

# Exploring History In The Post-Partition Literature: Shattered Reflections Of Identity Crisis In Short Stories Named Toba Tek Singh And Pali

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## ABSTRACT

The partition of India in 1947 was a seismic event that reshaped the subcontinent, leaving an indelible mark on its people and their sense of identity. This article delves into the profound exploration of altered identities in the wake of this historical cataclysm. Through an in-depth analysis of seminal literary works by distinguished authors such as Bisham Sahani and Saadat Hasan Manto, this study examines the multifaceted narratives that encapsulate the complex tapestry of experiences borne from the partition. Bisham Singh's "Pali" vividly portrays the human toll of the partition and the transformation of identities amidst the chaos. Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" delves into the surreal, probing the boundaries of sanity and identity in the aftermath of the division. This article contends that literature serves as a mirror, reflecting the pain, loss, resilience, and hope that characterized the lives of those who bore witness to the partition. It asserts that these narratives not only provide insight into the past but also serve as a testament to the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity. As we examine these works, it becomes evident that the legacy of the partition continues to influence subsequent generations' understanding of their own identities. "Shattered Reflections" aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of distorted identities through the lens of literature, offering a poignant reminder that even in the darkest moments of

history, individuals find the strength to navigate the complexities of their identities and forge new paths forward.

Keywords: Literature, Displacement, Trauma, Distorted Identities.

### Introduction

The partition of British India in 1947 stands as an indelible scar in the collective memory of the subcontinent. This seismic event not only redrew geographical boundaries but also left an indelible mark on the social and cultural fabric of the region. Amidst the chaos and carnage, a profound transformation of individual and communal identities took place, echoing through the annals of history. This article delves into the intricate web of distorted identities that emerged in the aftermath of India's partition, offering a nuanced perspective through the lens of literature. As the eminent historian Rajmohan Gandhi aptly stated, "Partition was not just the division of land, but the division of souls" (Gandhi, 2020). The psychological trauma inflicted by the partition was profound, leading to a profound reshaping of individual and collective identities. This phenomenon is palpably reflected in the rich tapestry of literature produced in the wake of partition.

Scholars like Alok Bhalla and Jasbir Jain have meticulously explored the thematic underpinnings of partition literature, uncovering layers of pain, loss, and the quest for identity. It is through these literary works that the voices of those who bore witness to this cataclysmic event find resonance, giving expression to their experiences and the ensuing struggle for self-definition (Ahmed, 2012). This article navigates through key works of literature from both sides of the border, examining the portrayal of fractured identities and the profound impact of partition on personal and communal consciousness. By analysing seminal texts such as Saadat Hasan Manto's "Toba Tek Singh", and Bisham Singh's "Pali", we gain insight into the intricate interplay of identity, memory, and displacement.

Through this exploration, we aim to shed light on the enduring legacy of partition on the collective psyche of the subcontinent. Moreover, we seek to emphasize the pivotal role that literature plays in not only documenting history but also in unraveling the complex web of human emotions and experiences that lie at the heart of this epochal event (Kripalani, 1962). In the ensuing

sections, we will delve into specific literary works, probing the nuanced portrayals of distorted identities, and illuminating the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unprecedented upheaval. Through this interdisciplinary journey, we endeavor to pay homage to the voices that refuse to be silenced, and the identities that emerged, shattered yet resilient, from the crucible of India's partition (Pandey, 2001).

### **Saadat Hasan Manto and His Short Story Toba Tek Singh**

Saadat Hasan Manto was born on 11 May 1912 in Samrala India and died on 18 January 1955 at the age of 52 years, he spent most of his adult life in Bombay, where he worked as a journalist and a screenwriter. It is documented that he moved very reluctantly to Pakistan in 1948. He was a Pakistani Urdu writer and wrote 22 collections of short stories, five series of radio plays, three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches. He was popularly known for his short stories about the partition of India. When he published his partition fiction in the early 1950s, it was negatively received not just by right-wingers in Pakistan and India but also by progressive cultural critics who thought him voyeuristic, pornographic, and irreligious. Six times he was charged with obscenity, three times before and three times after independence in 1947. Before partition for his stories *Dhuan*, *Bu*, and *Kali Shalwar* and after partition for stories *Khol Do*, *Thanda Gosht* and *Uper Neeche Darmiyan* (Jalal, 1985).

