

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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# **Identity Crisis, In-betweenness, and Psychological Trauma of Displacement: A Critical Study of Saadat Hasan Manto's Short Story "Toba Tek Singh"**

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### **Abstract**

Published in 1955, Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" revolves around the issues of partition violence, the trauma of displacement, identity crisis, and the complexities of human psychology and so on. This paper attempts to study a madman's plight and dilemma to come to terms with the decision of exchanging mental patients based on their religious identity after the partition of India. The study again tries to highlight the madness of the people and the total disorder leading to an atmosphere of hostility and communal violence. It is a qualitative research where a textual analysis method is used, taking postcolonial theory as its theoretical scheme to analyze "Toba Tek Singh" in the contemporary context. The paper also seeks to highlight the issue of the postcolonial identity crisis of millions of people like Bishan Singh and their refusal to accept partition. The analysis is further substantiated by the data taken from secondary sources related to the field of study.

**Keywords:** Partition, Identity, Psychological trauma, In-betweenness, Displacement.

The partition of India and Pakistan by the British according to the “Two Nation Theory” in 1947 is regarded as one of the worst tragedies of the 20th century because of the horrific events, crises, and violent activities that followed. The British left a chaotic and fractured India where people engaged in communal riots all over the country. The Indians were cornered and marginalized for their lack of agency and voice in colonial India. The British colonizers “aimed at turning them into docile mimics of their own way of life and thus the Indians became the outsiders in their own country” (Mehmood 5). They treated them as inferior human beings due to the colour of their skin and considered the Indians devoid of basic knowledge, etiquette, culture, language, and intelligence. They defined religion to mess up the psyche of the people and their peaceful coexistence. Although the Indian subcontinent got independence from the British colonial power in 1947, the independence came in exchange of a sense of loss since India was divided into two separate countries-Pakistan and India. The British colonizers destroyed the harmony and brotherhood of the people of all communities by cultivating the seeds of communal hatred and anger in their souls before leaving India. They tore the heart of India upside down and India became the breeding ground of communal violence. After the fall of the British colonial power in India, the people turned on one another in the name of religion and nationalism. The incidents of communal violence and atrocities were the ultimate legacies of British colonialism. The British colonizers treated the Indians as the other, the lesser beings. Similarly, after the acquisition of communal identity, the people of different communities who once lived together harmoniously in India without any kind of problem treated the other as the enemy and wanted to erase them from the surface of the earth. Ayesha Jalal (1996) argued that “the psychological legacy of partition has left a much deeper impact on people's minds than the social, economic, and political dynamics that led to the division. Whether the two dimensions should be separated quite surgically as India was dismembered by the partitioner's axe is itself an issue of considerable disagreement among historians” (93-94). Partition violence

was not only the outcome of colonialism but also It was its modified version. Partition would have never taken place at first sight without the existence of colonialism and its vicious effect. In the midst of chaos and confusion, people lost their sanity, and conscience and were driven by communal hatred and anger, creating an atmosphere of animosity, intolerance, and suspicion among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The violent riots and political turmoil during the early days and after the partition are the direct inheritance of British colonialism, creating a lot of disorders, corruption, confusion, and brutalities in the lives of the people of all communities. If there was no colonialism in India, there would not be such things.

Postcolonialism is mainly a critique of colonialism and colonial legacies. The postcolonial writers and critics advocate for the urgency to recover the native culture and language that were violated and transgressed by force and completely erased because of the forceful invasion of the European colonizers and the imposition of their alien culture, and foreign language. Jane Hiddleston describes that “postcolonialism refers to the wider, multifaceted effects and implications of colonial rule” (1). Colonialism shatters and distorts the native identity and cultural purity of the colonized. The colonizers brainwash them by enforcing violent measures, mind control, colonial education, culture, and language. Albert Memmi writes that colonization morally, physically, and materially kills the colonized (195). Colonialism ultimately leads the colonized to madness. Postcolonialism results in an identity crisis, and psychological trauma in the minds of the colonized because of the interactions between two different cultures and the formation of a new national identity.

