

Ontologies of Crisis: Partition Literature and the Shattering of Being in Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*

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Abstract

This article contends that literature produced in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition of British India transcends the boundaries of historical fiction and is better understood as a distinct and visceral form of 'crisis literature'. The Partition wasn't merely a frantic exercise in cartography or a shifting of administrative seats; it was an ontological rupture. It fundamentally altered what it meant to be for millions of people. When faced with the sheer, inexpressible cruelty of that era, such as the mass displacements and a sort of collective, feverish insanity, traditional storytelling fell short. By looking at Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", alongside the grim realities of the 1946 Calcutta Killings and the purgatory of refugee camps, the present research will explore how absurdity, fragmentation, and even silence became the only honest ways to map communal trauma. Literature, in this sense, does something history cannot. While official records track the movement of borders, these stories track the disintegration of the soul.

Keywords: partition literature, crisis literature, trauma theory, absurdity, fragmentation, ontology, saadat hasan manto, collective memory

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Introduction: The Cartography of Trauma

One of the most dramatic disasters of the twentieth century was the partitioning of British India in 1947. It was a time when the Earth's crust seemed to buckle and 'is often tucked away in history books, where it is common to decode the event as a sterile political agreement between the British Raj, the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim League, the reality on the ground tells a different story. This narrative reveals a profound, fundamental wound. It was a time that essentially transformed the psychological and social landscape of South Asia, forming a crisis that was, perhaps, more existential than it was geographical.

The researcher assumes that partition literature can be interpreted as the core of crisis literature, specifically focusing on the ontological break. Ontology is the philosophical science of being. Human existence, in this view, has a very strong foundation in land, community, language, and shared history. The cutting of these roots was done almost at random through the drawing of the Radcliffe Line at night. When this happened, the self was broken. The consequent violence, which led to mass kidnappings, mass killings, 'trains of ghosts', and the displacement of nearly 15 million individuals, was an unspeakable enormity beyond the confines of classic narrative realism.

The insanity of the day could not be contained in the straight, ordering narration by which writers and poets usually hang onto words. The logic of the realist novel, based on a world of cause-and-effect wholeness, went asunder before the illogic of neighbours becoming murderers. It was therefore necessary that writers come up with new literary forms to convey the schizophrenic state of mind of a land partitioned by lines that did not consider human geography. Here, the literature is not simply an account of history. It serves as a space for witnessing and acts as an active agent of trauma that disrupts conventional logic. This paper examines how literary expression in the context of the 1946-1947 atrocities might be the only possible way to express the ontological crisis of Partition.

The Ontological Break: Crisis Beyond Politics

In interpreting Partition as an ontological crisis, the researcher notes that the event destroyed the objectivity of being for the subjects of the subcontinent. The self is closely connected to surrounding conditions. The village square, the ancestral home, the surrounding dialect, and the inter-communal relations that make everyday life are what constitute the self. The self-disintegrates when the environment becomes hostile or intolerant due to a sudden political pronouncement. The partition of 1947 displaced practically all residents of the subcontinent, turning them into "citizens" and their neighbours into 'others'.

This movement was not solely a physical one. It was a break in identity. '*Crisis*' here is rooted in the Greek word '*krisi*', meaning 'a choice' or 'a turning

point', but in the case of 1947, it is the collapse of the known world. Conventional documentary realism cannot reproduce this internal disjunction because realism is based on an uninterrupted narrative. Yet there was a peculiar mental illogic about the partition. The rapid shift of old houses into "enemy territory" and the capriciousness of the border provided a surreal atmosphere in which reality itself appeared to melt.

Trauma philosophers, such as Cathy Caruth, assert that most people do not fully understand or process trauma during its experience. This experience represents a violation of time that the mind endures. Partition literature represents this transgression. When trying to transcend documentary realism, authors such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, and Bisham Sahni proved that the crisis was existential. These writings depict the breaking of being not as a metaphor, but as a literal state of mind amidst such apocalyptic violence. The refugee is not just a homeless person. They are people whose idea of home has been ontologically refused. With that said, this literature serves as a fundamental repository for trauma research as it gathers the history of emotions often found lacking in official archives, which are too preoccupied with numbers and conventions.

