

Between Madness and Nationhood: Bishen Singh’s Liminal Identity in Manto’s “*Toba Tek Singh*.”

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Abstract-

The partition of India in 1947 stands as a defining historical moment, delineating the birth of India and Pakistan, while unleashing profound emotional upheaval and violence. Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story Toba Tek Singh delves into the reverberations of this partition, plumbing its psychological depths. This research paper undertakes a meticulous analysis, concentrating on the character Bishen Singh, who navigates the precarious space straddling India and Pakistan. Singh’s resolute refusal to align himself serves as a potent symbol of the identity crisis that enveloped individuals amidst the tempest of partition. Through an intricate dissection of narrative techniques and symbolism, the paper probes Manto’s intricate portrayal of the personal reverberations spawned by seismic political decisions. It unveils how Bishen Singh’s uncharted odyssey intricately mirrors the collective journey of numerous dispossessed people, their yearning for belonging juxtaposed against the backdrop of uncertainty. The study casts light on the profound impact of historical cataclysms on the human psyche, unearthing the nuanced interplay between personal agency and the colossal tides of history. Thus, it magnifies the timeless relevance of Manto’s narrative, a lens to decipher the intricacies of human emotions amid societal upheaval, ultimately offering profound insights into the multifaceted spectrum of human experiences.

Main Discussion

Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) emerged as one of the most celebrated and contentious Urdu writers of the twentieth century. His literary repertoire extended beyond boundaries, encompassing essays, plays, film scripts, and even a novel; however, it was his short stories that etched his name in literary history. Hailing from Punjab, Manto's literary journey gained momentum in Bombay before leading him to Lahore, Pakistan, in January 1948, a few months post-partition (Hasan 85-95). Subsequently, his literary focus predominantly gravitated towards the partition's theme, dissecting its human aftermath from myriad angles. Manto's stories are renowned for their commitment to realism, linguistic economy, reliance on intrinsic elements, and notably, their propensity for abrupt, occasionally disconcertingly ambiguous conclusions (Akhtar and Flemming 1-3).

Notably, Manto, although a Punjabi speaker, chose Urdu as the medium for his stories, mastering a language rooted in Persian, Arabic, Old Hindi, and Old Punjabi. His narrative style and thematic exploration have often drawn comparisons to the nineteenth-century French short story writer Guy de Maupassant. Both exemplify the Naturalist school, probing human lives, destinies, and societal forces through a lens of disenchantment and despair. However, historical context starkly differentiates their perspectives, as Manto's works bear witness to a tumultuous period that Maupassant could never have envisioned. Despite criticism for his unflinching portrayal of perversity and violence in their most unsettling forms, Manto staunchly defended his role as a realistic observer of India's harrowing days. Through his partition narratives, Manto conveys a resounding message of the sheer senselessness born from the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, underscoring the profound impact of this turbulent period on the human psyche.

The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947-48 stands as one of the most profound and traumatic events in modern history. Yasmin Khan emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the specific case of Partition and considering it within a broader comparative context. In the "Preface" of her *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* she states,

"Partition histories are so often treated as unique and set apart from any comparative context. On the one hand, we now know a lot about Partition: scholars have pored over its causes and repercussions, sifted nearly every available document, and collected oral testimonies from refugees and victims of violence from all over the subcontinent. Any history of Partition relies on this rich body of information and on the many well-grounded and valuable histories that have been written on the subject. Yet most studies do not look sideways to other cases. A certain regional myopia on the part of historians has been a block to understanding Partition as a global event with very real and important commonalities with other histories, even those of the 1940s" (Khan xxi).

"Introduction" to "Stories About Partition," Alok Bhalla underscores that this historical episode is defined by its traumatic essence: "The partition of the Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history" (Bhalla 3). The partition surged across the Indian subcontinent, leaving behind a considerable portion of the population

dispossessed, entailing the loss of both lives and property. It served as a symbolic “metaphor for irreparable loss” (Menon xi), and the survivors experienced it as “violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart” (Pandey 7).

