAADAT HASAN MANTO'S CRITIQUE OF PARTITION IN 'TOBA TEK SINGH'

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Abstract

This article explores the themes of madness and identity in Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh," set against the tumultuous backdrop of the 1947 Partition of India. Manto sets his story in a mental asylum, using it as a powerful metaphor for the chaos and irrationality of the socio-political turmoil of the era. Through Bishen Singh, a Sikh inmate on a quest to find his hometown of Toba Tek Singh, Manto illustrates the confusion and existential crisis faced by millions who were uprooted. The story critiques the arbitrary nature of the Partition and the human cost of political decisions, using the lunatic asylum as a microcosm to reflect the broader chaos and senselessness of the divided subcontinent. Bishen Singh's tragic end in the no-man's land between India and Pakistan symbolizes the profound loss of identity and belonging. This article delves into Manto's masterful use of madness as a narrative device to underscore the human consequences of divisive politics and the enduring quest for place and self, amidst dislocation.

Keywords: Partition, madness, Saadat Hasan Manto, Toba Tek Singh, asylum, border, identity.

Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the most prolific and controversial Urdu writers of the 20th century, is renowned for his poignant and often unsettling narratives that delve into the human condition amidst socio-political upheavals. Hailing from Punjab, his literary journey flourished in Bombay. Subsequently, he relocated to Lahore, Pakistan, in January 1948, a few months following the Partition. Subsequently, his narratives primarily focused

on the theme of Partition, exploring its repercussions on human beings from multiple perspectives. Composed in 1954 and set against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition of India, Manto's renowned short story "Toba Tek Singh" is a powerful exploration of madness, identity, and the absurdity of arbitrary divisions. "Manto's "Toba Tek Singh," as it has been rightly observed by M. Asaduddin, "has become a metaphor for the utter absurdity and mindlessness of the entire exercise of Partition.

The eponymous story is a devastating indictment of amateur statesmen and unscrupulous politicians who draw shadow line boundaries between peoples and countries" (33).

The Context of Partition

The Partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan, was a cataclysmic event marked by thoughtless division of land, arbitrary boundaries and borders, unprecedented communal violence, mass displacement, and deep-seated trauma. Millions of people were uprooted from their ancestral homes, and a once unified cultural and geographical landscape was divided along religious lines. In fact, as Stephen Alter has elucidated, lunacy became the "only conceivable response" to the "ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence" (91). Deep psychological scars from the horrible killing of family members and painful memories of displacement remained unhealed. There was enough evidence of acute psychological trauma and mental disorders caused by the violence associated with the partition, and sometimes such trauma manifested itself in delayed aftereffects. In some cases, entire communities were the sufferers who displayed the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Since independence, numerous writers have employed mental illness as a literary motif in their works on Partition. In fact, as Stephen Alter has contended, "madness became the guiding metaphor in much of Manto's fiction" (Alter 96) in the period following Partition. Manto felt utterly revolted by the country's Partition and the subsequent changes. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to split Pakistan from India or India from Pakistan. His thoughts could not settle on whether he was now a citizen of Pakistan or India. The identity crisis of its creator is reflected in the character of Bishen Singh, the central protagonist of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh." The story of "Toba Tek Singh" is set in a mental

asylum, a microcosm of the larger madness that engulfed the subcontinent during this period. As it has been rightly pointed out by M Asaduddin,

"Toba Tek Singh" is about arbitrary boundaries and borders that divide people, history and culture. . . . In studies of Partition it has been pointed out again and again that perhaps never before in human history was the fate of so many decided by so few, and in such an arbitrary and thoughtless manner. . . . The cavalier and whimsical way in which the Mountbatten Plan and the Radcliff Award were put into practice is underscored by the fact that, for days and weeks after the announcement of Partition, people in some provinces were uncertain about their precise location in the new structure. (34)

The Inmates and the Outside World

The story begins in a mental asylum in Lahore, where the inmates, unaware of the political realities outside, live in their own world of delusions. When the governments of India and Pakistan decide to exchange Hindu and Sikh inmates in Pakistan with Muslim inmates in India, the asylum becomes a microcosm of the confusion and chaos of the larger world. The asylum residents' perplexity is further exacerbated by the news of the inmate exchange. The detainees, who have cohabitated for years despite their religious differences, are perplexed by the prospect of being relocated to different countries based on their religion. Their responses range from bewilderment and fear to absurd behaviour and preposterous arguments, underscoring the absurdity of the situation. Tahir Jokinen and Shershah Assadullah, in their essay "Saadat Hasan Manto, Partition, and Mental Illness through the Lens of *Toba Tek Singh*," contend:

