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Madness Ensued: Exploring the upshot of Partition in *Toba Tek Singh* and *Thirst of Rivers*

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Abstract: The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 turned up as one of the most tragic incidents in the history of mankind. The politics of religious difference was targeted and it accordingly violated the unity between Hindus and Muslims in the undivided India. About twelve million people were exchanged between the two newly-born nation-states against their will and more than ten million people were uprooted from their own land. Accompanied by dislocation and migration, there were about 75,000 women who were abducted and raped and about 50,000 children who were affected by the sheer convulsion caused due to the partition.

Keywords: Partition, dislocation, insanity, memory, Toba Tek Singh, Bebe.

The movement for India's freedom against the British Empire took its peak during the World War II. The incidents like the failure of the Cripps Mission, the Quit India movement of 1942 and the struggle of Azad Hind Fauj stimulated the termination of the British Empire. These incidents forced the British to transmit the power to India, but it eventually led to the conflict between the Congress Party and the Muslim League. After the discussions with the leaders of both the parties, Lord Mountbatten presented his proposal for dividing the subcontinent into two separate nation-states: India and Pakistan. The decision to divide India was declared on June 3, 1947 and the following resolutions were taken: i) People of the Muslim-dominated areas of India can establish a free and independent province of their own; ii) Bengal and Punjab provinces will be divided according to religion; iii) The future of the North-West province will be decided through a plebiscite and iv) A Commission will be formed to settle the border of divided Bengal and Punjab. Sardar Ballabhbai Patel and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru were the principal figures of the Congress Party to support the decision of dividing the country because since 1946 they had realized that it was not possible to lead the government with the Muslim League as there had been impasse in the



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activities of the interim government. On July 18, 1947, the British Parliament granted the independence law of India. In the midnight of August 14, 1947, a meeting of the Constituent Assembly took place in Delhi. It declared the full independence of India and along with that the British rule of about 200 years came to an end, India won her independence on August 15, 1947. Lord Mountbatten and Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the Governor Generals of independent India and of independent Pakistan respectively.

India became independent, but it accordingly went through the baffling issues like refugee problem, religious animosity and communal riots that claimed lives of millions of people. Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, who was a witness to the Partition, writes in *India Wins Freedom*: “When partition actually took place, rivers of blood flowed in large parts of the country. Innocent men, women and children were massacred. The Indian Army was divided and nothing could be done to stop the murder of innocent Hindus and Muslims.” (Azad 207) Thus the Partition of 1947 turned up as one of the most tragic events in the history of mankind. It resulted with the devastating consequences for people who were compelled to leave their own land; for families that lost their members due to communal violence; for millions of women who were separated from their clan, were abducted, raped and killed, and also for children who were separated from their parents and were even slaughtered in the communal riot manifested during and after the Partition. The dislocation of people from their native land and their compulsion to settle in a new land entirely alien to them turned out to be crushing to their unflurried lifestyle, making their life ripped with anxiety, nostalgia, insecurity, misgiving as well as madness. While studying how partition impacted on ordinary Hindu, Sikh and Muslim refugees, renowned historian Alok Bhalla observes, “...The migrants did not choose to leave their homes or see themselves as the makers of new nations. Nor did they deliberately gather their household gods and their holy books and move to safer sanctuaries where all they considered sacred would be preserved from the pollution of other... Many who crossed the newly-marked borders, even those who had supported the various demands for separate countries, did not want to leave the places that they had come to regard as their *zameen*, their piece of ground, their home” (Bhalla 4).



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Partition literature, distinctly the short stories depict the distress and affliction of people caused due to dislocation, homelessness and death. In Saadat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh* and Joginder Paul's short story *Thirst of Rivers* the intensity of the idea of madness is recurrent and is treated with great intensity and vividness. The present paper will attempt to study the acute mental torment of two protagonists of the respective stories- Bishen Singh or Toba Tek Singh and Bebe.

Toba Tek Singh is often considered to be the best partition story authored by the renowned Urdu writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto. The story presents a punctilious account of how partition impinged on the lives of common people. Besides, it gives a realistic picture of how this event had affected even the insane folk of the subcontinent. Here Manto makes his readers acquainted with the inmates of a mental asylum in Lahore. This story is a sheer attack on how religious identity acted as the regulating agent to separate the people of the subcontinent into two- Hindus and Muslims. Ayesha Jalal adumbrates the context in which the story was composed, saying that Manto