Saadat Hasan Manto himself was a living witness to the bloody partition of India and its brute consequences. His stories speak for themselves. He had a secular mind. Through his stories, he points out the nasty and heart-wrenching realities of the contemporary diabolical situation on the eve of partition and post-partition period. He focuses on themes of madness and postcolonial issues. He was a victim of mental health problems in his real life due to

excessive alcoholism, dementia, and depression. As a result, he had to spend some time in a mental asylum in Lahore for his treatment. Manto not only shows the psychological trauma and plight of the countless refugees who lost their homes, identities, and countries overnight following the partition of India but also condemns the very decision of partition on sectarian lines realizing the brutal consequences of it. Manto's short stories based on partition resemble the unbearable and toxic reality of that era. They act as the mirror of the contemporary rotten society and present the bitter truths about human traits and psychology. "Manto portrays the ruptures, dislocations, and differences affected within families and communities. The horrific images of violence, craziness, and death that haunt Manto's stories invoke an overwhelming fear of illogical violence, and at the same time, question what is at the root of that violence" (Das 202). Due to partition, the beast of communal violence and madness was on the loose devouring everything coming on its way. Before wreaking havoc and annihilation, it was in a state of hibernation in the hearts of the people of different communities living in the Indian subcontinent. When the British colonizers partitioned India on the premise of religion and cultural diversity, the beast was unleashed with full force and caused excessive violence, deaths, craziness, forced migration, gendered violence, trauma, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of atrocities all over India. Yasmin Khan in her book *The Great Partition* questions the issues of refugee crisis, tens of thousands of deaths, identity dilemma, and other forms of violence caused by partition. She writes,

Where was India and where was Pakistan? Who was now an Indian and a Pakistani? Was citizenship underpinned by a shared religious faith, or was it a universal right, guaranteed by a state that promised equality and freedom to all? Were people expected to move into the state where their co-religionists resided in the majority? The tragedy of partition was that by the time people started to

ask and try these questions, unimaginable violence had escalated to the point of ethnic cleansing. (4)

Partition led to the escalation of violence and sheer hatred among the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. All of a sudden, the civilized and rational citizens turned into demented assailants. The idea of homeland was erased and identity was shattered into pieces overnight. Thus, it created a bloody stain on the prolific history of India which could not be removed ever by any means. Regarding Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories, Ayesha Jalal in her famous book, *"The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide"* states, "He had faith in humanity, which motivated him to write fascinating stories about the trauma of 1947, and it is acknowledged internationally that his writings representing the pain of migration and savagery of humanity without any objectivity" (56). Manto's stories reveal his continuous and deliberate attempts in order to come to terms spontaneously with the unforgiving and grim event of partition during 1947 and the terrible outcomes of it on the lives of millions of people of the Indian subcontinent. "Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" is a sensitive expression of the psychological wear-and-tear of a nation split into rival halves" (Nepal 56). Manto criticizes the consequences of partition and realistically depicts many disturbing and horrible pictures of reality.

Saadat Hasan Manto is very famous for his well-known partition story "Toba Tek Singh" set in the background of the India-Pakistan partition of 1947. It was published in 1955. It vividly describes the political exchange of mental patients between India and Pakistan after the partition of India. After the partition of India, the officials of India and Pakistan came to a mutual agreement to relocate their political prisoners and mental patients based on their religious identity without concerning the outcomes of their decision. Manto throws light on the concept of madness, as well as, identity crisis, psychological trauma of displacement, and total confusion felt by the lunatics upon discovering the decision of their relocation by the

government officials of India and Pakistan. Manto's stories are known for his tradition of realism, verbal economy, reliance on internal elements, and basically for his style of sudden, abrupt, and at times disturbingly uncertain endings. (Akhtar and Flemming 1). "Toba Tek Singh" unveils the collective madness of the people engaged in fratricidal warfare and violent activities caused by communal hatred and bogus nationalism, as a result of the division of the Indian subcontinent. Shamsul Haq Thoker (2007) asserts that "Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" is regarded as his magnum opus which tells the story of partition and its aftermath. It delineates very realistically the picture of partition and its immediate effects upon the human psyche" (195). The story acts as the mouthpiece of Manto. It is about the fear of losing identity. The announcement of the date of exchange fosters confusion and identity crisis among the asylum inmates. The decision creates panic in the minds of the lunatics since they did not know what to do and what not to do, and how to react. People hardly remember the role of colonialism while focusing on the partition of India. The way in which British colonizers used the formula of divide and rule to maintain their authority over the Indians, in the same way after the independence of India, people created a division among themselves in terms of religion to prove the authority of one community over the other. According to Harmeet Shah Singh's article "*The Story of Toba Tek Singh and the Partition of the Subcontinent*" published in *India Today*, Manto's most "famous Partition narrative "Toba Tek Singh" is a stinging satire on institutional insanity that led to the savage division of the subcontinent...Toba Tek Singh depicts how syncretic cultural identities were wiped out in a matter of months by rash political powers. This identity crisis has created multiple "no-man's" silos in the human psyche on both sides of the border" (Singh). Bishan Singh's psychological trauma and identity crisis represents the existential crisis of the millions of refugees who lost everything in 1947 due to a horrendous decision of the British colonizers to separate the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan

