

# Ontological Struggle and Quest for Identity in Sadat Hasan Manto's Story Toba Tek Singh

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## Abstract

The paper explores the truth behind the politics of border and the forced notion of nationhood that displaced millions of Indians from their homes at the time of partition. Toba Tek Singh a story written by Saadat Hasan Manto ruthlessly portrays the reality of partition and displays the strong bond that a common man shares with the land of his birth. The partition was one of the most unfortunate occurrences of modern world which not only affected the masses but raised serious questions on the notions of patriotism and nationality. The paper explores in detail the importance of the concept of regional identity and ontological existence in the life of a common man by analysing in detail the character of Bishan Singh, the mentally unstable protagonist of the story Toba Tek Singh. The story set in a mental asylum in Pakistan ridicules the insane decision of Indian and Pakistani governments who decide to exchange the mental lunatics living in their country on the basis of their religion. Bishan Singh who is also known as Toba Tek Singh after the name of his village shares an existential relationship with his village and refuses to be shifted to India, a country with which he shares no emotional and spiritual bond. He dies standing for 24 hours on the piece of land that belonged neither to India nor Pakistan, his tragic death signifies his unbreakable bond with the land of his birth and mocks at the forced notion of nation and nationality.

**Keywords:** 1947 Partition, Border Politics, Identity, Trauma, Ontological Struggle, Regional Identity

## Introduction

Saadat Hasan Manto known as "enfant terrible of Urdu literature," Mushirul Hasan (2000) had written many stories revolving around the lives of thousands of innocent people residing in Indian subcontinent when India gained independence and Pakistan came into existence. Manto had witnessed and experienced the trauma of partition and many of his stories have become a written testimony of pain, suffering, agony experienced by the common masses who were forcibly displaced. On 15th August 1947 when India gained freedom Nehru Ji addressed the nation and said, "At the stroke of the midnight hour when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from old to the new, when an age ends and when the soul of a nation finds utterance". (Nehru 1947) When India was awakening to life and freedom, the citizens of Indian subcontinent were in a dilemma and were forced to search for new identities in the newly formed countries. On one hand majority of Indians were celebrating their newly gained independence and on the other hand millions were forced to leave their homes and the country experienced one of the most tragic human massacres in the history of modern world. India and Pakistan were divided into two Nations and the borders were specified by the dividing line, Red Cliff Line which passed through the homes and villages of the people living in Punjab. The people were forced to leave their ancestral land and as Read and Fisher wrote "some 14 million people left their homes and set out by every means possible- by air, train and roads, in cars and lorries, in buses and bullock carts but most of all on foot- to seek refuge with their own kind." (Read and Fisher p 499). "Around 2,00,000 people lost their lives (official estimate of British government at the time). 10 million of them were in the central Punjab. In an area measuring about 200 miles (320 km) by 150 miles (240 km) roughly the size of Scotland, with some 17,000 towns and villages, 5



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million Muslims were trekking from east to west and 5 million Hindus and Sikhs trekking in the opposite direction. Many of them never made it to their destinations." (Read and Fisher 497). Amidst this human massacre where countless murders were committed in the name of religion and patriotism, thousands of men, women and children experienced psychological murder of their existence and identity. Manto in his short stories captured the intricate details of psyche of the innocent victims who had to bear the incessant torture and atrocities because of their religious identity.

### **Aim of the Study**

The paper aims to establish the truth that for a common human being his identity is related to the land of his birth and to him the belongingness to his land of birth is of utmost importance. He is not affected by the politics of border and his relationship with his fellow human beings is not based on their religious identity, human relations are built on the foundation of mutual trust and love, people are bonded to each other because of the mutual regional identities shared by them.

