



Border Issues in Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Story "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract

Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" is based on the miserable plight of lunatics at a Lahore mental asylum. It shows the dire consequences of the cataclysmic partition between India and Pakistan in 1947. It depicts how millions of people lost their general course of living and were, displaced during the partition. The story witnesses a hideous geographical change that made the condition completely adverse and tumultuous. The partition shook the whole continent. The story begins with both the Governments' decision to exchange the psychopaths on the basis of their religious orientation. Bishan Singh, the protagonist, emblemizes the border, finds himself dislocated as a subaltern limbo. The pangs of Bishan's displacement still haunt history. The partition caused such a topsy-turvy that none can find out Bishan Singh's village Toba Tek Singh. Nobody knows whether it is in India or Pakistan. Bishan Singh is mercilessly victimized and traumatized by the horror of partition. Partition is the prime cause of his existential angst. Indeed, the story satirizes the absurdity of such elusive and farcical demarcation of national territories. The current paper attempts to reexamine the border issues created by the partition in Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh."

Keywords- Partition, Border issue, Displacement, Trauma, Catastrophe.





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Saadat Hasan Manto belonged to the era where "philosophy, argumentation or logic had lost their meaning; they were nothing but an exercise in futility," as Stephen Alter says in his article *Madness and Partition*; however, Urdu literature creates a sense of voidness without him. Manto's epoch-making short story "Toba Tek Singh" portrays the everhaunting catastrophe of partition. It depicts the protagonist Bishan Singh as a poor prey to the demonic blow of the 1947 partition.

The works still echo the life of Manto which is full of sound and fury. Manto translated Victor Hugo. He accepted the notion of 'Art for life's sake.' He writes what he sees in front of his eyes. He minutely observed each and every phenomenon happening around him and he never artficed his observation. Indeed, his writings are the narration of that unfiltered phenomena. As A. K. Ramanujan in his poem "A River" talks about the calamity of a flood, not about its artificial grandeur, Manto explores the naked and harsh hypocrisy of the fragmented society in his partition narratives. The characters of Manto are either a murderer, a lunatic, or a prostitute. He portrays the life of the unknown, oppressed, and, devoid to convey the hard truth. Manto talks about the marginalized those visually represent the havoc caused by partition. Mahnaz Ispahani defines Manto as a "remorseless student of partition's wreckage, of its broken soul," (Ispahani 187). His writings echo the delirious agony of the border issue in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

South Asia contributes to the field of partition literature to a greater extent. In South Asian countries, we have multiple border disputes like India-Pakistan, India-China, India-Bangladesh, India-Nepal, etc. In short, the issues related to the border are a worldwide phenomenon. Scholar admits that partition literature gives voice to the trauma of the cataclysmic partition. The demarcating lines of the borderlands work as mnemonic devices. They





carry the history of gory past often looked upon nonchalantly. Prof. Jennifer Yusin in his article *Beyond nationalism: The border, trauma and Partition fiction* writes, “For those scholars who approach Partition studies as literary critics and turn their attention to close readings of now well-known literary works such as Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* (1991), a nationalist rhetoric still seems to prevail as they explore how the stories of individual traumas become allegories for the trauma of the nation, and vice-versa. The importance of the inextricable relationship between the individual and the collective that literary critics have articulated in their work cannot be understated, but the rubric of the nation continues to be the popular lens through which Partition fiction is read.” (Yusin 25)

A crystal reflection of the partition, we can see in the works of Bapsi Sidhwa, Khushwant Singh, Intizar Hussein, Ismat Chughtai, and so on. The partition narratives deal with madness, trauma, women’s victimization, genocide, and existential crisis. These show how people were displaced or uprooted from their homelands during the partition of India. The partition writers do not only “celebrate” the village kinships in undivided India but also “mourn” the loss of it in August 1947. (Tiwari 50)

In Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Toba Tek Singh,” the catastrophe of partition is visually represented by the traumatized lunatics. The titular village is the microcosmic representation of the whole.

The British people did sow the seed of partition by introducing the ‘Divide and rule Policy’ to disunite a united India. India was split up and polarized upon the basis of the religious orientation of the people. Indeed, that seed, after going through a long process, germinated when Lord Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India, introduced his plan of partition and autonomy on 3rd June 1947 where Quaid-i-Azam and Tara Singh (as Manto describes) both succeeded. However, the Indo-Pak subcontinent is still groaning consequently, with the parasitic infection of partition, still suffering the traumatic stress. It was not a partition of territorial borders, Ranabir Samaddar admits that “it was a partition of several units, several identities, and, several visions.” (Tripathi and Chaturvedi 173)

A renowned Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto was born in 1912 at Samlara in the Ludhiana district of Punjab. By the time, India was undivided but colonized. Manto’s literary carrier comprises 22 collections of short stories, a novel, five series of radio plays, three collections of essays and, two collections of personal sketches.





Manto's attitude toward society was radical, defiant and, non-conformist. He was never a model of compliance. He possessed a voice of resistance; he longed for progress. He was accused six times, three times in pre-partition and another three times in the postpartition era for his writings deal with the theme of obscenity. He offended "If you cannot bear these stories then the society is unbearable. Who am I to remove the clothes of this society, which itself is naked! I don't even try to cover it, because it is not my job, that's the job of dressmakers."

Manto was the most underrated writer, who wrote of the neglected in his lifetime. Manto believed in the concept of undivided India, and that's why he did not want to leave the country. He supposed that India was unpartitioned thitherto. Manto was an iconoclast who writes about the soul-piercing border issue. Although he belonged to the Muslim community, Manto never allowed religious extremism to tempt him. His humanistic approach toward civilization made him a man of greater importance. Manto did bear the trauma of partition, displacement, and poverty. Manto jolted with the catastrophe of partition.

