
Revisiting Partition through Madness: Humanity, Trauma, and Resistance in Manto's "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract

This paper revisits the Partition of India through the symbolic and narrative framework of madness in Saadat Hasan Manto's seminal short story "Toba Tek Singh", arguing that insanity functions not merely as a psychological condition but as a profound ethical and political commentary on history. Set in a Lahore mental asylum during the post-Partition exchange of inmates between India and Pakistan, the story foregrounds the absurdity of newly drawn borders by placing them in dialogue with the fractured yet deeply humane consciousness of the so-called mad. The paper contends that Manto deliberately collapses the distinction between sanity and madness to expose the deeper irrationality embedded in nationalist politics, administrative logic, and the violent reordering of human lives.

By focusing on characters who are unable—or unwilling—to comprehend the logic of Partition, the narrative reveals how trauma disrupts language, memory, and identity. Bishan Singh's persistent questioning about the location of "Toba Tek Singh" and his eventual refusal to choose between India and Pakistan are read as expressions of existential trauma and moral resistance. His final act of lying down in the no-man's-land is interpreted as a powerful symbolic gesture that rejects imposed national identities and asserts a liminal space of humanity beyond borders. The paper further examines how Manto uses dark humour, irony, and fragmented speech to articulate the inexpressible violence of Partition, suggesting that madness becomes the only truthful response to an insane historical moment.

Ultimately, this study positions "Toba Tek Singh" as a critique of modern nationhood and bureaucratic rationality, demonstrating how Manto reclaims ethical clarity through the voices of the marginalized. Madness, in this reading, emerges as a site of resistance and human truth, allowing the narrative to mourn loss, register trauma, and affirm dignity in the face of one of the subcontinent's most devastating historical ruptures.

Keywords: partition literature; nation-state; political borders; displacement; trauma; madness; resistance; postcolonial identity; human dignity; cartographic violence; bureaucratic power; allegory; communal history; etc.

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 constitutes not merely a political division of territory but a profound rupture in human consciousness, ethics, and social memory. The hurried drawing of borders between India and Pakistan resulted in the displacement of nearly fifteen million people and the deaths of over a million, leaving behind a legacy of trauma that continues to haunt the subcontinent's cultural imagination. Literature emerging from Partition consistently grapples with the challenge of representing this violence without reducing it to spectacle. In this context, madness frequently appears as a recurring trope, offering writers a language through which the irrationality of history itself can be confronted. Among all Partition narratives, Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" stands out for transforming insanity into a site of moral clarity rather than psychological deficit.

Partition fiction often exposes how ordinary lives are shattered by abstract political decisions taken far from the ground realities of those affected. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* provides one of the most candid assessments of the violence unleashed by communal politics when it states, "The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured" (Bobb). This refusal to assign moral superiority to either nation destabilizes nationalist histories and foregrounds shared culpability. Similarly, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* depicts communal riots as driven less by ideology than by fear, rumour, and manipulation, revealing how quickly social order collapses into chaos. These narratives suggest that Partition was marked by a collective loss of reason, a breakdown in ethical judgment that transformed neighbours into enemies. Partition literature repeatedly returns to the problem of representing violence that exceeds the limits of rational explanation. In this context, silence, fragmentation, and madness emerge as dominant narrative strategies. *Clear Light of Day*, though not a conventional Partition novel, captures the long psychological aftermath of 1947 within the domestic sphere. Desai underscores the persistence of trauma when she observes that historical rupture leaves behind "a wound that time did not heal" (Desai 92). This emphasis on lingering psychological damage resonates with Manto's portrayal of trauma as unresolved and non-linear in "Toba Tek Singh".

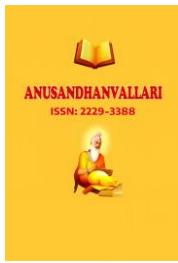
A more direct engagement with Partition appears in *Pinjar*, where bodily displacement and identity loss become central concerns. Pritam articulates the disintegration of self-caused by forced migration when the protagonist reflects on her fractured sense of belonging: "I am neither of this side nor that" (Pritam 147). This statement echoes Bishan Singh's existential predicament, reinforcing the idea that Partition produces subjects who exist in liminal spaces beyond national categorization.

Together, these texts situate "Toba Tek Singh" within a broader literary tradition that foregrounds psychological rupture rather than historical resolution. While Desai emphasizes the endurance of trauma across generations and Pritam focuses on gendered displacement, Manto radicalizes this tradition by locating ethical clarity within madness itself. These intertextual echoes strengthen the argument that "Toba Tek Singh" is not an isolated narrative but a foundational text that redefines how Partition, trauma, and humanity are imagined in South Asian literature.