... stormed the literary circles with "Toba Tek Singh", which he wrote in 1954 after spending time in Lahore's mental asylum for his alcoholism. Regarded as his best partition story, "Toba Tek Singh" is a scathing comment on the absurdity of the division and the policy of the two postcolonial states to split up the inmates of the asylum according to their religious affiliation. Manto's message is searing but clear: the madness of partition was greater than the insanity of all the inmates put together. But beyond partition there were other no less farcical turns in the postcolonial moment that his roving eye, fearless mind, and vibrant pen could not avoid detecting and exposing to the fullest. (Jalal 184-86)

The story begins with a graphic delineation of a number of mentally deranged people in an insane asylum. It has been pointed out earlier that although they were mentally perverted, they were not untouched by the cataclysmic consequences of the erosive effects of the partition. The existing knowledge about their nationality as well as identity produces, after the partition, novel and vague persuasion about Hindustan and Pakistan. The conversations among the lunatics about Hindustan or Pakistan or the leaders of the two newly born countries assert that the inmates also are not uninformed about the division of the subcontinent. The story reveals how they have formulated (although vague) the idea of a new country named "Hindustan". A Muslim inmate, when asked by



his fellow inmate where Hindustan is, replies- “It’s a place in Hindustan where they make cut throat razors”. Conversely, a Sikh lunatic also conveys his indignation towards the people of Hindustan- “... These Hindustanis are devils and strut about haughtily...” Here both the Muslim and the Sikh lunatics give voice to their exasperation at the partition after which the Hindu inmates in Pakistan are resolved to be sent to Hindustan and the Muslim lunatics are decided to be kept in Pakistan. All these illustrate the sense of enmity that partition has effectuated even in the mind of the inmates. The story expounds the actual status of the inmates in an elaborate way:

... These men had some vague notions about why Hindustan had been partitioned and what Pakistan was, but they did not know the whole story... All they knew was that there was a man named Muhammad Ali Jinnah whom people called Qaed-e-a’zam, the Great Leader. And he had created a new land for the Muslims called Pakistan.

However, they did not know a thing about its actual location and its boundaries. That is why all the inmates of the asylum who weren’t completely insane were thoroughly confused about whether they were in Hindustan or Pakistan. If they were in Hindustan, then where was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how was it possible that only a short while ago they had been in Hindustan, when they had not moved from the place at all? (Saint 64-65)

Muhammad Umar Memon observes that the border line initiated by the politicians only proves their unscrupulousness because people were dislocated due to the oppressive circumstances; their migration was not to build a new nation or a better country. He writes,

“Manto’s “Toba Tek Singh” has become a metaphor for the utter absurdity and mindlessness of the entire exercise of Partition. The eponymous story is a devastating indictment of amateur statesmen and unscrupulous politicians who draw shadow line boundaries between peoples and countries. Their actions are so insane that even the hard core lunatics of an asylum seem much wiser than them ...” (Menon 33)

The story records the mental deportment of the inmates in a very distinct manner. Apart from the titular character Manto’s presentation of other inmates is apt to capture their abject plight and threatened existence menaced by the partition. There is, in the story, a Maulvi Sahib, who expresses his view about Pakistan- “It’s a place in Hindustan where they make cut throat razors”; there is the



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Sikh lunatic who calls the Hindustanis as “ devils”; there is the Muslim lunatic who “raised the slogan “Pakistan Zindabad” with such gusto that he slipped on the floor and faints; the lunatic who declared, “I want to live in neither Hindustan nor Pakistan ... I’d rather live on this tree.” ; the Muslim radio engineer; a fat Muslim lunatic from Chiniot named Muhammad Ali, who was once “an energetic leader of the Muslim League” and now “declared in his enclosure that he was Muhammad Ali Zinnah, the Qaed-e-a’zam”; a Sikh lunatic who “styled himself Master Tara Singh”. There is the young Hindu lawyer, who became insane for his failed love affair. He is once again jeopardized because if he is now sent to Hindustan, the present province of his beloved, his practice will not prosper there. The problem of the two Anglo-Indian lunatics is, apart from others, unlike altogether; they are shocked to think about their future condition in the asylum- “Would the European Ward be there or done away with? Would they be served breakfast anymore? And, instead of Western style bread, would they be forced to swallow the “bloody Indian Chapatti?” All these ideas and gestures of the inmates, as portrayed in the story affirm the greatness of Manto as a writer who could depict the affected mental condition of these people. Muhammad Umar Memon rightly comments about Manto’s proficient treatment of human psychology:

The areas of human experience and the liminal spaces that he focused on relentlessly, shocked people out of their complacency into a new awareness of the reality around them. This is particularly true in the context of his writings about the partition of India. Among all the creative writers who wrote on the theme of partition, Manto stands apart. He alone had the capacity to take a hard, impassioned look at the slaughter and senseless violence let loose on the eve of India’s independence, without ideological blinkers, pious posturing or the slightest trace of communal prejudice ... Moreover, Manto had the courage to probe the innermost recesses of the human mind and expose some of the dark forces and the pressing urges that lie dormant there. The sudden eruption of these forces at critical moments causes great damage both to the individual and society. (Menon 9-10)