Short stories provide a good understanding of the impact of partition on the common man. Mostly at that time, writers were trying to depict the psychological effect in their writings. Saadat Hasan Manto is the most famous short story writer of that era, in his collection there are many short stories, one is "Toba Tek Singh". The story is about the identities that make people confused in 1947. The theme of the story is based on the exchange of the insane, who were in the asylums of India and Pakistan (File No. 18576, 1949). It is, by some accounts, the best short story ever written on this subject. Ironically, the story shows us that when faced with the chaos and bloodshed of partition, the response of a person committed to a mental institution appears 'saner' and more appropriate than those around him. published in 1955, the story takes place inside the Lahore insane asylum (today called the Punjab Institute of Mental Health), two or three years after partition. At a high-level conference, a decision has been made for the exchange of

lunatics in insane asylums. The story starts with the expense of political leaders and national pride but ends on a sad note. The story is about an insane Sikh named Bishan Singh but called Toba Tek Singh, he is a landlord of Toba Tek Singh village. He spent 15 years standing on his legs without even sitting and sleeping. When he hears that India is now divided into two parts, his mind is stuck with the question that, then, where Toba Tek Singh lies (Haldane, 1970). During this time, he has not, even once, sat or lain down. The only words he has spoken during the fifteen years are the nonsensical, "Upar di gur gur di annex di be dhyana di mung di dal of the lantern". Once a month when his relatives came to meet him, he agreed to take a bath and clean up. He has a daughter who has grown older visiting him, and still cries every time she sees her father.

At the start of the story, there is a lunatic asylum. Where there is an atmosphere that is full of emotions for the partition that is fully expected. Muhammad Ali is one of the inmates, who thought he was Jinnah in himself. He is arguing with a Sikh, who is Tara Singh in himself. The remaining patients are in trouble about where they are, in India or Pakistan, and how it is possible that a place moment before is in India and another moment became Pakistan (Manto, 1954). Manto's Toba Tek Singh in first place portrays how people who claim to be rational 'change' the geographies within the night. Manto insists that places have to be named, as it is a name that identifies the place. The places that used to be identical with a specific name until yesterday, are now confronted with identity crises. Manto has parodied and criticized the 'wise' people, who aim to build separate nations based on religion (Dhanda, 2020). For Manto, this aim rather involves splitting peace and harmony from within the human souls. The situation they are portraying with their behavior is of partition time, but the current time is two or three years ahead. Currently, both governments have decided on the exchange of the insane people. According to the government agreement, if their families migrate then they will be sent to corresponding countries, and if there is no data of any blood relation then on the identity of their religion they will be sent to respective countries, even without their will (File No. 18584, 1949). Manto has not only parodied the decisions taken by the wise heads of his times, but he has also portrayed the lunacy of people who have exemplified the nationalistic tropes by creating boundaries and bars. Manto's artistic designation of

delineating the grim realities of his times is quite symbolic. He has portrayed a world of lunatics that seem to be saner than the people living outside the world of lunatic asylum. From the beginning of the short story, Toba Tek Singh Manto is very critical and symbolic, "Muslim lunatics from Indian institutions should be sent over to Pakistan, and Hindu and Sikh lunatics from Pakistani asylums should be allowed to go to India" (Singh, 2020). These people being the victims of the partition showed very reasonably and intelligently the resistance to the partition when the news reached them. The questions asked by the lunatics repeatedly carry an ambiguity, which needs to be justified and answered. Though for people living a rational and saner life, these people are mere commodities that need to be exchanged based on their religion, for Manto, these people are more rational and saner with unconditional love and harmony among each other (Khan, 2020).