It is precisely this collapse of reason that Manto literalizes by situating "Toba Tek Singh" within a mental asylum. The story revolves around the exchange of lunatics between India and Pakistan, a bureaucratic exercise that mirrors the larger displacement of populations during Partition. By presenting characters who are officially categorized as insane, Manto inverts dominant notions of sanity and madness. The inmates' confusion regarding national borders reflects not intellectual deficiency but the sheer absurdity of political logic imposed upon lived reality. Bishan Singh's repeated question—where does Toba Tek Singh belong?—becomes a haunting reminder that places, memories, and identities cannot be neatly aligned with cartographic lines.

Manto's aesthetic philosophy further illuminates this strategy. In his essay "Why I Write," he unapologetically defends the disturbing nature of his stories, asserting, "If you cannot bear these stories, then it is because we live in unbearable times" (Manto 194). This statement is central to understanding "Toba Tek Singh", where madness functions as a truthful response to an unbearable historical moment. Language fractures, logic disintegrates, and silence becomes more expressive than coherent speech—reflecting the psychological trauma inflicted by Partition. Bishan Singh's eventual refusal to move to either India or Pakistan and his collapse in the no-man's-land between the two nations emerges as a silent yet radical act of resistance against imposed identities.

While Partition literature repeatedly exposes the moral collapse of society in 1947, "Toba Tek Singh" distinguishes itself by refusing to narrate violence in conventional realist terms. Instead, Saadat Hasan Manto displaces the historical trauma of Partition onto the enclosed space of a mental asylum, turning madness into both a narrative device and a philosophical position. The asylum becomes a microcosm of the newly divided subcontinent,



governed by rules that appear orderly yet are fundamentally absurd. Through this setting, Manto demonstrates that the logic of nationhood itself is indistinguishable from insanity when measured against human suffering.

The story's most devastating insight emerges in its closing image, where the exchange of lunatics reaches its bureaucratic conclusion but meaning collapses entirely. As Bishan Singh refuses to move to either side, Manto describes the final spatial arrangement in stark, minimalist prose, "On one side, behind barbed wire, was India and on the other side, behind barbed wire, was Pakistan. In between, on a stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh" (Manto 10).

This unnamed strip of land becomes the ethical center of the narrative. Bishan Singh's body occupies a liminal space that resists cartographic logic, transforming no-man's-land into a site of moral protest. His silence is more articulate than the speeches of officials, suggesting that refusal itself can be a form of resistance. In this moment, madness ceases to signify disorder and instead exposes the inhuman rationality of political borders.

Manto's treatment of insanity closely aligns with philosophical critiques of institutionalized reason, particularly those articulated by Michel Foucault. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault argues that madness is not merely a medical condition but a category produced by systems of power that define normality and deviance. He observes that modern society confines madness in order to preserve the illusion of rational order, writing that the asylum functions as "a place where madness is silenced by reason" (Foucault 241). Manto's asylum operates in precisely this manner: the inmates are segregated not because they lack humanity, but because their presence threatens the fragile coherence of a world built on artificial divisions.

Seen through this philosophical lens, Bishan Singh's incoherent speech and physical resistance challenge what Foucault terms the "monologue of reason." His persistent refusal to accept national labels destabilizes the authority of the state and its institutions. The irony is unmistakable: the so-called sane administrators efficiently relocate bodies across borders without regard for memory, belonging, or identity, while the madman alone remains faithful to place and meaning. Madness, therefore, emerges as a counter-discourse—one that exposes the violence masked by bureaucratic rationality.

In Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", madness functions not as a pathological deficiency but as an alternative ethical lens through which the absurdity of the Partition is exposed. By placing the narrative inside a mental asylum, Manto destabilizes conventional binaries of reason and unreason. The world outside—the domain of states, borders, and bureaucratic order—is shown to be more irrational than the confined space labelled as insanity.

