

Existential Alienation and the Absurdity of Life: A Philosophical Understanding of Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*

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Abstract

The renowned South Asian writer, best known for his short stories, Saadat Hasan Manto often dealt with themes of Partition, its impact on the human psychology, the injustice meted out by the society and its darker aspects. He was as bold as well as a controversial literary figure who often challenged social norms and exposed the hypocritical face of the elite. The horrors of the Partition were his core themes, which were left behind by him as a thought-provoking literary legacy that still continues to shape contemporary South Asian writing. The short story "Toba Tek Singh", taken for the current research powerfully explores the existential questions of alienation, the absurdity of border demarcations, and the human predicament in a fragmented world governed by illogical politics. Through the character of Bishan Singh, the mentally deranged protagonist, caught between India and Pakistan during the post-Partition prisoner/inmates exchange, Manto evaluates the arbitrary nature of marking national boundaries and the existential crises imposed upon the common people. This paper attempts to evaluate "Toba Tek Singh" through the lens of Existentialist Philosophy developed by Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, in order to analyse the themes of absurdity and alienation and how individuals search for meaning/purpose of life in a meaningless world. The story would be examined as a critique of dehumanization that seeks to underscore the existential expense of political and ideological demarcations.

Keywords: partition, existentialism, alienation, absurdity, meaninglessness, identity crisis

Introduction:

The philosophical movement of Existentialism had emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, having its roots in Germany and Denmark. It is a response to the crisis of meaning and the disintegration of traditional metaphysical structures in Western thought. Existentialism incepted basically and powerfully in the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche and gradually claimed a prominent space in the literary thoughts of Jean- Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus.

The concept of 'leap of faith' introduced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's declaration of the "Death of God" are strong implications of the collapse of absolute values that paved the way for ethics based on personal will and self-determination. In the 20th century, Existentialism found perfect materialization as a structured philosophical discourse with Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). The core ideas of Existentialism being-alienation, absurdity, freedom, and authenticity-were further developed by Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943), where he questions the human existence in a state of radical freedom and condemns to create their own essence through choices and actions arising in their individual will.

The most path-breaking seminal work of Existentialist philosophy is, undoubtedly, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) by Albert Camus, where the notion of absurd is articulated by utilizing the myth of Sisyphus to signify the fact that human beings persist in a meaningless world without recourse to divine or universal order. Following the Second World War, the movement's themes of alienation, anxiety and freedom were further reinforced, giving definite shape by the major historical events. From being a philosophical movement, it found its way through literature, drama, psychology and political theory that influenced the intellectual figures like Franz Kafka, Simone de Beauvoir and Samuel Beckett. As a profound literary framework, it is used to analyze human existence and the search for meaning of life in an uncertain world.

Existentialism is marked by disillusionment with traditional values and supports the constant search for individual freedom by providing fertile ground for the survival of the discourse.

Objectives:

1. To analyse "Toba Tek Singh" through the framework of Existential philosophy to understand its core tenets.
2. To explore the existential crisis and absurdity of Partition.
3. To investigate the psychological dislocation caused by political turmoil.
4. To locate the position of "Toba Tek Singh" as a universal existentialist narrative.

Hypothesis:

The current study hypothesizes that Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" is not just a Partition narrative; it is an existentialist text reflecting the absurdity of human existence and the alienation caused by arbitrary socio-political constructs and the individual's search for meaning in an irrational world. By examining the story through the framework of Existential philosophy and its core tenets, this research would attempt to argue that the fate of the protagonist is representative of a form of existential resistance.

Methodology:

For the current study, the primary source i.e. the short story is read using multiple core tenets of Existential philosophy.

Advent of Existentialism in India:

Indian philosophers and scholars were introduced to this deeply thought-provoking intellectual discourse

during the British Colonial rule when the existential ideas found a discussion platform in the renowned universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University and Banaras Hindu University. The core themes began to be resonated in Indian literature, particularly in modernist and post-modernist writings. A good number of Indian writers, poets and playwrights explored the existentialist ideas in their works like *Jejuri* (1976) by Arun Kolatkar, *Adhe Adhure* (1969) by Mohan Rakesh, the works of Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishna Sobti.

Saadat Hasan Manto's literary contributions are an outstanding reflection of strong existentialist thoughts, especially when he deals with alienation, absurdity, freedom and the search for meaning in a haphazard world. For the current study, two of his major works are taken- *Toba Tek Singh* and *Thanda Gosht* because these works are the nurturing ground for concepts of alienation, absurdity and search for the meaning of life.

