

PARTITION AND MADNESS IN MANTO'S TOBA TEK SINGH

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ABSTRACT:

The Partition of Hindustan in 1947 is one of the most important historical events in the history of the twentieth century. The bloody riots and massacres during the partition affected both the Hindus and Muslims on either side of the borders. Many people lost their lives and many more suffered displacement, poverty, rape, brutality and physical and psychological trauma. The voice of the victims was quieted by the chaotic madness and butchering that went on during and after the partition. These silenced voices were heard through Saadat Hasan Manto. Manto, being a writer of that decade, not only witnessed the horridness of partition but also realized how that separation of 1947 traumatised people by making them homeless and identity less. He brought forward the traumatic realities of Partition. The present paper attempts to focus on the idea of Partition and Madness in his story Toba Tek Singh. Manto's Toba Tek Singh highlights the concept of partition and madness in different ways.

Key words: Madness, Dissent, Partition, Identity.

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The story Toba Tek Singh begins with an image of the Partition ridiculing political leaders on both sides and reflecting the confusion of identity. Muhammad Ali, who imagines himself to be Jinnah, argues with a Sikh who thinks himself to be Tara Singh, while other inmates "...were unable to decide whether they were now in India or 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, 2-3). The story takes us to an asylum, "taking the notion of victimhood to its extreme" and gradually focuses on one old Sikh inmate named Bishan Singh. He is called Toba Tek Singh because he had been a wealthy landowner in a village of that name. Although unable to speak except in nonsense syllables, 21 upon hearing of the intended transfer, he tries to find out whether Toba Tek Singh is in India or Pakistan. He cannot understand why he is being uprooted from his home. That was the question over two million people asked their governments during Partition. At the border, Bishan Singh learns from a liaison officer that Toba Tek Singh is in Pakistan, and he refuses to cross. When all persuasion fails, he is left standing by himself between the two border stations. Finally, just before sunrise, Bishan Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground. 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." (Tiwari, 55)

Toba Tek Singh depicts the individual's identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. Though the story is set in a lunatic asylum, Manto's provides the asylum a metaphoric meaning. Manto has deliberately taken the lunatic asylum as the setting of his story because his purpose is not only to show how the separation of India and Pakistan traumatised people by making them insane but also to highlight the fact that the decision of partition was not even acceptable for the lunatics in the asylum. In other words, Manto has tried to show, on the one hand, the shock that common lives received due to the separation of Pakistan from India and on the other, the confusion arose because of the inability of the people to segregate India from Pakistan and Pakistan from India. Bishan Singh exemplifies a world without the bars and boundaries. He wants to live his life neither in Pakistan nor in Hindustan. These national boundaries are identities that have been attached with him without seeking his consent that is why he keeps on resisting. He wants to go back to Toba Tek Singh, form where he belongs and which gives him his identity. Manto, thus proclaims the lunacy of the splitting the nation on the basis of religion through his mouthpiece Bishan Singh, who would rather prefer to die in no man's land than make a choice between Hindustan and Pakistan. Thus, the death of Bishan Singh at the wagah border stands as a metaphor of doom and curtains for both the nations." (Nisar, 97) Partition was the major event that gave new shape to the history of the subcontinent. Manto, being an eyewitness of the cataclysmic event, has depicted the impact of it with utmost intensity. The trauma, from which Bishan Singh was suffering from, was in fact a contagious disease that dispersed after partition. It is this disease that Manto has exposed through the character of Bishan Singh, who understands nothing except Toba Tek Singh. In other words, in a story like *Toba Tek Singh*, through the character of Bishan Singh, he has tried to show how a catastrophic event like partition traumatised people by putting them nowhere. Manto criticises the barrier between India and Pakistan that separates man from man, body from body and soul from soul. As if he wants to propagate the message of peace and prosperity to the people of both countries by showing them the way that leads them to a land, where there is no division in the name of religion, where liberty, equality and fraternity predominates and where wind blows only to disperse the fragrance of *Shantih, Shantih and Shantih*.

The partition is seen by many historians as a period of insanity. The term 'madness' itself has a privileged status in the discourse on Partition. The metaphor of madness highlighted the refusal to accept and understand Partition. It became a form of dissent. Madness, in Toba Tek Singh, can also be seen as the failure of Language, communication and comprehensibility. It parallels the failure of communication amongst the madmen to the failure of communication amongst the people outside; at the same time it also provides a contrast by highlighting the

sensible questions that comes out of the insane minds. The whole concept of Partition is poignantly brought forward through the body language and conversations of the lunatics. Madness has been “performed” by the insane very creatively. Insanity gives them the right to their thought-processes and actions. No one, neither the officials of Hindustan nor Pakistan, can take this agency away from them. The performance subverts the dominant discourse of the Government in its own uncontrollable and bizarre ways.

Through Bishan Singh, whose identity cannot be separated from his homeland Toba Tek Singh, Manto expressed the utter confusion and helplessness people faced when Pakistan, a new nation was crafted out of Hindustan. Nobody really knows what Pakistan means. They try to understand this through their own performances inside the asylum. A Muslim lunatic describes Pakistan as “the name of the place in Hindustan where cut-throat razors are manufactured”, thus describing the slaughters and madness outside. One of the Muslim madmen loses his balance and faints while shouting “Pakistan Zindabad”. Manto here highlights the harmful consequences of hollow factional patriotism brought about by uninhibited fervour and passion. A mad-man climbing up a tree and declaring how he would live there forever instead of living either in Hindustan or Pakistan, is symbolic of how people could not accept this random thrusting of national identities on them. The fight between the madmen impersonating as Jinnah and Tara Singh and their getting locked away in separate cells is indicative of how the Government failed to curb the violence in the real world. It also exposes the fact that people, who once lived peacefully, when they acquire communal identities, saw the “other” as the enemy. Most importantly, Toba Tek Singh’s gibberish represents the collapse of language and understanding in the midst of such jingoistic madness.

Toba Tek Singh’s performance of standing on one leg is almost like a “stand-in-protest” against the “trafficking” of their bodies to “foreign lands” they don’t understand. His death in no man’s land is symbolic of his rejection of Partition, of Communalism and especially of his changed Nationality. This reminds one of how Foucault sees “madness as being located in a certain cultural „space” within society; the shape of this space, and its effects on the madman, depend on society itself.” Even the mad man reflects what is being played out, performed and enacted in the “sane” world outside. Choreographed ceremonial exchanges in the Wagah border mirrors, in complete contrast, the aggressive dystopian partitioned world where train full of bodies reached either side of the border. Toba Tek Singh’s refusal to cross the border becomes a political performance which denies the new nation states any take on his body or his land.

According to Suvir Kaul, there are versions of metaphors of partition. One of them is the claim that all nations are founded in blood and that it is only violence and sacrificial flow of blood that porous boundaries can be sealed and a strong nation built. “The vocabulary of martyrdom (shahidi) is an important feature of such understanding... a nation demands its shahids and is strengthened by them.” The idea that borders have to be drawn by blood has been very well presented by Manto. If excess of violence on religious grounds becomes the true embodiment of nation formation, the future of that nation will always be embroiled in such religious fundamentalism.

Toba Tek Singh is a catchy story that depicts the individual’s identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. In the story, the trope of madness has also been cleverly incorporated by Manto. Madness that comes out of sheer human crookedness and bestiality can be seen in all of Manto’s works. Political violence arises out of a collective madness; it erases all the distinction between madness and sanity.

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