
**No Man's Land: The Literary Echoes of *Toba Tek Singh*
in Manto and Gulzar**

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1. Introduction

Partition is always a painful event in history, causing loss, suffering, and deep wounds in people's hearts. Many countries have faced Partition, and each one has led to great human tragedy. The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was one of the most heartbreaking events, leading to mass migration, communal violence, and lasting sorrow. Many writers have captured the pain of Partition in their works, creating what is known as Partition literature.

Among these works, *Toba Tek Singh* by Saadat Hasan Manto stands out as unique. Originally written in Urdu, it was first published in 1955. It is a powerful short story that shows the madness of Partition through the setting of a lunatic asylum. The story's main character, Bishan Singh, refuses to accept the division of his land, making his fate deeply tragic and symbolic. The story has been widely translated into English, with notable translations by Khalid Hasan and Aatish Taseer, ensuring its global reach.

Gulzar, a famous poet, lyricist, and filmmaker, was also deeply affected by Partition. He wrote a poem titled *Toba Tek Singh* in Hindi-Urdu, inspired by Manto's story. His poem reflects on the ongoing impact of Partition, showing that its wounds have not healed even today.

Apart from the poem, Manto's story has also been adapted into plays and films. Several stage performances have brought *Toba Tek Singh* to life, and it was adapted into a short film as part of the anthology *Toba Tek Singh* (2017), directed by Ketan Mehta. These adaptations further highlight the lasting significance of Manto's story in Partition discourse.

This paper focuses on Manto's short story and Gulzar's poem, analyzing how both works portray the themes of displacement, identity, and political absurdity.

2. Objectives of the paper: This paper aims to:

- (i) Examine *Toba Tek Singh* as a powerful literary response to Partition, highlighting its critique of political absurdity and its impact on human psychology.
- (ii) Analyze how Gulzar's poem extends and reimagines the themes of Manto's story, reflecting on the continued relevance of Partition.

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- (iii) Compare and contrast the narrative techniques of Manto's short story and Gulzar's poem, focusing on their use of symbolism, irony, and emotional depth.

3. Review of Literature

Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* has been widely analyzed in Partition literature, psychoanalytic criticism, and postcolonial studies. Scholars have explored its themes of identity crisis, political absurdity, and the psychological impact of Partition. Alok Bhalla (1999) viewed the lunatic asylum as a metaphor for the irrationality of the external world, while Rakhshanda Jalil (2014) focused on Manto's satirical critique of the political decisions leading to Partition. Ayesha Jalal (2013) positioned the asylum as a microcosm of the subcontinent, highlighting Bishan Singh's resistance to imposed national identities.

Shamsul Haq Thoker (2017) analyzed the story as political satire, emphasizing its critique of arbitrary borders. A 2019 study linked Manto's personal experiences with mental illness to his portrayal of madness in the story. Bijendra Nath Das (2024) examined Bishan Singh's refusal to accept Partition as an act of passive resistance. Additionally, a study on *Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh' and the Politics of Translation* discussed how different translations reflect ideological influences, affecting the story's interpretation.

Gulzar's poetic adaptation of *Toba Tek Singh* has also drawn scholarly attention. Tuhin Sanyal (2021) argued that Gulzar transforms Bishan Singh into a symbol of historical memory and unresolved trauma, elevating insanity from a textual element to an experiential reality. Neeti Singh (2015) examined how Gulzar's poetry adds a lyrical and reflective dimension to Partition literature, extending beyond Manto's stark realism. Aamir R. Mufti (1998) situated Gulzar's poem within broader Partition narratives, asserting that it actively engages with the past rather than merely retelling it.

Collectively, these studies highlight how *Toba Tek Singh*, both in Manto's original story and Gulzar's poetic adaptation, continues to be a powerful commentary on identity, displacement, and the enduring consequences of Partition.

4. Detailed Summary of *Toba Tek Singh*

4.1 Saadat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh*

Saadat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh*, first published in 1955, is one of the most powerful literary reflections on the Partition of India. Set in a lunatic asylum, the story satirizes the absurdity of the division of India and Pakistan, portraying how even those considered "mad" struggle to make sense of the arbitrary borders drawn by politicians.

The story is set in a mental asylum in Lahore, where the inmates belong to different religious and cultural backgrounds. In the aftermath of Partition, the governments of India and Pakistan decided to exchange mentally ill patients, just as they had exchanged prisoners and civilian populations. Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums are to be sent to India, while Muslim patients in Indian asylums are to be transferred to Pakistan.

The announcement causes confusion and panic among the asylum's inmates. These men, already detached from reality, struggle to understand what Partition means. Some ask which country they belong to, while others question the logic of dividing land that they have always considered their home. The asylum becomes a microcosm of the subcontinent, reflecting the senselessness of political divisions.