based on communal identity in the disguise of giving independence to India, and thereby, they destroyed the harmony, peaceful coexistence, tolerance and fraternity of all communities.

Manto harshly vilifies the self-centred and egotistical politicians and their outrageous decisions in the wake of partition such as relocation of mental patients despite knowing the severe consequences like anarchy and bloodshed. So, the rehabilitation program propagated by the political figures of both countries turns out to be a total mess. This decision to relocate causes a sense of fear and panic among the lunatics of the mental asylum. As a result, they find themselves in a great dilemma regarding their current status and identity. They ponder whether they are in Pakistan or in India and where they are being deported. Manto writes, “As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or in Pakistan. 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 10). The story objectively discloses the physical, mental, and psychological trauma and agony of the division of India by means of the post-partition exchange of the lunatics across the border of India and Pakistan. It further shows the way in which syncretic cultural identities are demolished within a matter of moments by a hasty political decision to divide India and Pakistan on the basis of religious background. As a result, millions of people find themselves in a limbo state losing everything that they had, including their identity, and homelands, all of a sudden in a stroke of fate during the tumultuous period of partition in 1947. Sudhwa Tiwari in her article, “*Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto*” states that “Partition not only created a 'mad' atmosphere but also made its victims 'mad', 'insane', losing their mental balances due to traumatic experiences” (55). The madness of the mental patients mirrors the madness, chaos, and violence of the outside world. In fact, the lunatics seem to be much more sane, calm, and rational than the irrational political leaders of India and Pakistan controlling their fate in round table conferences. However, the

news of partition creates chaos, confusion, misunderstandings, and conspiracy theories among the lunatics inside the mental asylum as there is no accurate information available to them.

According to Kiranpreet Kaur,

The asylum itself becomes a micro cosmic view of India and the confusion among lunatics resembles the actual confusion among the people of colonial India. The lunatics of Lahore asylum ask each other the whereabouts of the country named Pakistan and the language that is spoken there. They are totally unaware of the fact that India and Pakistan are their own lands and nothing more than a fruit of the tree whose seed was sown by imperialism. (217)

The lunatics try their level best in order to understand the premise of the partition of India into India and Pakistan through their actions. Most of them are against their relocation and hardly understand why they are being deported. Besides, the asylum inmates find themselves in a fix regarding their use of language after their resettlement. One of the lunatics states his concern to a Sardarji by stating, “Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don't even know the language they speak in that country” (Manto 12). They do not know whether they could use their current language in the new place or if they have to learn a new language to communicate with others. Thus, the political exchange of the asylum inmates from Pakistan to India and vice versa will result in their loss of identity, homeland, friends, memories, and even their language too. When asked by a Sikh lunatic about the language of Hindustan, another lunatic smiled and replied, “I know the language of the Hindostoras. These devils always strut about as if they were the lords of the earth” (Manto 12). The lunatics create their own home and their individual identity inside the madhouse. They take the roles of political leaders like Jinnah and Tara Singh out of their madness and preach political sermons declaring communal warfare between the Muslims and the Sikhs. Smita Das writes that “The asylum acts as a space where the marginalized subaltern can voice the logical and rational concerns of Partition in contrast to