Manto's writing in general, and "Toba Tek Singh" in particular, was coloured by his own mental health problems, namely

alcohol addiction and possibly depression. Even the choice to use a mental asylum to reflect the "madness" of partition was intimately related to his experience. However, more than just this, "Toba Tek Singh" and the character of Bishan Singh is a symbolic commentary on the psychological trauma of the human displacement brought about by partition; perhaps also the author's own displacement and uncertainty about identity. (93)

One of the individuals residing in the asylum is Bishan Singh, a Sikh gentleman who has been a resident for a duration of fifteen years. Bishan Singh, who is named after the hamlet of Toba Tek Singh, is notable for his constant utterance of nonsensical words and his unusual conduct. He spends his days in an upright position, adamantly avoiding sitting or reclining, and persistently asking the same question: "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" The madness of the asylum's inhabitants represents the violence of the partition, and Bishan Singh's absurd phrases symbolize the arbitrary and opaque nature of the political apparatus. Manto uses the asylum as a metaphor for the subcontinent as a whole. The interactions among the inmates, and between the inmates and the authorities, underscore the absurdity and cruelty of the political decisions being made outside the asylum walls. The authorities' decision to exchange lunatics between India and Pakistan mirrors the larger exchange of populations, further emphasizing the dehumanizing nature of the Partition. The inmates' simplistic and often nonsensical responses to the news of the Partition serve as a critique of the complex political manoeuvrings that led to such widespread human suffering. The reactions of the asylum inmates to the news of Partition emphasize that the so-called "lunatics" exhibit more rationality than the officials responsible for arranging their exchange:

However, they did not know a thing about its actual location and its

boundaries. That is why all the inmates of the asylum who weren't completely insane were thoroughly confused about whether they were in Hindustan or Pakistan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible since only a short while ago they had been in Hindustan, and they had not moved from the place at all? (Manto 213)

Madness as a Metaphor

The madness of the inmates is utilised by Manto to mirror the chaos and irrationality of the outside world as his story narrates the exchange of inmates at a mental asylum in Lahore following partition. Manto wrote the story after spending time in Lahore's mental asylum for his alcoholism. As the narrative advances, the reader gradually perceives that the asylum inmates are considerably more rational than the legislators who govern their fate. In the words of Sudha Tiwari, "Partition not only created a 'mad' atmosphere but also made its victims 'mad,' 'insane,' losing their mental balances due to traumatic experiences. People in both the territories were confused about their identities, about their geographical and political identities, and about their citizenship as well. Manto merges these two themes and creates *Toba Tek Singh*" (55). In "Toba Tek Singh," the narrative commences with a series of vignettes that depict the Partition, parody political leaders from both parties, and reflect the confusion of identity. For example, a criminal named Muhammad Ali, who feels himself to be Jinnah, has a disagreement with a Sikh who believes he is Tara Singh, while other convicts are unsure if they are actually in India or Pakistan. The lunacy of the world outside is reflected in the setting of a lunatic asylum, which Manto employs. The Partition is viewed from a distinctive perspective by the asylum residents, who are not influenced by the socio-political realities. The absurdity of the situation is reflected in their reactions to the news of the country's division, which are characterised by

perplexity and disbelief: "Who knew whether Lahore, which was now in Pakistan, would not go over to Hindustan the following day, or the whole of Hindustan would not turn into Pakistan? And who could say with certainty that some day, both Hindustan and Pakistan would not vanish from the face of the earth altogether!" (Manto 216). One lunatic also declares in a fit of anger, "I want to live in neither Hindustan nor Pakistan ... I'd rather live on this tree" (214). In this context, it has been appropriately pointed out by Dr. Sabiha Shaheen that "*Toba Tek Singh* is a scathing comment on the absurdity of the decision and the policy of the two postcolonial states to split up the inmates of the mental asylum according to their religious affiliation. . . . Manto's message is searing but clear, the madness of partition was greater than the insanity of all the inmates put together" (551).