Bishen Singh, the titular character is called “Toba Tek Singh” after the name of the village where he belonged to. In a disorderly situation when people are forced to leave their homeland, Bishen Singh’s frantic search for his own land becomes symbolic of the attempts of thousands of



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people to return to their roots. The imaginary border line drawn between the two newly born countries turns out to be the symbol of a barrier, resisting people of both sides to feel kinship with each other. Bishen Singh's blurted out phrase- "Upar digurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of Vahe Guruji da Khalsa and Vahe Guruji ki Fateh ... jo boley so nihaal sat sri akaal." is the validation of the fact that the divergence of the existence of God and Allah- the two Supreme Beings of Hinduism and Islam has ingrained even in the minds of the inmates. Bishen Singh is also conscious of the fact that a solution is possible only by a Sikh God- "the knotty issue" cannot be resolved by a Muslim God. So he thinks, "He would have surely listened to his request if he had been the God of the Sikhs."

Bishen Singh is the individual who cannot remember Fazal Deen, a friend from his village, not even his daughter Roop Kaur, but the only thing he can remember is the name of his village-Toba Tek Singh. At present uprooted, he asks everybody where Toba Tek Singh is. A sense of his alienation is further intensified as he has the knowledge of the country's division- being a Hindu whether he will be able to return to his village at all if it is now in Pakistan. And his concern proves true as Fazal Deen answers that Toba Tek Singh is "In Hindustan ... No, no, it's in Pakistan." Bishen Singh, though mentally aberrant, now can realize the obvious- he will be sent to Hindustan as he is a Sikh. He also becomes aware that his ardour to return to his roots will remain unrealized. So, in total desperation, he mutters in his own manner- "Opar di gurgur di annexe di bay dhiana di mung di daal of the Pakistan and Hindustan of the dur fitey munh."

The closing section of the story depicts the moment of exchange of the inmates in a graphic manner - "Some just refused to budge from their place. Those who agreed to come out were difficult to manage, as they ran off in all directions. The naked ones among them tore off their clothes as soon as they were made to put them on. If one called names, another burst into a song. While some fought, others cried and wailed. It was difficult to hear anything in the fracas. Female lunatics made their own noises..." At the moment of exchange they became the nowhere people "because they could not make out why they were being uprooted from their homes." Bishen Singh's death at the end of the story once again reveals his futile as well as silent protest against the



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exchange which is the other name of uprooting people from their own land. Umar Menon substantiates his view about the story in the following words:

Toba Tek Singh? Toba Tek Singh ... Oh yes, the name rings a loud bell in the minds of the people of the subcontinent. The reader vividly recalls the “demented” Sikh lying between the barbed wires marking the borders of India and Pakistan, in the so-called “no man’s land”, refusing to accept the division of the country. The image captivates one’s mind. This image, which has been seen repeatedly in the many dramatized and film versions of the story, would do credit to a famous painter like Van Gogh or Degas. It is the image of a nowhere man, an existential exile, a marginal man whose fate is decided by the politics of attrition indulged in by shortsighted politicians... (Menon 9)

The other story which will be discussed in this paper is Joginder Paul’s *Dariyaon Pyas* (translated into English as *Thirst of Rivers*). Joginder Paul (1925-2016) is one of the esteemed writers of the partition that separated him from his own homeland. Being a victim himself of the partition, he could pen down the nostalgia and one’s yearning to return to his homeland. Among his much known short stories like *Dharti ka lal* (1961), *Main kyun socum* (1962), *Mati ka idrak* (1970), *Khudu Baba ka maqbara* (1994), *Parinde* (2000), *Bastiyan* (2000), *Dariyaon Pyas*, although less known, claims a special acknowledgement. In this story the motif of madness is outlined through the character of Bebe. Initially written in Urdu as *Dariyaon Pyas* this short story was published in a collection of Paul’s short stories entitled *Bay Muhavara* in 1978.

The story opens with the graphic description of the old protagonist, Bebe, who is seen with “wrinkles on her face, burdened and heavy from the course of events, seem to have slid off and embedded themselves into the gnarled wood of the charpoy legs, so much so that one can imagine the age old wood now completely in the clutches of her wrinkles, at the brink of being crushed by them and about to give way.” Sitting on the cot at the haveli of her son, Bebe’s brain is unceasingly ghosted by the memories of her past- her ancestral haveli, her husband and her son around whom her world revolves. At present rooted out from her own place, “a veil of the past perpetually hangs over” her eyes.