The psychological impact of Partition, however, remains one of the least explored and recognized aspects of this historical event. In the 1940s and 1950s, people lacked the language of psychiatry and psychoanalysis to comprehend the collective trauma they had experienced. It affected not only refugees but also eyewitnesses, perpetrators of violence, aid workers, politicians, and law enforcement. The trauma manifested in various ways, from frozen faces and uncontrollable tears to panic attacks and nightmares. Some individuals even experienced severe mental health problems that plagued them for life. Despite the extensive historical documentation aimed at quantifying the scale of the partition, it remains a formidable task for conventional history to adequately convey the emotional turmoil, pain, and trauma endured by those who lived through it. In this context, Mushirul Hasan elucidates the limitations of the grand historical narrative, asserting that it “...does not reveal how the momentous happenings in August September 1947 affected millions, uprooted from home and field and driven by sheer fear of death seek safety across a line they had neither drawn nor desired” (Hasan 270). This human dimension of displacement often becomes overshadowed by the broader political and geographical ramifications of the partition, resulting in an incomplete comprehension of the profound psychological and emotional wounds that linger in its aftermath. Perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of Partition has been the establishment of heavily guarded borders and strict citizenship regulations. Initially introduced as a means to regulate the refugee flow, these border controls evolved into a complex and restrictive administrative regime. The aim was not just to prevent illegal migration but also to define who was Indian and who was Pakistani with precision. This bureaucracy, riddled with red tape, has “generated large numbers of court cases, deportations and arrests” (Khan 196).

Manto’s iconic short story, *Toba Tek Singh*, offers a profound exploration of the psychological and emotional aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947. This masterpiece delves deep into the human consequences of the political cataclysm, resonating identity crisis, psychological impact, and collective displacement. Manto’s compelling narrative opens with a stark portrayal of the Indian and Pakistani governments’ agreement, occurring a couple of years after the Partition, to exchange mental asylum inmates based on their religious affiliations. The plan was to send Muslim inmates in Indian asylums to Pakistan, while Hindu and Sikh inmates in Pakistani asylums were to be relocated to India. The relevance of such a decision was under question, “Whether this was a reasonable or an unreasonable idea is difficult to say” (Manto 70). But the narrator is quite tongue-in-cheek about such a decision, “One thing, however, is clear. It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to the decision” (Manto 70). The love of the lunatics for the root - the native land is quite noteworthy. They don’t want to be sent to any other place than their native land as they don’t know the language of the new land, they would find themselves alien, and they would suffer an identity crisis there. In such a tumultuous situation the inmates of the asylum could not decide in which country they were in. The doubt regarding their present location is a very thought-provoking statement, “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 72).

Amidst the chaos and uncertainty that envelops this transfer, we encounter the story’s central character, Bishan Singh, an elderly Sikh who had been institutionalized for fifteen years after suddenly losing his sanity. Bishen Singh is such an enigmatic character who becomes emblematic of the turmoil that engulfed individuals during the Partition. As we navigate the intricacies of Bishen Singh’s character and his journey, we witness how Manto’s narrative becomes a microcosm of the larger human experience during a turbulent period. The trauma of partition, often neglected in conventional historical accounts, is meticulously laid bare in Manto’s storytelling. This trauma manifests not only in the physical displacement of people but also in the profound psychological scars that lingered long after the political boundaries were drawn. Singh was pretty much concerned about his homeland, his hometown- Toba Tek Singh. While such confusion of exchanging was going on, Singh started asking “where Toba Tek Singh was to go” (Manto 74). Like a true nationalist, he is concerned about his roots. It doesn’t matter to him which place goes where except his birthland. Manto’s acidic observation through the mind of the lunatics about the senseless idea of partition is noteworthy:

“Those who tried to solve this mystery had become utterly confused when told that Sialkot, which used to be in India, was now in Pakistan. It was anybody’s guess what was going to happen to Lahore, which was currently in Pakistan, but could slide into India any moment. It was also possible that the entire subcontinent of India might become Pakistan. And who could say if both India and Pakistan might not entirely vanish from the map of the world one day?” (Manto 74).

Through Manto’s masterful storytelling, the story of Bishen Singh becomes a paradigm of the broader human experience during the Partition era, where lines on a map blurred the boundaries of identity, leaving many lost and adrift in the turbulent sea of history. It echoes the profound impact of Partition on the psyche of a nation and its people, a legacy that continues to reverberate through generations.