Bishen Singh: A Symbol of Displacement

Manto's narrative begins in an asylum and progressively centres on the central character, Bishen Singh, who has been incarcerated in the asylum for fifteen years. Despite his madness, Bishen Singh becomes increasingly agitated as he tries to comprehend the meaning of Partition and what it means for him. He relentlessly questions the officials and other inmates, trying to determine whether his village, Toba Tek Singh, is now in India or Pakistan. His obsession with finding his home symbolizes the deep-rooted connection people have with their land and the disorientation caused by the arbitrary division. The search for identity and allegiance in a world that has been turned upside down is poignantly symbolised by Bishen Singh's journey to locate his hometown, Toba Tek Singh. In this context, Sudha Tiwari's remarks are noteworthy: "Toba Tek Singh has become a symbol of the confused and torn identities arising from separation from one's ancestral home. He wins over those who 'claim to be sane' and who want to fix his identity, as his death takes place in no-man's-land, where the writ of neither nation prevails" (55).

The character of Bishen Singh functions as a symbolic commentary on the trauma of displacement. His intense pain is illustrative of the experiences that refugees from the partition of India have had. His frequent queries and demands for knowledge regarding his homeland are indicative of a loss of a sense of belonging and a fragmentation of his identities. Bishen Singh's character is a representation of the emotional trauma and suffering that thousands of individuals on the subcontinent have endured as a consequence of displacement. Bishen Singh's character embodies the plight of millions who were put on the wrong side of the newly drawn borders. The irrationality of the Partition is underscored by his refusal to recognise the arbitrary division of land and people. A manifestation of the communal disorientation experienced by those who lived through the Partition, Bishen Singh's madness is not merely a personal affliction. His repeated question, "Where is Toba Tek Singh?" underscores the dislocation and loss of a sense of place that many experienced.

The Ending: A Powerful Allegory

The catastrophe of the Partition is powerfully symbolised by the climax of the narrative, in which Bishen Singh dies on the no-man's land between India and Pakistan. On the day of the exchange, authorities round up the inmates and transport them to the border. Bishen Singh refuses to leave until he gets an answer about Toba Tek Singh's location. A liaison officer at the frontier informs him that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan, and he declines to cross. All attempts at persuasion fail, leaving him to stand alone between the two border stations. In the long run, shortly before dawn, Bishen Singh, the individual who had remained upright on his lower limbs for a span of fifteen years, let forth a piercing scream, and as the authorities from both sides approached him rapidly, he fell to the ground. In the words of Manto, "Over there, behind the barbed wires,

was Hindustan. Over here, behind identical wires lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto 220). Bishen Singh's death in the no-man's land, where neither country claims him, poignantly encapsulates the existential limbo faced by those who found themselves caught between two nations. It signifies the ultimate failure of the political process to address the human cost of their decisions. Bishen Singh's death in no-man's land serves as a powerful allegory for the countless individuals who found themselves stateless and homeless due to political decisions beyond their control. The protagonist, Bishen Singh, represents the anguish of displacement experienced by millions of partition refugees in his arduous quest for identity. As M. Asaduddin observes, "Bishen Singh, the 'mad' protagonist of the story contemptuously rejects the verdict of the politicians to be divided between India and Pakistan and prefers to die on the strip of land that belongs to neither. This is Manto's symbolic rejection of the vivisection of the country, and his considered comment on the stupidity of the entire exercise" (Asaduddin 33).

Conclusion

In summary, "Toba Tek Singh" is a masterful narrative that employs the metaphor of lunacy to critique the political and social madness of the Partition. Manto reveals the arbitrary and senseless nature of the divisions imposed on the subcontinent through the character of Bishen Singh and the setting of the lunatic asylum. The narrative is not merely a reflection on a historical event; it is an immutable commentary on the enduring human pursuit of identity and belonging, as well as the repercussions of divisive politics. Manto's poignant narratives force readers to confront the enduring wounds of displacement and loss, as well as the human cost of political decisions. Under the disguise of the portrayal of the insanity of the asylum's inmates, Manto's narrative cautions against the terrifying peril of

the lunacy of the supposedly sane legislators and policymakers.

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