In his short story "Khaled Mian," Manto picturizes the death of his son Arif, where he numbed in bereavement. Manto, in his writings, depicts the topsy turvy ness of the partition. He exposes the hypocrisy of the so-called great leaders and tried to unfold the hegemonic mechanism of subalternation and victimization, applied by the power lovers to dissect India. Tahir Jokinen and Shershah Assadullah in their article "Saadat Hasan Manto, Partition, and Mental Illness through the lens of *Toba Tek Singh*" quotes Tarun K. Saint to define the nonsense gibberish of Bishan Singh as a reflection of the arbitrariness and opacity of the governmental machinery. (Jokinen and Assadullah 3)

Manto wrote a lot of writings based on the story of partition. His writings are tragic snapshots of the wound of the holocaust. These show how deeply Manto got affected by that. Some of his notable partition narratives are- "Siyah Hashiye" (Black Margins)- where Manto questions "Whose blood is it that is being shed so wantonly? ..." The others are "Boo", "Thanda Gosht", "Khol Do", "Dog of Titwal", "The Last Salute" etc.

The tone of *Titwal ka Kutta* is more sarcastic. In the story a dog was entrapped in a mountain valley between Indian and Pakistani troops. Both the troops began to enjoy a sadistic pleasure through the game of firing that makes the dog run back and forth and, finally it died.





Manto was deeply brooding over a sense of belongingness and thus he wrote about the partition, “Though I tried hard I could not separate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India...my mind could not resolve the question: what country did we belong to now, India or Pakistan?”

Pushpinder Walia quotes Alok Bhalla, “there is a single, common note which informs nearly all the stories written about the partition and the horror, it unleashed, a note of utter bewilderment”. Walia continues further that “this sense of bewilderment, the tormenting feeling of being trapped in an inhuman dilemma, which lies at the heart of the story *Toba Tek Singh*.” (Walia 254)

The setting of the story is a mental asylum in Lahore. In the narrative, Manto characterized mad people to question the sanity of the entire project of partition. The story begins with both the Governments’ decision to exchange the psychopaths based on religion. The lunatics do not have an iota of knowledge, what is happening around them. They are confused with the whole situation and it is ironical that the lunatics are not coming to their homes but are dislocating in a different place of different languages. The questions haunting them are – “Where was Pakistan? What were its boundaries?”

The inmates are unable to solve their mental dilemmas. Being mercilessly tortured by issues of the border, a lunatic decides to live neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan but on a tree. Another episode tells the pathetic love story of the lawyer ends with a tragic note because he became a Hindustani while the lady love became a Pakistani after partition, however it was a one-sided love from the male lover.

Manto depicts how geography as well as cartography changed in a while when he writes about Sialkot, which was in Hindustan but now is in Pakistan and, none can assure that the existing Pakistan and India would not wipe out someday. Manto wrote, “It had been rumored that Sialkot, which was once in Hindustan, was now in Pakistan; who could say where Lahore, which was in Pakistan today, would be tomorrow, and was there anyone who could guarantee that both Pakistan and Hindustan would not disappear someday?.” The mephitic displacement shattered the collective psyche, indeed.



Prof. Jennifer writes that “the trauma of the Partition lies on the border, on the stretch of land between nations that, though it cannot be named, creates its own cartographic reconfiguration in the collective psyche of the subcontinent.”

Bishan Singh, the inmate lunatic, is the protagonist of this story. He is traumatized by the psychological impact of migration. People call him Toba Tek Singh, the name of the native land he is named after. After partition, he can't find out and desperately searches for his village Toba Tek Singh, but nobody knows where it is in India or Pakistan.

The textual ambiguity between Toba Tek Singh the man and Toba Tek Singh the place is part of what makes Manto's story particularly compelling for a discussion about the trauma of the Partition as steeped in a past that bears an ungraspable psychic resonance and in a present that demands new contextual understanding. Bishan's increasing disorientation that emerges from his inability to locate the place he once called home is an important allegory for the profound confusion that was actually felt among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. Such matters of identity were no doubt complicated by the Wagah border – the India-Pakistan border in the north western Punjab region – which was somewhat arbitrarily drawn, and Manto's story makes painfully clear that the drawing of this particular border did not resolve or end opposition but instead precipitated an enduring historical, political, and cultural rupture in the subcontinent. (Yusin 29)

The ever-haunting partition transformed the whole cosmos into a state of utter confusion. It made its victims mad, insane, and, lunatic as well. They lost their mental balance due to such traumatic experiences of 'man-made violence.' People in both territories are confused about their identities. They are uprooted from their native lands. The authority did not concern with their emotions and attachments with their motherlands. It never listened to the voice from the periphery. The lunatics are 'othered' and doubly marginalized and the existential angst of Bishan Singh is an embodiment of the whole, of course.

However, at the end of the story, Bishan Singh learns from a liaison officer that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan and, he refuses to go back there. He can't go back. He has been thrown out of the homeland because he is a Hindu. There is no place for him in the Muslim country Pakistan. Now he belongs to a different border and he lives in limbo. In his article “How many Pakistans?”



Prof. Yusin quotes Bede Scott that “in *Toba Tek Singh*, for example, the border clearly facilitates nationalist ideologies of divergence’ in which the Punjabi identity, which was regionally based, was superseded by Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu identities.” (Yusin 29)

Thus, to oppose and to bring forth the absurdity of such farcical demarcation of territories based on religion, Bishan Singh finally lies down between the two border stations in ‘no man’s land.’ Manto writes, significantly, “In the middle, on a stretch of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.”

To sum up it is very obvious that *Toba Tek Singh*, “is Manto’s symbolic rejection of the division of the country and his considered comment on the mindlessness of it,” (Tiwari 56).

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