Historical Atrocities: Background of the Shattering

To base this literary discussion, there is a need to look at the particular historical disasters that triggered this ontological discontinuity. The most notable of these is the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946. Considered to a large extent the prelude to the Partition, the Calcutta (modern-day Kolkata) bloodshed shattered the very idea of communal coexistence well before the British formally left. The violence of August 1946, sparked by the Muslim League's call for Direct Action Day, left thousands dead and provided a pattern of carnage that would be repeated in Punjab and Bengal the following year. Literature dealing with such events transcends secondary historical reports to address the phenomenology of fear. The riots of 1946 created a haunting progenitor of the larger-scale cataclysmic violence. It turned out that the disintegration of communal identities was not a bureaucratisation but a visceral act of violence. The ontological break, as it would be played out, began on the streets of Calcutta, where the neighbour ceased being the neighbour and instead turned into a representative of an opposing nation-state.

This act was followed by the physical expression of the crisis through the migration of millions to refugee camps. In the atrocities of the refugee camps, people were stripped of their social identities, including their caste, profession, status, and kinship, and degraded into what Giorgio Agamben would term "bare life". This compelled them to experience a permanent condition of flux, residing in grey areas leading to two countries, neither of which felt entirely pertinent. The camps were places of disease, kidnapping, and hopelessness, yet they were also the places where old social classes disintegrated.

Literature about these spaces serves as a form of bearing witness. It makes the cold, dispassionate information of the past a story of personal loss. Crisis literature immerses the reader in the heart of the experience of those ensnared in the machinery. It gives a voice to the silence of the so-called “ghost trains”, trains that bypassed normal stations, carrying slaughtered corpses upon arrival. This is a grotesque spectacle reiterated in partition fiction as the personification of the failure of modernity itself.

The Micro World of Asylum: A Critique of *Toba Tek Singh*

In response to the indescribable gigantism of such a partition, a particular narrative technique was required: absurdity, fragmentation, and satire. These are not merely attempts at aesthetic beauty. Rather, they are narrative means of communal trauma that are necessary components of how one communicates the absurdity of the historical moment. These ideas could not be better expressed than in a text by Saadat Hasan Manto titled *Toba Tek Singh*.

Manto sees absurdity as the sole reasonable reaction to the mental irrelevance of those times. The premise set out by the story is exceedingly satirical. Two or three years after the Partition, the governments of India and Pakistan resolve to swap lunatics just as they had swapped prisoners, according to religious identity. Muslim lunatics will be exported to Pakistan; Hindu lunatics will be exported to India. This clause is a bureaucratic ruling used to provide the final metaphor for how absurd the two-nation theory can be. Should the world beyond the asylum have fallen into the lunacy of sectarian violence, rapes, and fires, Manto proposes that maybe only the asylum can claim any sanity or perspective.

The residents of the asylum in Lahore act as a tragic chorus. The residents of the asylum in Lahore represent the bewilderment of the average man, who cannot comprehend how a piece of paper can separate a nation. One prisoner seeks refuge in a tree and refuses to come down, saying he does not want to live in India or Pakistan but in the tree. A Muslim radio engineer separates completely from his body to avoid the pangs of displacement. Such vignettes are examples of the fragmentation of the self under the influence of political absurdity. But it is Bishan Singh, the protagonist, who acts as the ontological point of the story. Bishan Singh is a Sikh inmate who, having stood on his legs for fifteen years, has one grounding question: “Where is Toba Tek Singh?” His village is Toba Tek Singh. It is his world- the center of himself. He does not pose the question, “Is Toba Tek Singh in Pakistan?” or “Is it in India?” He asks simply, “Where is it?” That statement shows the village is an absolute reality with no reference to the new political labels.

Bishan Singh’s ruthless search reveals the arbitrariness and changeability of the new boundaries. When they question the guards or other inmates, they are unable to provide a simple answer, as the political geography is moving under their feet. One inmate notices that Sialkot, which was in India, is now in

Pakistan. This ontological vertigo is caused by instability. Bishan Singh is a sign of the recalcitrance of human attachment to the land, an attachment that cannot be severed by petty notions of nationhood or dominion.

The Language of Strategic Silence and Fragmentation

The linguistic expression of this crisis is encapsulated in Bishan Singh's well-known, nonsensical refrain: "*Uper the gur gur the annexe the bay dhyana the mung the dal of Pakistan and India dur fittey moun*".