The story is pregnant with Bebe's imaginary conversations with her husband. Partition has forced to leave her haveli where she has left her subsistence. The only thing that makes her to stick to her past is a bunch of keys- "The iron of the keys had grown rounded and fleshy from the weight of the soft abrasion of her fingers for the last fifty years. She can see her soul peering out, in the shape of each key". She can still remember each key- the key to the kitchen, the key to her Munna's study room and the key to her husband's study room. The bunch of keys "has leapt to her fingers of its own volition". "It is as if Bebe, clutching the bunch of keys in her hand, has clasped the old haveli close to her heart". Her husband entreated her time and again to linger to their haveli- "Stay in this haveli till the end... We have been living in this haveli for generations, and on all occasions of marriage and death, our ancestors have assembled here. I too had witnessed them on my marriage. Among them was my late father- looking just the same. The rest were there too... If you stay here, then wherever I may be, I'll be with you. Don't leave this haveli under any circumstance- or we'll be separated..."

Bebe's condition corresponds to that of millions of people of both Hindustan and Pakistan. The vacillating circumstances during and after the partition periled their life. Paul has described the situation in the story- "The motherland has delivered a bundle of pain from her womb. And after giving birth to two blood soaked twins, has breathed her last." Bebe's delirium and her frantic concern to linger to her haveli are similar to that of the mother in M. S. Sathyu's 1973 film *Garam Hava*. Here in this story Bebe's husband initially forbids her to move out of their ancestral haveli, but when circumstances thrust them inexorably to leave the haveli the ghost of her husband also insists her to leave it. Bebe is assured: "You are leaving so you can return again."

Bebe's present existence is filled up with her past memories that resist accepting her present condition. Her attempt to go back to the memories of the past is to realize her own self. At this point she becomes a mad woman. Munna, her son tries to bring her back to reality- "How can I convince you that we have left our haveli, village, and country across the border. We've left them several years ago." He also complains - "...you still dwell there". But Bebe wants to affirm her existence, clinging to her past memories- "... I have only my ancestral haveli". She can visualize her unrealized dream regarding her son and his family with a wife and a child. She is elated to fancy her



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grandson- “his forehead looks exactly like our Munna’s. See, even the chin is similar...” But Munna, her son tries to bring her back to reality- “I often resolve to try each one of your keys and somehow unlock you... Are you aware that no girl is willing to marry me because of your madness?”

The closing part of the story shows Bebe trying to unlock the door, called by the ghost of her husband whom she hears in her dream. She “tries all the keys of the haveli on the lock, in quick succession. The lock, however, refuses to open.” Bebe’s failure to unlock the room becomes symbolic of their futile attempt to go back to their homeland. Ravikant and Tarun K Saint comment about the story-

“The story resonates with many contemporary accounts of neglected old people, traumatized by what they had to undergo, and not given adequate support by the younger family members who faced the pressure of building life anew. The old woman’s rambling utterances and recollections convey the poignancy of her situation. Bebe is unable to unlock the doors of the ancestral haveli, even in her imagination, however many keys she tries. Time itself forecloses this possibility.” (Saint XX-XXI)

India was divided in her Eastern and North-Western areas- Punjab in the North-West and Bengal in the South. It is estimated that over 14 million people were dislocated after the division of the country. Urvashi Butalia evaluates the situation in *The Other Side of Silence*:

“... Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, crops left to rot, villages abandoned. Astonishingly, and despite many warnings, the new governments of India and Pakistan were unprepared for the convulsion: they had not anticipated that the fear and uncertainty created by the drawing of borders based on headcounts of religious identity- so many Hindus versus so many Muslims- would force people to flee to what they considered ‘safer’ places, where they would be surrounded by their own kind.” (Butalia 3)

In the present work the protagonists of the two stories have been studied as representatives of millions of uprooted people who were compelled to leave their homeland after the partition. Both of them are from Punjab which was affected by the partition to a great extent. The sense of loss born due to losing their homeland haunts their life. Bishen Singh’s story is the symbol of the



travesty of independence. His death on the no-man's land asserts his strong protest against the division of the country. Bebe's character has been illustrated to exemplify the actual state of millions of people whose life turned to be an assortment with the memories and nostalgia. Her ineffectual attempts to unlock the room affirm her impuissance to get back to her own haveli, her own land. Bishen Singh and Bebe become the figures for whom the fervent desire to go back to their homeland never gets accomplished. Although people like them had their own land, nobody asked them or took their consent, and the transfer took place. It consequently brought dislocation, migration, nostalgia about the past home and finally, their craving to go back to their roots.

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