The inmates' confusion about national identity highlights the artificiality of the political borders drawn in 1947. While state officials uncritically accept the partition of Punjab and the division of citizenship, Manto's "lunatics" repeatedly question and resist this logic. This inversion suggests that madness holds moral insight absent from the so-called rational world. One of the most frequently cited expressions of this linguistic and cognitive collapse is Bishan Singh's repetitive utterance, "upar di gur gur di annexe di bedhiyana di moong di daal of the lantern" (Manto 5). On the surface, this line appears to be random, nonsensical speech. Trauma theory, however, provides a deeper reading: extreme psychological rupture disrupts coherent language, scattering words into fragments. Bishan Singh's speech can thus be read as the embodied result of psychological dislocation, resisting narrativization. His breakdown of syntax mirrors the breakdown of community, memory, and identity experienced by millions during Partition. Despite his fractured speech, Bishan Singh retains one unshakable attachment: his homeland of Toba Tek Singh. His persistent question— "Toba Tek Singh kis mulk mein hai?"— repeatedly underscores his refusal to accept top-down nationhood imposed by arbitrary lines on a map. This insistence on place undermines the logic of geopolitical authority. The climactic description of the asylum grounds further emphasizes the moral disorientation of national politics, "In between, on that stretch of land which had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh"

(Manto 10). Here, the “no name” space becomes the ethical centre of the narrative—an unclaimed zone where Bishan Singh’s body resists subjection to state categories. His collapse between borders symbolically rejects the coerced redefinition of identity through colonial political logic.

Manto’s portrayal resonates with trauma scholars like Cathy Caruth, who argue that traumatic experiences resist orderly narration and rupture language itself, “Trauma, by definition, is not locatable in the simple timeline of the past.” (Caruth 4). In “Toba Tek Singh”, madness performs this resistant function; it bears witness to what cannot be fully spoken, understood, or neatly categorized by rational discourse. Madness, therefore, becomes the narrative form that most accurately conveys the ethical and psychological devastation of Partition.

In “Toba Tek Singh”, the violence of Partition is not staged through graphic scenes of bloodshed but through the quieter, more insidious mechanisms of bureaucracy. Saadat Hasan Manto shifts attention from mobs and massacres to files, orders, and administrative decisions, revealing how institutional rationality itself becomes a tool of dehumanization. The exchange of lunatics between India and Pakistan is presented as a routine governmental exercise, yet it mirrors the larger bureaucratic processes through which millions of people were uprooted, classified, and reassigned identities during Partition.

The mental asylum functions as a microcosm of the modern nation-state. It is governed not by empathy or moral reflection but by procedure and compliance. Inmates are reduced to numbers, diagnoses, and national affiliations, their personal histories rendered irrelevant. The officials responsible for implementing the exchange never question whether the decision makes ethical sense; their concern is limited to execution. This absence of moral deliberation highlights how bureaucratic systems operate by dispersing responsibility, allowing individuals to participate in violence without confronting its consequences.

This phenomenon aligns closely with Hannah Arendt’s analysis of bureaucracy as a form of domination. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that bureaucratic governance replaces personal accountability with rule-bound obedience, creating conditions in which harmful actions are carried out “as a matter of duty” rather than intention (Arendt 244). Manto’s story anticipates this insight by illustrating how Partition-era administration transformed displacement into an impersonal, almost mechanical process. Violence becomes normalized precisely because it is procedural.

What makes Manto’s critique particularly powerful is his exposure of the paradox at the heart of bureaucratic rationality. While the state categorizes asylum inmates as insane, it insists on their strict national classification, as if nationality were an essential and self-evident identity. The demand that lunatics be sorted into Indian and Pakistani citizens reveals the absurd absolutism of nationalist logic. In insisting on coherence where none can exist, the state exposes its own irrationality. Bureaucracy, far from representing reason, emerges as a system that enforces abstraction at the cost of lived reality.

Furthermore, Manto suggests that bureaucratic violence is more enduring and dangerous than spontaneous communal violence. Riots may erupt and subside, but administrative decisions leave lasting scars by reorganizing lives permanently. The exchange of lunatics symbolizes how the state exercises power over bodies that cannot resist or even comprehend the rationale behind such decisions. In this sense, Toba Tek Singh critiques not only Partition but the foundational logic of modern governance, which privileges order, documentation, and borders over human continuity.

By foregrounding bureaucratic violence, Manto reframes Partition as an institutional catastrophe rather than merely a communal one. The story demonstrates that the most devastating effects of Partition were not produced solely by hatred in the streets but by rational systems that rendered displacement ordinary and suffering invisible. In exposing the cold efficiency with which identities are reassigned and bodies relocated, Toba Tek Singh reveals

how the modern nation-state, in its pursuit of order, can enact profound moral violence while appearing entirely reasonable.