The content of this gibberish has been a point of debate among scholars. However, upon understanding the lack of meaning through the reading of crisis literature, the researcher posits that the absence of meaning itself is the essence of meaning. Language collapses when faced with a crisis that defies rational processing. The sentence is broken like the earth. The mixture of Punjabi, English, and nonsense syllables reflects the chaos of the post-colonial subject. This disruption enables the reader to feel the violence not as a remote past but as a broken, tearful reality. The language does not stick together because the world is divided. Partition literature incorporates the concept of "strategic silences", which represent the borders of trauma. Although Manto relies on noise and gibberish here, other authors, and indeed Manto himself in other stories, rely on silence to confront the most terrible parts of the Partition, specifically sexual violence.

According to *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia, there is an aura of silence in the context of mass abductions and the raping of women during the Partition. Most families repressed these events to preserve their honour. According to Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence*, there is an aura of silence surrounding the mass abduction and sexual violence against women during the Partition. Many of these stories remained hidden because families feared social stigma and dishonour. As Butalia observes, "The silence around Partition was especially deep when it came to women" (Butalia 3). Women's bodies often became symbolic sites of communal conflict and revenge, as she explains that "women's bodies became the terrain on which the honour of the community was fought over" (Butalia 166). Because of these cultural pressures, many survivors were forced into silence, and their experiences were excluded from official histories. Partition literature and oral testimonies become important spaces where these suppressed memories and traumatic histories can finally emerge.

These gaps in the literature serve as tools in narration. The fact that the trauma concerned the violation of women's bodies as a metonym for the violation of the land is often indicated by what is *implied*. The cold, detached narration used by Manto tends to revolve around these horrors, compelling the reader to confront the nothingness. In *Toba Tek Singh*, the silence lies in the interiority of Bishan Singh's emotional life; we never understand what he is thinking, just what he is muttering. This outside perspective looks into the

privacy of his trauma and forces us to observe his pain without fully accessing it.

The No-Man's-Land: An Existential Nothingness

The ontological break is most strongly formed through the climax of *Toba Tek Singh*. When taken to the border at Wagah, where the exchange takes place, Bishan Singh realises that his Pakistani village is called Toba Tek Singh. However, he is being forced into India because he is a Sikh. This clash of two facts, his geographical home and his religious classification, essentially kills him. He is not willing to cross the border. Growing weary of his recalcitrance, the guards leave him standing midway. The story concludes with a ghostly scene: "Behind barbed wire there was Hindustan." In this case, Pakistan was behind this type of barbed wire. On that nameless piece of ground between was Toba Tek Singh.

The crisis of being is the ultimate testimony to the death of Bishan Singh in the no-man's-land. He is neither a part of India nor Pakistan; he is part of the earth of Toba Tek Singh, which no longer exists as a political unit. He was turned into a citizen of nothing. This conclusion refutes the binary reasoning of the Partition (Hindu/Muslim, India/Pakistan) and proclaims the "third space", the space of humanity that is not placed in the new maps. It is a breaking of being in which the subject would actually rather die in a nameless place than live in a world characterised by alienating classifications.

Conclusion

The literature of the Partition is a critical element of trauma studies since it illustrates that a shared crisis may endlessly transform the narrative identity of a culture. It opposes the hyper-teleological approach of history, which presupposes that trauma can be easily remedied, saved, or overcome. Rather, writings such as *Toba Tek Singh* are an indication that the ontological break is still a part of the psyche of the subcontinent, reflecting the ongoing struggles and unresolved traumas that continue to affect the identities of individuals and communities in the region.

The literature acts as a counter-narrative against the government-sponsored histories of India and Pakistan. Where the state joyfully marks Independence, the literature laments Partition. In one aspect, the state talks of nation-building; in the other, the literature talks of soul-destroying. The narrative techniques of fragmentation, absurdity, and silence are open to exploring non-linear and non-healing trauma.

The analysis of these new literary forms shows that the Partition was a crisis of existence per se. It was not a flight of bodies only, but also a flight of souls into an everlasting exile, even for those who never walked abroad. Partition literature continues bearing witness to this fragmentation of humanity through the rejection of traditional realism. It was the illogic of the division that predetermined these extreme forms, ensuring that the voice of the traumatised

subject, the Bishan Singhs of the world, would be saved against the inexpressibility of official history. When reading this literature, the researcher concludes, we are not reading about the past alone; we are dealing with the haunting ghosts of a crisis that still shapes the present.

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