As the moment of transfer approaches, Bishan Singh’s poignant question reverberates: “Where is Toba Tek Singh? In Pakistan or in India?” (Manto 78). His refusal to cooperate with the transfer highlights the profound disorientation and identity crisis experienced not only by him but by countless others affected by the Partition’s tumultuous events. Bishen Singh’s unwavering refusal to align himself with either India or Pakistan mirrors the broader identity crisis that afflicted countless people torn between the two nations. His yearning for a sense of belonging amidst the backdrop of uncertainty reflects the very essence of partition, as individuals like Bishen Singh found themselves displaced and disoriented in a new world. The ambiguity of Toba Tek Singh—man and place—serves as a potent metaphor for Partition’s disorienting impact. Bishan Singh’s identity erosion mirrors geopolitical reconfigurations. The narrative’s denouement, wherein man and land coalesce, resolves this ambiguity, christening the liminal space. Ultimately, Bishan Singh embodies the Partition’s legacy: a fractured self, suspended between nostalgia and bifurcated nationhood.

Manto's ingenious use of a mental asylum as a microcosm for the Partition of India in 1947 offers a profound commentary on the event's far-reaching psychological impact. This literary device underscores the universality of trauma, transcending conventional notions of sanity and comprehension. The asylum's inmates, in their apparent madness, paradoxically mirror the irrationality of the world beyond, challenging established paradigms of mental health within the context of historical upheaval. Bishan Singh's incoherent utterances serve as a potent metaphor for the opaque and arbitrary nature of governmental decision-making during this tumultuous period. The narrative compels a re-evaluation of sanity, suggesting that true madness may lie not in individual mental states, but in the collective actions that precipitate widespread suffering. This nuanced portrayal invites a critical examination of the Partition's legacy, blurring the lines between institutional insanity and societal chaos.

What stands out starkly is the paradoxical coexistence of individuals in the asylum, who, by societal standards, are deemed insane, yet live in a state of relative peace and contentment, free from the chaos that engulfed the region due to the partition. In contrast, those who occupied positions of power and decision-making authority orchestrated a partition that led to widespread violence, communal tensions, mass displacement, and immense human suffering. This stark incongruity challenges the conventional understanding of sanity and raises fundamental questions about the mental and moral states of individuals during such critical junctures. Indeed, the partition's brutality, with its rampant communal riots, sexual violence, abductions, and large-scale displacement, invites a profound examination of the psyche and morality of those responsible. What kind of rationality or madness, one may wonder, underpins the decisions and actions that resulted in such catastrophic consequences? Is it not a form of collective insanity to promote violence and division on such a massive scale, ostensibly in the name of nationhood and identity?

The whole narrative epitomizes the disorientation engendered by Partition, encapsulating the collective bewilderment of millions. It deftly illustrates the existential quandary of individuals ensnared within the maelstrom of geopolitical reconfiguration and arbitrary demarcations. Bishan Singh becomes the embodiment of this odyssey. His uncharted journey, undertaken against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming landscape marked by newly drawn borders and a disintegrating sense of belonging, serves as a compelling facsimile of the larger human drama of Partition. His character becomes a symbol of resistance, refusing to conform to the arbitrary divisions imposed upon him. In his quest for answers about the shifting lines of his homeland, he mirrors the collective yearning for clarity and identity felt by countless others. Manto's storytelling prowess transcends the boundaries of mere narration; it becomes a lens through which the profound emotional and psychological ramifications of Partition are dissected. His storytelling choices, characterized by stark realism, narrative economy, and unsettling, often ambiguous endings, are essential components of this study. "Toba Tek Singh" is not just a backdrop; it's a powerful instrument that unravels the trauma, absurdity, and deep-seated human emotions that defined this period in history.

Manto's astute portrayal of this tumultuous period, primarily through the lens of an asylum and its inmates, is a stark reminder of the emotional scars that lingered long after the borders had been drawn. The asylum "churns out agonizing queries of 'Where is Pakistan' and 'Where is Hindustan.' The story is, in narrative terms, a rejection of 'batwara' and 'azaadi' that has come to the people" (Sengupta xii). Bishen Singh's hovering in the liminal space between India and Pakistan epitomizes the fractured identities and the yearning for a sense of belonging that countless individuals experienced during the Partition. His resolute refusal to be categorized becomes emblematic of the profound identity crisis that unfolded amid the chaos of Partition. Through Manto's skilful use of narrative techniques and symbolism, Bishen Singh's odyssey becomes a lookalike of the collective journey of dispossessed people seeking a semblance of home in a world forever altered. Manto's story reinforces the power of literature to transcend time and place, offering profound insights into the intricacies of human emotions during times of societal upheaval. It leaves us with a deep understanding of the diverse spectrum of human experiences, ultimately reminding us that even in the face of cataclysmic events like the Partition, the human spirit persists, questions, and resists.

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