Toba Tek Singh (1955) is a poignant Partition short story set against the backdrop of the Partition of India in 1947. It is basically a satire that questions the absurd concept of division and its sever-lasting impact on the marginalized Indians that also included the mentally retarded, whose perspective is used as the narrative. It is about the mutual decisions of the governments of India and Pakistan after a few years of partition, to exchange the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim inmates of lunatic asylums of both the nations, like the prisoners and the civilians. Bishan Singh, the protagonist is one among the inmates of the asylum of Lahore, who repeatedly utters the same in coherent phrase, "Upar di gur gur di annexe di bay dhyana di mung di daal of Toba Tek Singh". His madness fails to detach him from the memories of his homeland and he continues his obsession in knowing where Toba Tek Singh, his homeland, actually belongs to- India or Pakistan.

The confused and chaotic mind of the inmates are unable to comprehend the reality of Partition, thus reflecting the absurdity of random geopolitical divisions. According to Jaitra Bharati, the inmates are examples of "intense identity crisis, alienation and extreme existential angst" that signifies the inherent absurdity that lies within human existence (Bharati, 2019). Bishan Singh's unstable mind has but one stable question regarding the location of his homeland, which implies how he struggles with his identity and belonging in a divided land. The persistent existential crisis of individuals uprooted from their origins is highlighted here.

The setting of the mental asylum is deliberately utilized to juxtapose the social construction of the idea of 'insanity' with their rational social and political decisions. Manto raises the question regarding the presence of madness in the external world; suggesting that the society lying outside the walls of the lunatic asylum is the symbol of real madness.

"Where is Toba Tek Singh?" reflects the intense identity crisis of Bishan Singh who is unable to understand the geopolitical changes that caused his displacement. He continues to seek meaning in a chaotic world ruled by selfishness. The confusion of the inmates about the Partition are expressed, "Two or three years after Partition, it suddenly struck the governments of India and Pakistan that, just as they had exchanged ordinary prisoners, they should also exchange the lunatics". This arbitrary decision to relocate the inmates of the asylum is one absurd aspect of Partition which eventually nurtures existential crisis. According to Martin Heidegger,

“Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping” (Heidegger, 1927), reflecting Bishan Singh’s existential anxiety.

“One Sikh inmate declared that he didn’t want to live in India or Pakistan. Instead, he wanted to reside in a place called ‘Tila Singh’s Land’” (Manto, 1997, p.30). His subconscious mind rejects both the nations. It underscores the existentialist theme of alienation. Conformation to socially materialized identity is straightforwardly rejected here.

However, the ultimate existential moment is presented in the story when Bishan Singh finally breathes his last moments in neither nation, but in a No-Man’s Land, “When the guards lifted him, they found him dead. On one side, behind barbed wires, was India. On the other side, behind more barbed wires, was Pakistan. In between, on a piece of land, that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh” (Manto, 1997). This represents the idea that loss of identity, displacement and man-made borders are all absurd concepts. The death of Bishan Singh in a No-Man’s Land is equivalent to Albert Camus’s idea as expounded in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide” (Camus, 1942).

Toba Tek Singh exemplifies a highly intellectual existentialist narrative that portrays characters struggling hard to understand the absurd reality of a fragmented world. Partition is a poignant event devoid of any meaning, still causing individuals to be displaced and uprooted, losing identity and creating an existential void.

This political allegory based on the Partition is deeply embedded with existential philosophy. It is an established fact that the Partition of India and Pakistan had resulted in mass displacements and communal violence. Transcending beyond the actual historical events, the short story focusses on existential questions of alienation and absurdity. Albert Camus’s concept of the absurd brings out the truth that the universe actually lacks substantial meaning and the individuals are left without knowing why they exist, or the purpose of life. This thought provoking idea is echoed by Bishan’s predicament when living in the asylum for many years, he was abruptly transferred to India. He is just one example of the entire population who had to face displacement owing to the Partition. The Partition was a very absurd and arbitrary decision of the rulers; the actually affected were the innocent common people of both the nations. The question of identity crises is best manifested in the context of the Partition.

Conclusion:

Albert Camus was of the view that a person can be called an “absurd hero” when he/she grapples the meaninglessness of life, yet continues the resistance and survives anyhow. Despite being a lunatic, Bishan continues his defense against the system and raises perpetual queries regarding his existence. The politically mandated labels of either being “Indian” or “Pakistani” were rightly rejected by the chaotic mind of Singh. When he was being tried by the governments to be obliterated, he struggles hard not to move out till he breathes his last. This was his adamant yet stable decision.

His alienation from the socially constructed idea of identity emerges when he encounters that all the social constructions are fake and deprived of all sorts of authentication. Existing in a severely liminal space,

Bishan is distanced from the category of belonging. His insanity renders human fit in the social space, but the cause of his insanity was never considered to be examined. Moreover, his death is also symbolic of the existential tenet of the acceptance of the fact that all human conditions in this world are simply absurd. Till his death he refused to be a part of the arbitrary and meaningless government decisions. One can readily argue that Bishan's death is just physical-he achieved freedom after that.

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