Partition literature consistently registers a profound collapse of moral order, social coherence, and ethical judgment. Across languages and regions, writers represent this historical rupture through images of violence, silence, fragmentation, and psychological disorientation. Madness, whether explicitly named or implicitly embedded in narrative structures, emerges as a recurring response to the enormity of Partition. However, the function of madness differs sharply across texts. When read comparatively, “*Toba Tek Singh*” distinguishes itself by transforming madness into a form of ethical resistance, whereas other Partition narratives foreground collective violence and moral breakdown.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Partition is filtered through the perspective of a child narrator, Lenny, whose gradual loss of innocence mirrors the moral corrosion of society. Madness here manifests not through institutionalized insanity but through sudden, shocking transformations in ordinary individuals. The Ice-Candy-Man himself undergoes a radical psychological shift, turning from a humorous street figure into a violent zealot consumed by revenge. Reflecting on this transformation, the narrator observes, “I have seen men change into beasts.” (Sidhwa 119)

This line encapsulates the novel’s vision of Partition as a process that unleashes latent brutality, eroding ethical restraint. Madness in *Ice-Candy-Man* is collective and contagious; it spreads through rumor, grief, and communal hatred, engulfing individuals who were once humane. Violence becomes a socially sanctioned response, and moral responsibility dissolves within group identity. A comparable representation of collective irrationality appears in *Tamas*, where riots erupt without clear origin or purpose. Sahni repeatedly emphasizes the senseless momentum of violence, suggesting that once unleashed, it operates independently of reason. At one point, the narrative starkly acknowledges, “Nobody knew who had started it. Nobody knew why.” (Sahni 87)

This absence of causality underscores the irrational force driving Partition violence. In both *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Tamas*, madness functions metaphorically—as a social condition marked by fear, imitation, and ethical collapse. Individuals participate in violence not because they are inherently cruel, but because rational judgment is overwhelmed by historical hysteria.

Manto’s *Toba Tek Singh* departs radically from these portrayals. Rather than depicting society as collectively mad, Manto confines madness within the asylum, thereby isolating it as a distinct narrative space. This containment allows him to reverse moral expectations: those deemed insane refuse violence and question borders, while the external world unquestioningly enacts displacement and exclusion. Unlike the mobs in Sidhwa and Sahni, Manto’s lunatics do not kill, riot, or seek revenge; instead, they express confusion, irony, and resistance.

Most importantly, Manto individualizes trauma through Bishan Singh, condensing the historical catastrophe of Partition into a single resistant body. While *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Tamas* show how madness leads to participation in violence, “*Toba Tek Singh*” presents madness as withdrawal from it. Bishan Singh’s refusal to choose between India and Pakistan contrasts sharply with the violent choices made by characters in other Partition narratives. His madness is solitary, silent, and ethical rather than aggressive or contagious.

Literary critics have noted that Manto’s Partition stories resist nationalist consolation by foregrounding moral ambiguity and human suffering. Alok Bhalla argues that Manto “refuses to romanticize suffering or assign moral innocence to any side” (Bhalla 12). This refusal is central to *Toba Tek Singh*, where madness becomes a means of exposing the ethical emptiness of political reason. By stripping sanity of its moral authority and relocating humanity within madness, Manto offers a critique far more radical than depictions of violence alone.

Thus, when situated alongside *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Tamas*, “*Toba Tek Singh*” emerges as a uniquely subversive Partition text. Where other narratives document how madness spreads through violence, Manto interrogates the

rational structures that legitimize that violence. His story suggests that the most dangerous form of madness lies not in institutional insanity but in the unquestioned acceptance of borders, identities, and histories imposed through force.

Conclusion

“Toba Tek Singh” offers a profound critique of the Partition of India by dismantling conventional distinctions between sanity and insanity. Through the confined space of the mental asylum and the figure of Bishan Singh, Manto exposes the deeper irrationality of political borders and bureaucratic logic. Madness in the story does not represent intellectual deficiency; instead, it emerges as a form of ethical awareness that resists the violence of imposed national identities.

By foregrounding confusion, repetition, and refusal, Manto captures the psychological trauma and moral disorientation produced by Partition. Bishan Singh’s inability to align himself with either India or Pakistan challenges the assumption that belonging can be reorganized through political decree. His final position between borders symbolizes a rejection of nationalist rationality and affirms a humanity rooted in memory, place, and lived experience rather than abstract statehood.

When read alongside other Partition narratives, “Toba Tek Singh” stands apart for transforming madness into a site of resistance rather than participation in violence. The story ultimately suggests that in moments of historical catastrophe, ethical clarity may survive not within systems of power but at their margins. Manto’s narrative thus remains a powerful reminder that the true madness of Partition lay not in fractured minds, but in the unquestioned acceptance of borders drawn at the cost of human dignity.

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