Partition literature offers a horrific and haunting account of the spine chilling incidents where genocide was committed, women were murdered by their own family members to protect their family honor, trains and bogies arrived at their destination loaded with dead bodies of the passengers. Humanity seemed to have become extinct and a human being was only being identified on the basis of his religion. People who managed to escape amid this gory violence were also not left untouched; their psyche was permanently blemished with the wounds of mental agony and trauma experienced by them while shifting to a new land which was identified as their nation but with which they had no emotional and existential bonding. The story Toba Tek Singh deals with the struggle for retaining one's identity with the land where he was born, where his ancestors belonged to and which was the only place which he can identify himself with. The protagonist Bishan Singh, an old Sikh lunatic residing in a mental asylum in Pakistan for the last 15 years was known as Toba Tek Singh after the name of his village. Bishan Singh a harmless fellow who never got into fights with fellow inmates was oblivious of the world around him but had developed a sixth sense about the day when his family members would visit him, would speak to him and would bring gifts for him. After the partition they had suddenly stopped visiting him and he lost the only connection that he had with his village and was left in a mental quandary about the location of his village Toba Tek Singh. "He had also begin enquiring where Toba Tek Singh was to go. However, nobody was quite sure whether it was in India or Pakistan."(Khalid Hassan P14)

Manto very ironically had questioned the sagacity behind the division of a piece of land and creating nations out of it. Through the doubts that are raised in the minds of so-called lunatics, he is mocking on the erudition of the intellectuals who were unaware of this basic fact that a piece of land cannot be divided by creating borders, the people who live

there, develop an invisible strong emotional bond with it and hence their identity is associated ontologically to it. In human society a child initially gains his identity from his family and as he grows into a mature human being he relates himself with the place of his birth. He is proud of correlating himself with the place to which he belongs; and the fact that regional identity means more than the national identity of an individual cannot be underestimated; a person first belongs to the land where he was born and identifies himself with that particular region. The concept of nationhood needs a much broader perspective because a common man always introduces himself as a person belonging to a particular area of his country. Majority of the world population, never gets a chance to introduce themselves at an international platform where they can identify themselves with their national identity and national citizenship. Manto in Toba Tek Singh through the character of Bishan Singh tries to convince his readers about this existential relationship that exists between a man and the land of his birth. A common man throughout his life associates himself with his village, region, town, state that happens be a small fragment of his country. Bishan Singh who had lost his mental stability still remembers the name of his village and is adamant to move to a new strange land, although he had spent fifteen years of his life standing on his legs, he is unable to stand for twenty-four hours on a land with which he had no bonding and in the end collapses on that small piece of land which is neither in India nor in Pakistan. He epitomizes the common human being whose life revolves around the regional identity of his existence and who lives and dies believing in the strong concept of belonging to a particular piece of land. Manto questions this logic of dividing Earth into Nations and forcing innocent people to show their loyalty towards this forced notion of nationhood. The simple ignorant people living in the Indian subcontinent at the time of partition found themselves entangled in this baffling situation and struggled to understand the logic behind the creation of India and Pakistan. This mental dilemma of the inmates can be felt when Manto writes "One inmate had got badly got caught up in this India- Pakistan-Pakistan - India rigmarole that one day, while sweeping the floor, he dropped everything, climbed the nearest tree and installed himself on a branch, from which vantage point he spoke for two hours on the delicate problem of India and Pakistan.

The guards asked him to get down; instead he went a branch higher and when threatened with punishment, declared: I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan, I wish to live in this tree."(Hasan Khalid p -13). The unwillingness of the masses to get displaced from their land is also portrayed by Devendra Issar who argues: "Manto's stories often take place in spaces where borders are erased and consciousness loses its bearings, where sanity and insanity, health and sickness, moral goodness and sin cease to be sharply demarcated." (p186).

The story Toba Tek Singh begins with an agreement between the Indian and Pakistani governments to exchange the Hindu Muslim and Sikh, inmates living in the mental asylums of the both

