Abstract

*Toba Tek Singh* is a catchy story that depicts the individual’s identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. It 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. In *Toba Tek Singh*, through the character of Bishen 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*.

Key Words

Partition, trauma, identity, madness,

According to Alok Bhalla (editor of one major collection of partition stories), 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.” Saadat HassanManto, 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. Manto once said “When I sat down to write I found my mind in a confused state. However much I tried, I could not separate India from Pakistan or Pakistan from India. My mind was invaded by the same puzzling question again and again; will the literature of Pakistan be different? If so how? Who has the claim to what was written in undivided India? Will that be divided as well?”(Page 29, Asauddin) It is this state of confusion that Manto has depicted in of his finest short stories Toba Tek Singh, where he not only questions the border between India and Pakistan, but also has skilfully criticises the evil consequences of partition upon society.

Partition of India was a cataclysmic event that had immense impact on country’s society, culture and literature. It was a kind of trauma that annihilated the lives of common people. While describing the massacre of partition Khalid Hasan writes - “The great tragedy of the partition of India lay in the sectarian and religious bloodletting which preceded and followed it. To this day, it is not known with any degree of accuracy of how many people on both sides of the divide were massacred in cold blood. Savagery such as that witnessed at the time of partition as few parallels in history. A fierce madness seems to have taken whole of people who had lived together for centuries and, barring occasional and limited violence, in a spirit of mutual tolerance and understanding. In 1947, something snapped. The holocaust of partition was in a way more horrifying than the extermination of European Jews by the Nazis. It was the third reach which undertook the liquidation of Jews population as a matter of state policy. The machinery of the state was paced into service to accomplish this grisly task. It was organized and meticulously planned killing. In the subcontinent, it was not the state which killed people but the people themselves who became the pearl perpetrators of a vast and macabre drama of death. Overnight, civilized citizen turned into demented killer. Neighbours and friends killed friends. Reprisals were wide spread. If a hundred men were reported killed by one community, the other community made sure that it doubled the score. There were no holds barred. Women became worst victims of partition. Hundred upon thousands of them were raped killed or abducted. No one was spared, not given children and old people. Whole neighbourhoods entire village were set on fire and the feeling, screaming inmates chased and turn to death with improvised weapons. No one has been able to make sense of that madness. It is clear that not only individuals but entire communities can go insane.” (page xii-xiii, Hasan)

According to Khuswant Singh, partition was the major catastrophe that divided the Indian literature in pre-partition and post-partition categories. All scholars would more or less agree
to 1947 being the defining point in the history not only of India and Pakistan, but also of narratives speaking of nation and national identity. It was such a major event in history that compelled common lives to rethink about their own existence and identity. Manto’s story Toba Tek Singh tries to depict that traumatised condition of partition, which played a significant role in distancing men from men, land from land by drawing the barrier between India and Pakistan.

In an article entitled as ‘Memories of Partition: Revisiting Saadat Hasan Manto’ Sudha Tiwari argues that “the metaphor of madness and the theme of identity-crisis recurs often in the discourse on Partition, whether conventional historiography or fictional representation. The nationalist leaders were often heard saying, “Our people have gone mad.” Gandhi appealed to the people not to “meet madness with madness”. The newspaper editors said so, and so did ordinary men and women. Partition not only created a “mad” atmosphere but also made its victims “mad”, “insane”, losing their mental balances due to traumatic experiences. People in both the territories were confused about their identities, about their geographical and political identities, and about their citizenship as well. Manto merges these two themes and creates Toba Tek Singh. Toba Tek Singh has become a symbol of the confused and torn identities arising from separation from one’s ancestral home. He wins over those who “claim to be sane” and who want to fix his identity, as his death takes place in no-man’s-land, where the writ of neither nation prevails.” (page 55, Tiwari)

The story begins with an image of the Partition and ridiculing political “leaders on both sides and reflecting the confusion of identity. For example an inmate named Muhammad Ali, who fancies 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 1997: 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, but who 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.” (page 55, Tiwari)