Although, his friends and relatives come to meet him. Once his Muslim friend Fazal Din comes and he asks the same question to him about Toba Tek Singh. Fazal Din is unable to reply to him. Then from the officials, he comes to know that Toba Tek Singh is included in Pakistan, but as his all relatives leave for India, he is evacuating to India (File No. 128/CF/48, 1948). 'Toba Tek Singh' is Saadat Hasan Manto's most personal story. He wrote it while he was an inmate in Lahore's mental hospital. It was, in many ways, reflective of his inner confusion and lost sense of identity. "Writing, at its best, is a lonely life", the great Ernest Hemingway proclaimed in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Hemingway killed himself with a shotgun seven years after he made that speech. Manto's downward spiral through poverty, alcoholism and madness culminated in his death in 1955 at the young age of 43 (Ahmad, 1988). He had written the text for the epitaph of his tombstone six months before he died. "Buried here is Saadat Hasan Manto in whose bosom are enshrined all the secrets of the art of short story writing. Buried under mounds of earth, he continues to contemplate who is the greater short story writer: God or he." He does not want to go to India, but when they reach at the border, he stops midway. Suddenly he faints and falls, he is dead, The official witness is that the man who has spent fifteen years standing on his legs now lying on the ground, India and Pakistan are on both sides, and he dies on the no-man's land (Manto, 1954). Saadat Hassan Manto suffered from anxiety and other mental issues from an early age. He later became an alcoholic. He continued to suffer

from symptoms of anxiety and depression all his life. It has been suggested that his mental distress was a source of his creativity and helped him write some of his masterly short stories. The relationship between madness and creativity is a matter of great popular, as well as scholarly, fascination (Hasan, 1984).

Partition literature is full of stories that depict the true picture of that time either Manto's writings or Khushwant Singh's. All the writers who witnessed that scenario wrote stories to reveal the truth in front of the people. Most of the stories are masterpieces and few are award-winning too. Writers from both sides tried to portray the picture. Toba Tek Singh is one of the best short stories which is about an insane person that he also does not want to leave his ancestral place, it's terrible when they hear about the massacre, it's hearts broken (File No. E-1-8, 1950). The paradox of how borders simultaneously separate and unite is discussed elsewhere. The significance of Manto's description lies in describing an existentialist reality of the separation of people living on both sides who had a long history of cultural and social contact and the paradoxical character of borders being a metaphor for the ambiguities of nation-building. He was offering a way of correcting the distortions inherent in state-centered national histories. Then 'India' or 'Pakistan' were mere territorial abstractions to most people who were ignorant of how Mountbatten's Plan or the Radcliffe Award would change their destinies and tear them apart from their social and moorings (Sarkar, 2020).

In their worldview, there was no nationalism, religion, or composite. They were blissfully unaware that their fate, which had rested in the hands of the exploiting classes for centuries, would be settled after Mountbatten's three days of 'diplomacy' leading to the 3<sup>rd</sup> June Plan, and that the frontiers would be decided by Cyril Radcliffe in just seven weeks and 'a continent for better or worse divided'. They had no clue whatsoever that these veins, insensitive and conceited representatives of the Crown, having received the mandate from Clement Atlee's Labour government to preside over the liquidation of the most important imperial possession of all time, would abandon them in mid-ocean 'with a fire in the deck and ammunition in the hold (Butt, 2017).

In short, this is how difficult for people to leave their ancestral place and move to another place. For an insane person, it is

difficult to leave his ancestral place and then imagine for a normal man how difficult the decision to take. It's not about only changing the place, it's about changing the identity too. Psychologically these people are confused and think of torn identities that everyone feels when get separated from their ancestral home.

Manto employs a unique blend of dark humor and stark realism to portray the mental and emotional turmoil experienced by the characters, mirroring the broader disarray and displacement caused by the partition. The story's title, which refers to Bishan Singh's hometown, becomes a symbolic representation of the disorientation and shattered identities that the partition inflicted upon countless individuals (Naqvi, 1973). One of the notable strengths of Manto's storytelling lies in his ability to humanize the characters, showcasing their quirks, fears, and vulnerabilities. Through vivid and evocative descriptions, he brings to life the inmates of the asylum, each carrying their poignant tale of loss and dislocation. This humanizing approach adds depth to the narrative, allowing readers to empathize with the characters' struggles (Faruqi, 1997).