The central character, Bishan Singh, is a Sikh inmate who has been in the asylum for fifteen years. He is known for constantly muttering nonsensical phrases like "*Upar di gur di annex di be-dhyana mung di daal di attain.*" However, amidst his incoherent speech, he repeatedly asks one question: "*Where is Toba Tek Singh?*" his hometown, which is now Pakistan.

Before being admitted to the asylum, Bishan Singh was a landowner in Toba Tek Singh, a village in Punjab. Though mentally unstable, he never forgets his roots. Unlike the politicians deciding the fate of millions, Bishan Singh clings to his identity, refusing to accept the idea that a border can erase his connection to his land.

As the transfer of asylum inmates begins, Hindu and Sikh patients are taken to the Wagah border to be sent to India, while Muslim patients arrive from the other side. The scene at the border is chaotic. Some inmates protest, refusing to leave; others fail to grasp why they must move at all.

When Bishan Singh is brought to the border, he anxiously asks the authorities where Toba Tek Singh is. When told that it is now in Pakistan, he refuses to leave. His mental turmoil reaches its peak as he stands in no man's land—between the barbed wires of India and Pakistan—unable to cross into either country.

In the story's powerful climax, Bishan Singh collapses in no man's land, lying face down on the ground. The narration states:

"There, behind barbed wire, on a piece of land that belonged to neither India nor Pakistan, lay Toba Tek Singh."

4.2 Gulzar's poem *Toba Tek Singh*

Gulzar's poem *Toba Tek Singh* is a tribute to Saadat Hasan Manto's famous short story of the same name. The poem reflects on the pain of Partition and the madness it created, using the character of Bishan Singh from Manto's story as a central figure. The poem is written in a nostalgic and sorrowful tone, showing how the wounds of the Partition still remain fresh.

The poem begins with the speaker saying that he wants to visit Wagah, the border between India and Pakistan, to meet Bishan Singh, the madman from *Toba Tek Singh*. He heard that Bishan Singh was still standing on his swollen feet at the spot where Manto had left him. The reference to his swollen feet symbolizes the suffering and injustice faced by those who were displaced due to Partition. Bishan Singh is still muttering his famous meaningless phrase:

"Opad di gud gud di moong di dal di laltain..."

This phrase, originally from Manto's story, represents the confusion and absurdity of the division.

The poem then shifts to another madman who sits on a high tree branch, believing himself to be God. He claims that he alone has the power to decide which village belongs to which country. This character represents the politicians and leaders who divided the land without thinking about the people's suffering. The speaker wonders when this madman will come down from the tree and realize the pain he has caused. He wants to tell him that the Partition is not over yet—many more divisions and tragedies are still happening. The pain of Partition continues in different forms.

The speaker also wants to inform Bishan Singh about his friend Afzal and other people like Lahna Singh, Wadhwa Singh, and Bheen Amrit. These individuals were killed while trying to cross the border. Their bodies were looted, and their heads were lost along the way. This tragic image highlights the brutal violence of Partition, where people lost their lives, their families, and their identities.

There is also a mention of Bhuri, a girl whose fate remains uncertain. The speaker says that no one will come to claim her anymore. This line suggests the countless women who were abducted, assaulted, or abandoned during Partition. Another heartbreaking image is of a little girl whose finger used to grow longer every year. But now, instead of growing, she is losing parts of her finger. This symbolizes how the new generations are not healing from Partition; instead, they continue to suffer its effects.

Towards the end, the speaker says that not all the madmen have reached their destinations. Many are still lost on both sides of the border. This could mean that the psychological and emotional scars of Partition still exist, affecting people on both sides.

Finally, Bishan Singh calls out once again, repeating his famous nonsense phrase but adding a curse:

"Opad di gud gud di moong di dal di laltain di Hindustan te Pakistan di dur fitey munh."

The last words, *dur fitly much* (may your face be blackened), express his anger and frustration at the senseless division of the land. Bishan Singh, who was declared mad, is actually the one who understands the true madness of Partition.

5. Comparative analysis of the Manto's story and Gulzar's poem

Saadat Hasan Manto's short story *Toba Tek Singh* and Gulzar's poetic tribute both explore the trauma of Partition, but they do so in different ways. Manto's story, written shortly after Partition, captures the immediate chaos and absurdity of dividing a nation, while Gulzar's poem, written much later, reflects on the lasting wounds that Partition inflicted on people and continues to inflict through ongoing divisions. The central theme of madness serves as a powerful metaphor in both works. In Manto's narrative, the lunatics in an asylum mirror the senselessness of Partition, where even those who are supposed to govern fail to

comprehend the consequences of their decisions. Bishan Singh, the protagonist, cannot understand whether his hometown, Toba Tek Singh, is now in India or Pakistan, symbolizing the larger identity crisis and displacement felt by millions. Gulzar extends this theme, suggesting that even decades later, the spirit of Bishan Singh still lingers at the border, embodying the unresolved pain of Partition.