the illogical rhetoric of nationalism resulting in craziness constructed outside the walls of the asylum. The asylum as a place of resistance or refuge from the illogical atrocities committed by Partition becomes an inversion of the nation as an actual place of craziness” (205). A Muslim lunatic falls flat on the ground losing his balance and gets knocked out while shouting “Pakistan Zindabad” which is a symbolic indicator of how the people outside of the mental asylum lost their sanity due to the ongoing communal warfare and how the partition destroyed the unity of the different communities. Another lunatic climbs up the top of a tree against the will of the people who are in charge of the mental asylum and then he expresses his desire neither to be a part of India or Pakistan. He boldly proclaims that “I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree” (Manto 13). His action symbolizes the plight of the refugees and their rejection of partition on the basis of communal identity which caused millions of people to lose everything suddenly. The ongoing madness inside the madhouse is a symbolic representation of the political turmoil and communal madness that spread among the communities throughout India. They also rejected their brand-new national identities imposed upon them. Pakistan is described as a place in India where straight razors are made, suggesting the bloodshed, fury, and communal frenzy of the outside world. Manto writes, “One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper, *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection: The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured” (11). Manto describes the corrupt system as most of the inmates of the mental asylum are not actually mad at all. Rather they are killers and perpetrators of violence who get themselves into the madhouse by bribing the higher officials to escape from being executed by the authorities.

Manto depicts the plight of a young Hindu lawyer from Lahore who is alienated from his beloved living in Amritsar, India, due to partition that breaches their love affair. Partition brings a sudden end to their hopes of getting married to each other. They fell in love with each

other despite having different religions. It shows the existence of inter-faith affairs before the partition of India which is hardly imagined today. Manto talks about the disgusted reactions, madness, and anger brought about by the partition of the young Hindu lawyer living in Lahore with the words, “That day he abused every major and minor Hindu and Muslim leader who had cut India into two, turning his beloved into an Indian and him into a Pakistan” (13). Nowadays in 2023 in India, inter-faith love or marriage is termed “Love Jihad”, an offensive crime. Even many lovers are beaten to death mercilessly or thrown behind bars for this so-called “Love Jihad”. Many lovers also become the victims of honour killing. This type of action is the legacy of partition violence and communal hatred.

Manto shows the mental state of the Anglo-Indians and their stance when the British lost their power and control over the Indians in 1947. The two Anglo-Indian inmates in the European ward of the asylum face an existential crisis after hearing about the independence of India from the British colonizers. They are very reluctant to abide by the rules of the Indians and their customs. They hate the Indians from the bottom of their hearts because they are firm supporters and loyalists of the British colonization in the Indian subcontinent. They also hate Indian foods and traditions. They want the British to have in a position of power and control over the Indian subcontinent which shows their colonial mindset and attitude to govern others forcefully. Regarding the dilemma and psychological trauma of the Anglo-Indians, Manto writes, “They went into a state of deep shock and were seen conferring with each other in whispers the entire afternoon. They were worried about their changed status after independence. Would there be a European ward or would it be abolished?” (14). It shows their rejection of the transfer of power and authority from the British colonizers to the local Indians. Nobody has given vivid descriptions of partition violence as shockingly as Manto did in his short stories. He has painted a genuine picture of the reality of those days.

Bishan Singh, a Sikh mental patient, is the protagonist of the story, “Toba Tek Singh” who suffers from an identity crisis and psychological trauma resulting from the partition of India. His sufferings symbolically stand for the trauma of displacement of the thousands of refugees who lost their ancestral houses, properties, lands, families, and even their identities merely in the name of political emancipation. Bishan Singh is known as Toba Tek Singh to his inmates as he comes from a place called Toba Tek Singh. He has been in the asylum for fifteen years. His language is full of jargon and he never sits and never lies down even for a single minute. He keeps standing facing the wall. Before the partition, his relatives used to visit him occasionally but after the partition, they stopped visiting him because of their displacement. He does not understand partition and looks for his native place Toba Tek Singh. He loves his ancestral land and wants to stick to his homeland. According to the opinion of Tarannum Riyaz, Toba Tek Singh is undoubtedly Saadat Hasan Manto himself. She states that “It seems that the main character of the short story, a mad person, is no other than Manto himself. At the time of partition the piece of land, Toba Tek Singh, fell neither within the boundary of India nor Pakistan. Toba Tek Singh is a piece of land which has no specific national identity” (205). Fazl Din, a friend of Bishan Singh, used to visit him before the exchange of lunatics and informs him about the migration of his family from Pakistan to India. Although Fazl Din stutters while informing him about his daughter, Roop Kaur's well-being, it is indicative that she might have suffered the same fate experienced by thousands of women during the frenzy of partition. During the deportation of the lunatics to India, they are taken to the Wagah-Attari land border by Pakistani government officials under police surveillance. When the exchange process begins, the lunatics start screaming, laughing, tearing one another's clothes, running in different directions aimlessly, and thereby, and raising hell on the surface of the earth. The Muslims and Sikhs even engage in verbal jabs and brawls while giving slogans like “Pakistan Zindabad”, “Pakistan Murdabad”. Bishan Singh refuses to cross the border after being informed that Toba