Moreover, Manto's skillful use of satire serves as a powerful tool for critiquing the absurdity and arbitrary nature of political decisions that led to the partition. The story's climax, where Bishan Singh stands in the no man's land between India and Pakistan, encapsulates the tragic irony of a man who is neither here nor there, highlighting the senselessness of the partition. "Toba Tek Singh" remains a masterpiece of post-partition literature, offering a searing commentary on the disintegration of communities, the loss of home and belonging, and the profound impact of political decisions on individual lives. It stands as a testament to Manto's ability to capture the human condition amidst the chaos of history.

### **Bisham Sahani and His Short Story Pali**

Bisham Sahani was born on 8 August 1912 in Rawalpindi, Pakistan and died on 11 July 2003 in Delhi India. He was born into a devout Arya Samajist family. He was schooled in Rawalpindi. Then he went to Government College, Lahore. He took a master's degree in English literature there. After college education, he returned to Rawalpindi to join his father's import business. However, he found many difficulties with taxes in that business, so he decided to teach at a local college. These were

the days of the freedom struggle against British rule in India (Desai, 2006). At the same time, he was also involved in the activities of the National Congress. Bisham Sahani participated in the Quit India Movement of 1942. Because of it, he went to jail from time to time at an early age. Then, he became a district secretary of the Congress (Chatterjee, 1993). In 1947, communal riots broke out in the whole nation. There also, in Rawalpindi, in March 1947, the communal riots broke out. Bisham Sahani worked with the relief committee as a Congress worker.

Further, on 15 August 1947, India got freedom. The Independence brought about the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The partition formed the Union of India for Hindus and New Pakistan for Muslims. The partition changed all. The sectarian forces compelled the Hindu Masses to migrate to India from New Pakistan. After partition, the birth town Rawalpindi of Bisham Sahani was in Pakistan. Being an Arya Samajist Hindu family, Bisham Sahani's family had to migrate from Rawalpindi to Union India (Ahmed, 2012). The partition made Rawalpindi a foreign land to Bisham Sahani. In those days the masses had not forgotten the birth towns where they had been brought up and schooled. He was a Hindi writer, playwright, and famous for his novel *Tamas*, which was a passionate account of the partition. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan for literature in 1998. He had command over Punjabi, English, Urdu, Sanskrit and Hindi. He also translated many foreign works into Hindi (Chatterjee, 1993).

*Pali* is a short story written by Bisham Sahani; among his collection of short stories, this is the most remarkable which shows one of the facts of the scenario. The story is about a boy who during the partition disturbance was separated from his family (File No DO 142/14, 1948). *Pali* is the protagonist of the story; his biological parents are Manohar Lal and Kaushalya whereas his adopted parents are Shakur and Zainab. At the start of the story, *Pali* gets separated from his family while crossing the border and then a childless couple adopts him. He is Hindu while his adopted parents are Muslim, and he faces the confusion of multiple states which psychologically affects him. In his childhood, he first gets separated from his own family, then is adopted by a different family, later he needs to convert his religion (Civil and Military Gazette, 1948). Among all, nobody is there to realize that he is undergoing mental stress. People cheered him as he kept calling him "*Pitaji*" and



crying. People trying to give him a warm place to adjust to the new environment including his adopted Muslim parents (Sahani, 2001). Though Pali is adopted by a family that is loving and caring, not all the children are lucky in the same way. Most of the children who survived the partition were subjected to various psychological and physical tortures that became a permanent part of their conscience. The lost children who were left to survive on their own. If these children did not starve to death or were not murdered for sport, they ended up in state orphanages. The displaced children were adopted out, and the boys, of course, were always first to go. They were not adopted for love or family but mainly for labor. On the other hand, when small girls were adopted, sadly enough, most ended up as domestic workers or prostitutes (Dar, 2013).