Both Manto and Gulzar highlight the unfinished nature of Partition. Manto's story ends with Bishan Singh collapsing in no-man's land, a symbolic representation of those who never found a place in either country. Gulzar builds on this by stating that divisions are still happening, emphasizing that Partition was not a singular historical event but a process that continues in various forms of communal and political discord. Another shared theme is the brutality and violence associated with Partition. Manto subtly portrays the inhumanity of the mass exodus and the loss of innocent lives, while Gulzar makes it more explicit by naming victims and describing the horrors of those who suffered. The poem takes this suffering beyond the immediate context of 1947, illustrating how the pain of that division persists across generations.

The two writers also differ in their perspectives due to the time periods in which they wrote. Manto, writing in the aftermath of Partition, focuses on the direct impact, showing the confusion and helplessness of those who were suddenly uprooted. His story does not engage in political analysis but instead presents the lived reality of common people. Gulzar, reflecting from a later time, looks at the larger picture, questioning whether Partition ever truly ended. He personalizes the historical pain by expressing a desire to meet Bishan Singh at the Wagah border, using it as a metaphor for the continued separation between people who once lived together. Manto's short story is confined to a single event—the forced exchange of mental asylum inmates—whereas Gulzar's poem expands its meaning to address modern times, showing how Partition's legacy still affects relationships and identities.

Symbolism plays a crucial role in both works, with Bishan Singh standing as the ultimate victim of Partition. Manto's Bishan Singh is a man caught in the absurdity of political decisions beyond his understanding, and his death at the border is a tragic reminder that some people never found closure. Gulzar reimagines him as a timeless figure, still standing at the border, showing that the pain of Partition is not confined to the past. The mental asylum in Manto's story functions as a microcosm of the real world, where the political decisions of powerful leaders seem just as irrational as the thoughts of the lunatics inside. In Gulzar's version, the world outside the asylum has not changed much—it remains divided, irrational, and filled with conflicts just as senseless as the original Partition. Another significant symbol is Bishan Singh's gibberish, which Manto presents as nonsensical words that reflect his inability to process the reality of Partition. Gulzar reuses the same phrases in his poem, but now they take on a deeper meaning, symbolizing the absurdity of borders that continue to dictate people's fates.

The narration style of both works also differs. Manto's prose is simple, direct, and laced with irony. He does not provide excessive commentary; instead, he allows the absurd situation itself to convey the tragedy of Partition. His ending is abrupt, reinforcing the sudden, incomprehensible nature of the trauma experienced by those affected. In contrast, Gulzar's poem is poetic and symbolic, engaging the reader in an intimate reflection. By using a first-person voice and addressing Bishan Singh directly, Gulzar creates an emotional connection that draws the reader into the continuing story of Partition. His language is filled with metaphors and imagery, making the poem not just a tribute to Manto's work but an extension of its themes into the present. The shift from prose to poetry transforms the emotional and political dimensions of *Toba Tek Singh*, allowing Gulzar to frame Partition not as a historical event but as an ongoing human experience.

Emotionally, Manto's tone is tragic, ironic, and darkly humorous, highlighting the cruelty of Partition through a seemingly absurd but deeply poignant story. Gulzar's tone, on the other hand, is sorrowful, nostalgic, and reflective, showing how Partition remains a wound that never fully healed. Manto portrays the immediate human cost of Partition, while Gulzar looks at its long-term consequences, making us question whether we have truly moved beyond that painful chapter of history. Both works ultimately remind us that political boundaries may have been drawn decades ago, but the divisions they created continue to shape our lives. Together, *Toba Tek Singh* and Gulzar's poems serve as powerful literary testimonies to the enduring pain of Partition, urging us to reflect on whether we have learned anything from history or if we are still trapped in the madness of divisions.

5. Conclusion

Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* and Gulzar's poem show us that Partition was more than just drawing a line between two nations—it tore apart families, friendships, and identities. Even after so many years, the pain and memories remain, reminding us of the cost of division.

Both writers teach us an important lesson: humanity is greater than borders. People may belong to different countries, but their emotions, memories, and shared past cannot be erased. *Toba Tek Singh* is not just a town—it is a reminder that love, peace, and unity are stronger than any wall that separates us. The story and poem ask us to remember history, not with hatred but with the hope that such suffering never happens again.

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