countries. It was agreed between the diplomats of the two nations that Hindu and Sikh inmates living in Pakistani mental asylums will be sent to India and the Muslim inmates living in India's mental asylums would be sent to Pakistan. A date was fixed and on the scheduled date the Hindu and Sikh inmates from Pakistani mental asylums were transported to the border dividing the two Nations; the mere sanity of this apparently absurd decision was questioned by the insane lunatics who were unable to relate themselves to a land which is both strange and unknown to them. When a Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh: "Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don't even know the language they speak in that country." The man smiled; I know the language of Hindustanis. These devils always strut about it as if they were the lord of earth, "Manto exposes the goofy bellicism instigated as patriotism. He clearly ridicules this false notion of nationhood which was enforced on the mentally unstable people who were quietly spending their lives in the closed boundaries of a mental asylum. Bishan Singh, a Sikh lunatic, the protagonist of the story is also sent to border where this exchange is to take place and it is through him Manto represents the feeling of homelessness and ontological struggle for one's identity amid the chaos that had devastated human and moral values of the so called civilized society. Bishan Singh's defiance to leave the land where his village Toba Tek Singh is situated, reiterates Manto's faith that creation of borders cannot instill patriotic feelings in the minds of masses because they share an existential bond with the land of their birth. The story ends with the death of Bishan Singh, his body collapsing on the ground and lying between the barbed wires that divided India and Pakistan; on a bit of earth, which was claimed by none; which belonged neither to India nor to Pakistan. This concept of identity is also described by Prakash Bodh when he writes, "Bishan Singh's identity is established by his pseudonym, Toba Tek Singh, the name that alludes to the character more often than to his village. By this simple device Manto is able to collapse the individual and communitarian identity." (p14). Prakash Bodh in this essay draws a connection between the individual identity and the communitarian values. Victims of partition suffered because of the prejudice, religious fanaticism and jingoism of the leaders.

His death signifies the end of his search for his individual identity which gets quashed in the struggle between geography and cartography. His village Toba Tek Singh has not moved geographically; it is still situated at the place where it used to be but because of the changes in the maps and drawing of the new borders gets shifted to Pakistan. Bishan Singh, a lunatic, is unable to understand this simple fact and like thousands of other people gets carried away in the tides of this shifting ideology which estranged him from his land. Slowly he loses his identity as Bishan Singh the man, and becomes one with Toba tek Singh, the village. This systematic erasure of his identity as Bishan Singh the man to Toba Tek Singh the village portrays the deep association that he shared with his land. He cannot cope with the

new national identity assigned to him and rejects his new identity as an Indian citizen; for him the concept of nationhood is immaterial; he is loyal to the land of his birth; to the village Toba Tek Singh and denies the new national identity bestowed on him because of partition.

Manto in Toba Tek Singh exemplifies this fact that although India was divided on the basis of the religion of the population but in reality people were connected to each other and shared a peaceful coexistence. When Bishan Singh's relatives stopped visiting him after the partition, his neighbour Fazal Din visited him and informed him about the well-being and whereabouts of his family. The message that he wanted Bishan Singh to communicate to his family members after reaching India clearly depicts that people in reality shared a very close bond and were more concerned about their homes, their cattle and the mundane activities of their daily life. Fazal Din his neighbour asked him to tell, "Bhai Balbir Singh that Fazal Din is well by the by the grace of God. The two brown buffaloes he left behind are well too. Both of them gave birth to calves but unfortunately one of them died after six days". (Khalid Hasan p16). It shows that when top bureaucrats of both the nations were worried about the political future of their countries, then people were concerned about the mundane realities of their common life, relationships between human beings does not develop on the basis of their communal identities rather it is the basic feeling of love and compassion that binds them together.

Manto's Toba Tek Singh is a saga of triumph of a common man over the petty issues of communalism, nationhood and national identity. Bishan Singh's death is tragic but it clearly portrays the strength of a common man who refuses to bow down to the politics of border and ultimately dies on a piece of land which belongs to no one. Through Bishan Singh Manto asserts this fact that borders are drawn on maps but people cannot be forced to believe in these man-made political boundaries. Partition not only created new nations but also created new identities which created havoc in the lives of the people. Manto in Toba Tek Singh showed how the partition had become a metaphor for the post-independence communal divide. The story in short talks about the trauma and chaos experienced by the people who painstakingly searched for themselves in their new identities.

### **Conclusion**

The paper concludes by asserting that people cannot be divided on the basis of their religion, the land can be divided on papers but people cannot be obligated to develop a sudden emotional bonding with the land on the basis of their communal identity. Partition was one of the most unfortunate incidents of human history and the story Toba Tek Singh clearly portrays the tragic reality of this forced division and explores the struggle for ontological existence of a human being.

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