Furthermore, when Manohar Lal finds his son and demands his son's custody. Shakur and Zainab try hard to keep Pali with them. But according to the law of the state, they have to return Pali (File No. 10/CF/55xvi, 1955). The insecurity of a mother and her constant fear of becoming motherless. She gets frightened when someone comes to claim the custody of Pali. The first time the police havildar came with the summons for Shakur, Zainab felt greatly upset, her condition being like that of a fish that has been thrown out of water. Her dreams were crumbling before her very eyes. Happiness as well as sorrow of both families depend on the little innocent figure of Pali (Dar, 2013). The victory of one in the legal battle means the shattering of the dreams of the other. Here, both parties are victims, and none can be blamed. In this story, Sahni has shown the vital role of fate in the life of an individual.

There is no feeling of hatred in Zainab's heart for those who come to snatch away from her the most precious jewel of her life, Pali. Being a woman, she can appreciate the misery of Pali's real mother (Sud, 2011). Manohar Lal is on the strong side. Pali is now adjusted to his new family, and he is also practicing the Muslim prayers but again Pali is forced into a distressing condition. Now he is once again in an emotional phase as he is pressured to select his father by standing in a crowd (Sahani, 2001). The distress of the child is appreciated neither by Muslims nor by Hindus. Instead, Hindus and Muslims give vent to hidden animosity against each other. Thus, Pali becomes the symbol of dastardly indifference to the real issue. The unnecessary interference by the members of each community leaves Pali bewildered. At first, the boy is circumcised by

Shakur's people and made acceptable there, but when he comes back to his parents, he is again purified by the community of Manohar Lai (Nair, 1989).

Here, in the story, both the Hindu as well as the Muslim parents are devoid of any ill feelings towards each other. But the biggest tragedy is that they are made to behave exactly in the way their society expects of them. The values which the two couples hold do not teach them to hate. It is a pity that they are not allowed to follow those principles which are dear to them. Zainab and Shakur never insisted on the conversion of Pali's religion (Sud, 2011). Nor do Manohar Lai and his wife want it. The author's portrayal of the two parents in a favorable light and the disapproval of the acts of Chaudhary and Maulvi show that Sahni places the values of human kindness above religion. "But the time was not good at all, the circumstances took an ugly turn and there raised questions regarding religion. Whose child, is he? Who had brought him up? caused the situation more unimportant" (Sahani, 2001).

We see that when it comes to religious sentiments and communal superiority, the sentiments of a person and the bonds of love do not find any importance anywhere. It is the selfish motives and pseudo-norms that command the actions and emotions of the masses (Ahmed, 2012). A little child Pali, who had already suffered a lot is made to go through various rites and rituals that he couldn't understand at all. He is not asked whether he wants to go with his father to India or not. When he is made to learn Muslim ways and then suddenly expected to forget everything, he feels helpless. He feels alienated. He doesn't seem to belong to either of the countries. Bhisham Sahani here raises many important questions and leaves them unanswered. The end of the story suggests that perhaps it may have been better to leave Pali with his adoptive parents, for when he was with them, he was a happy child full of gaiety and joy (Jain, 2016).

In the climax, he is one more time put under psychological pressure because now he needs to adjust to his biological Hindu family. All the people around him are talking about the Muslim practices that a Hindu boy goes for Muslim practicing, they all have the opinion that Pali needs to be purified again. For this purpose, he must enter Hinduism with all its requirements. This puts Pali again in a state of confusion, at that time he thinks that he is happier while living with Shakur

and Zainab (Sud, 2011). In such a depressing situation a ray of hope seems to come when a Muslim mother makes a sacrifice for a Hindu mother. To Manohar Lai, Zainab is like a goddess who saves his family from destruction. He feels grateful to her and is all praise for the Muslim family. But the guests who gather to celebrate the restoration of Pali are so full of hatred for Muslims that they cannot tolerate the praise and that too for a person of their religion. This hardened attitude gives a clear indication of the refusal of one community to take into consideration the positive values or actions of the other and to treat them always as enemies or outsiders (Kumar, 2006).