Tek Singh, a place without having any national or religious identity, is now within Pakistan. He stands firmly on his ground. Manto writes, "There he stood in no man's land on his swollen legs like a colossus" (18). All the attempts of the officials to deport him from Pakistan to India end in smoke. He is reluctant to leave the land of his forefathers. He wants to stay in Toba Tek Singh, a place in Pakistan. It shows his very detestation of partition and the loss of his homeland. Then he finds himself stuck in a no man's land between the border of India and Pakistan. He does not move an inch from that place that has no national or religious identity despite the continuous efforts of the officials. He becomes a headache for them. However, their problem is resolved when he collapses after a scream and dies there just before the sunrise of the next day. Manto writes, "There, behind barbed wire, on one side, lay India and behind more barbed wire, on the other side, lay Pakistan. In between, on a bit of earth which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (18). The cause of his death remains unknown but it is assumed that he is shot dead on no man's land when the officials fail to deport him to India by force. Bishan Singh's death in no man's land has symbolic significance as it highlights his refusal to accept the decision of partition, his existential crisis, alienation, and trauma of deportation, his painful struggle for the loss of identity in the midst of madness as well as the confusions and helpless status of the refugees. Bishan Singh's psychological trauma, suffering, existential crisis, and tragic death at the final moment of the story is the ultimate legacy of a deadly contagious aspect called communalism that scattered throughout the Indian subcontinent like bushfires and swallowed up millions of lives after the independence of India.

Manto skillfully depicts the hatred, brutality, and collective madness of the people that create havoc all over the Indian subcontinent evolved from the ideologies of nationalism, religious pride, and cultural superiority through the madness of the twelve inmates of a mental asylum located in Lahore, Pakistan whose actions are much more sane and rational than the people of the outside world. The mental asylum stands for the Indian subcontinent in the

context of post-partition, inhabited by people of different religions, cultures, sects, colours, and languages. They encounter various issues and complexities inside the madhouse such as madness, the psychological trauma of displacement, and fear of the probable loss of identity and language. Bishan Singh's obsession with a place named Toba Tek Singh illustrates his love for his ancestral land, his roots. His cryptic phrase or mutterings throughout the story, which is incomprehensible, acts as an important hallmark of the mixture of different cultures, religions, races, languages, feelings, ideologies, thoughts, and traditions of the people of the Indian subcontinent. The hate crimes, identity crisis, and psychological trauma of the victims resulting from the partition of 1947 were the inheritance of colonialism as colonialism and partition were certainly the opposite sides of the same coin.

Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" depicts a madman's identity crisis caused by the trauma of displacement and collective madness as a result of partition during and after the diabolical atmosphere of 1947. Partition not only traumatized people but also robbed their identity and homelands by putting them into a no-man's-land overnight. Bishan Singh sticks to his decision not to cross the border despite being forced again and again which shows his rejection of partition as well as his deep attachment and sense of belongingness to his roots. He finds himself stuck in between his former identity and his brand-new national identity, as well as the pre-colonial and post-colonial circumstances and cross-cultural clash. Through the psychological trauma, the identity crisis of Bishan Singh, his reluctance to cross the border, and his tragic death between the borders of India and Pakistan, Manto not only shows the psychological trauma of displacement and plight of the countless refugees who lost their homes, identities and countries overnight following the partition of India but also condemns the very decision of partition on sectarian lines realizing the brutal consequences of it. In a word, the character of Bishan Singh in the story "Toba Tek Singh" seems to be none other than

Manto himself who personally endured the psychological trauma of rehabilitation and existential crisis because of the partition of India in 1947.

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