The phrase, “lay Toba Tek Singh”, refers both to the man stretched out on the ground and to
the piece of ground itself, which has become for him “the homeland” Toba Tek Singh, where
he wanted to be. In other words, Toba Tek Singh is Manto’s symbolic rejection of the division
of the country and his considered comment on the mindlessness of it. To quote Gilmartin,
“The desperate attempt to maintain the linking of place, ancestry, sanctity, and moral order was
cast against the backdrop of a fixed Partition of territory that symbolically torn these linkages
asunder. No work of literature encapsulates this more dramatically than Saadat Hasan Manto’s
Urdu short story, “Toba Tek Singh”. (quoted from Tiwari.56)

According to some critics, Bishen Singh, the principal character of the story, is an instrument
for Manto through which he exposes the cataclysmic consequences of partition that devastated
the lives of so many innocents of the time. He is an epitome of Manto’s criticism of the
contemporary political decision that was meant for nothing. The decision brought nothing
change in common lives except making them homeless, penniless. It played a significant part
in drawing the unbridgeable barrier between India and Pakistan, between Hindus and Muslims.
The question that haunts Bishen Singh, that is, “Where is Toba Tek Singh?” is actually the
question that traumatised Manto for not being able to resolve the confusion between India and
Pakistan. As he himself writes in a letter- “My heart is steeped in sorrow today. A strange
melancholy has descended on me. Four and a half years ago, when I said goodbye to my second
home, Bombay, I had felt the same way. I was sad at leaving a place where I had spent so many
days of a hard-working life. That piece of land had offered shelter to a family reject and it had
said to me, ‘you can be happy here on two pennies a day or on ten thousand rupees a day, if
you wish. You can also spend your life here as the unhappiest man in the world. You can do
what you want. No one will find fault with you. Nor will anyone subject you to moralizing.
You alone will have to accomplish the most difficult of tasks and you alone will have to make
every important decision of your life. You may live on the footpath or in a magnificent palace;
it will not matter in the least to me. You may leave or you may stay, it will make no difference
to me. I am where I am and that is where I will remain.” (quoted from Mumbai Fable)

Manto’s stories often deal with the problem of marginalized, who were the most passive
sufferer of partition. Being an eye witness of the massacre, he saw the violent side of it. He
realized the very truth that the consequences of partition were more upon the poor sections of
the society. These sections were ill-treated as dogs and were often used as a commodity, free
to use in order to serve the purpose. In other words his short stories open the façade of the consequences of partition to make us understand the terror-like situations and also compel us to feel how violence affects language by working as a barrier to prevent the medium through which human beings express agony and ecstasy. As Das and Nandy writes- “It was the genius of Manto to have created the form through which the deafening silence accompanying the trauma of being simultaneously the subject, object, and instrument of violence could be represented. We hope scholars will be stimulated into examining this kind of literature for understanding the theoretical constructions within which violence may be located in human societies.” (quoted from Tiwari.56)

Stephen Alter in one of his essays, “Madness and Partition: The Short Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto” says: - “No writer has been able to convey the violent ambiguities of communal conflict with as much force and conviction as Saadat Hasan Manto. Many of his short stories focus on the sense of despair and dislocation caused by the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947. Man to vividly recreates the anger and horrors of this period and the trauma of refugees uprooted and victimized by the delineation of arbitrary borders. As the characters in Manto's stories confront the ruthless inhumanity of Hindu-Muslim violence murder, rape and mutilation-their only conceivable response is madness.” (quoted from Nisar.9727)

**Toba Tek Singh** is a catchy story that depicts the individual’s identity crisis caused due to the trauma of partition. Though the story is set in an asylum, Manto’s artistic touch provides the asylum a metaphoric meaning. Scholars have argued that Manto has deliberately taken the lunatic asylum as the setting of his story for 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, by delineating the sanity of the insane in asylum, 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. According to a scholar the “lunatics, in the asylum of Lahore, stand as an epitome of a harmonious community that is governed *by a world*, without any overarching tropes of nationhood and religious differences. A small community of theirs is an indirect satire on the sane society whose trifle rationale makes them actually saner than the lunatics in the madhouse. Bishen Singh exemplifies a world without the bars and boundaries, who 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 Bishen 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.” (page 9731, Nisar)

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 Bishen 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 Bishen Singh, who understands nothing except Toba Tek Singh. In other words, in a story like Toba Tek Singh, through the character of Bishen 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.

References