Many children lost their families in the hassle when mobs attacked the caravans or houses. Many of them were adopted by childless couples or some kind-hearted person despite their religion. These cases happened on both sides of the border, many Muslim children were adopted by Sikh or Hindu families and for that, they need to change their religion to adjust to their families (Jha, 2013). Similarly, many Sikhs and many Hindu children were adopted by the Muslim families. But among all these, they were psychologically disturbed as they lost their identity. After the recovery process, they again faced the pain of separation from their adopted families (File No. 23/CF/51 xiv, 1951). In short, this is how people sacrificed, the loss they had cannot be recovered. It was very difficult for people to understand that their nationality had changed. They had no connection with their past, the things they left behind were no more related to them. Their life has changed now, they have new houses, and new neighbors and they need to live with onwards. They had a big question how they could forget their ancestors' land, their places, their memories, they all were buried there, how they could forget them? It was very difficult to understand their feelings (Ahmad, 2012).

"Pali" by Bisham Sahani is a compelling novel that delves into the complex socio-political milieu of post-independence India, focusing on the plight of refugees and the challenges of nation-building. Sahani's evocative storytelling and keen observations offer a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by displaced individuals during a critical period in Indian history (Jain, 2002). The novel's strength lies in Sahani's ability to humanize his characters, providing them with depth, complexity, and relatability. Through the experiences of Baldev, the protagonist, and other central figures, Sahani paints a vivid picture of the harsh realities faced by refugees from West Pakistan. He

skilfully navigates the intricate web of personal stories within the broader canvas of historical events, creating a narrative that resonates on both an emotional and intellectual level (Dar, 2013).

One of the most striking aspects of “Pali” is Sahani’s exploration of identity and belonging. The characters grapple with their displacement, attempting to forge new lives in the unfamiliar territory of Pali. Sahni masterfully portrays the tension between their desire to assimilate and their longing for the lost homeland, highlighting the complexities of individual and collective identities in the wake of partition (Pandey, 2001). Furthermore, Sahani’s critique of the political and bureaucratic machinery is evident throughout the novel. He exposes the inefficiencies, corruption, and indifference that plague the systems meant to support and rehabilitate refugees. This social commentary adds depth to the narrative, providing a broader context for the struggles faced by the characters (Kumar, 2006). While “Pali” is a work of fiction, it draws heavily from Sahani’s own experiences and observations as a witness to the partition and its aftermath. This lends authenticity to the narrative, allowing readers to gain a nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological impact of displacement. In short, “Pali” stands as a powerful testament to Bisham Sahani’s storytelling prowess and his keen insight into the human condition. Through the lens of the refugee experience, Sahani offers a poignant reflection on the challenges of nation-building and the enduring resilience of the human spirit.

### **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of India’s Partition, literature emerged as a powerful medium for exploring the profound impact of this historical event on individual and collective identities. “Shattered Reflections” has endeavored to navigate this poignant landscape, shedding light on the multifaceted narratives that emerged from the fractured identities of that era. Through the works of authors like Khushwant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto, Bisham Sahani and Bapsi Sidhwa, we witnessed the intricate weaving of personal experiences with the broader canvas of history. Their stories provided a mirror, reflecting the pain, loss, resilience, and hope that characterized the lives of those who bore witness to the partition.

Bisham Singh’s “Pali” vividly depicted the tumultuous events of the partition and the complex identities that were forged

amidst the chaos. Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" delved into the surreal, exploring the boundaries of sanity and identity in the aftermath of the partition. These literary works serve as timeless testaments to the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity. They remind us that even in the darkest moments of history, individuals find the strength to navigate the complexities of their identities and forge new paths forward.

As we reflect on these narratives, it becomes evident that the legacy of the partition continues to shape the identities of subsequent generations. The scars left by this historic event remain etched in the collective memory of the subcontinent. Through literature, we are afforded a poignant reminder of the resilience of the human spirit and the capacity to find meaning amidst shattered reflections. In short, "Shattered Reflections" has sought to unravel the intricate tapestry of distorted identities through the lens of literature. These narratives not only provide a window into the past but also offer valuable insights into the enduring human experience. They remind us that, even in the face of immense upheaval, the human spirit can find solace, strength, and ultimately, a renewed sense of identity.

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