

# Existentialism of Manto: Absurdity of Human Condition in "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khaled Mian"

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## Abstract

In this article I have attempted to re-read two of Sadat Hasan Manto's short stories "Toba Tek Singh" and "Khaled Mian". Both of these stories are examples of intense identity crisis, alienation, extreme existential angst which haunts the unique personalities of these stories. Manto's stories have been often analysed from a post-partitional perspective but some of these stories indeed exemplify existential features in the manner of the works of Sartre, Camus and other thinkers and writers of the 20th century Europe. The protagonist of these stories, Bishen Singh and Mumtaz respectively depicts an uncompromising struggle of mankind against essentialised interpretations of their world and their attempt to resist it. Manto's selection of unusual characters in these stories stretches the boundaries of existence and questions normative discourses of his sociopolitical environment.

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**Index terms**— existentialism, partition, saadat h<sup>a</sup>san manto, absurdism, essentialism, anxiety.

## 1 Introduction

Existentialism is the philosophical world view that wants to explain the place of human being in defining its ontological value in the world. It encapsulates so broad a vision that it is hardly possible to give a concrete definition of the philosophy. Most of the proponents of modern Existentialism, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and J. P. Sartre, deliberately differ from each other in their theoretical perspective on the term Existentialism. However, they accept certain elements of each other's perspective while revise and contradict different aspects.

Unlike some other philosophical movements Existentialism is more oriented towards the physical human being and his/her individual experiences. While classical philosophers like Plato would like to establish a common ethical standard for humanity, the Existentialist must find out or rather establish for himself the truth of his individual experiences. Kierkegaard wrote in his journals, "the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die" (qtd. in Lynn 3). The approach of the statement, its emphasis on individual interpretation of truth which can amount to the meaning of life and death, a freedom of choice are some of the important aspect of being that all of the existential thinkers have theorized. However, for the sake of this current essay, we can limit our analysis in some common and more relevant questions of this philosophy.

The most important philosophical problem for the Existentialist thinkers is the question of human freedom. But it is not freedom in the socio-political sense. The rational human being is 'thrown' into a world where every meaning that is already available at hand is the meaning made without his own intervention. Therefore it is of no value to attempt to constitute a sustainable meaning of his existence. It is therefore very important that he imposes his own meaning onto this apparently 'meaningless' world. It can be called 'meaningless' because the available meaning is not the result of his own attempt to explore truth. To resolve the uneasiness arising out of this condition, man can attempt two things. He can either choose to accept the truth of the masses and deny his own feelings towards his existence or he can exercise his own freedom in choosing and constructing an individualized meaning of the world. But freedom here is not something that can be achieved or discovered. It

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is already there. For Sartre, a man is completely free from the moment he is born. But it remains up to him if he claims this free-ness with independent action. According to him, man is "condemned to be free"(qtd. in Macquarrie 38) He says 'condemned' to express the inevitability of the freedom, which can become a burden for a person who does not really want to be free. Because when we reflect on such kind of freedom we realize that we are responsible for whatever happens to us and this results in a form of 'anxiety' to which no metaphysical solution is offered. This dreadful situation invades every moment of Existential freedom. Kierkegaard calls 'anxiety' "the vertigo of freedom" (Macquarrie 131). It is not fear or dread as the English translation of the German word "Angust" may suggest. The word Anguish approximates its meaning, but it really has nothing to do with physical or mental pain. It is an uneasiness that is 'revelatory of the human condition (128). Anxiety comes before achieving freedom. As freedom is a stirring of possibility, contemplating freedom generates anxiety of achieving the imminent possibility (129). Like Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Sartre also considers anxiety as something E to be endured, not evaded. To flee the uncertainties of freedom one can take refuge in the conventional patterns of action and conventional scales of value. But it would amount to conforming to common beliefs. Sartre calls it an act of 'Bad Faith'(132).

From an ontological point of view existentialism denies essentialism. It prioritizes the arbitrariness of life and escapes any a-priori essential meaning. "Existence precedes essence" (46) Sartre tells us and he emphasizes individuality through free choice, rather than on the abstract universal idea of man in general. By conferring precedence to existence, the existentialist thus proclaims that we do not have a universal existence or are created in accordance with a normative model or standard. Instead we create ourselves through the exercise of our personal freedom.

The arbitrariness of human possibility is emphasized by Heidegger with the concept of 'thrownness' of human condition (Macquarrie 149). All of us are thrown into this world and this pre-condition frees us from obligation to any essential meaning-making institution like religion, social customs, tradition etc. As it prepares the most suitable ground for exercising freedom, it also creates an overwhelming blankness of meaning and purpose. Man meets this void when he contemplates the consequences of his actions, its ultimate contribution towards the fulfillment of human existence. An absurdist like Camus would argue that this attempt on human action or free choice is a far cry from a sustainable meaning. For him the objective world, stripped from every conventional/social symbolism is irrational. For him existence is a confrontation between human demand for rational stability and a contingent, indifferent universe. Camus's ideal human is the Greek mythological character who is eternally engaged in an aimless pursuit of pushing a rock upon the mountain peak only to see it roll down again. Unlike, Sartre and Kierkegaard, Camus does not assume that overcoming anxiety and exercising freedom of choice would provide existence a meaningful state. Camus says; "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart." ?? 26) The purport of this statement is that the function of this universe which does not adhere to human logic should not be questioned for legitimacy. Such attempts would only produce a void of meaninglessness which in effect would alienate the individual from the universe. Therefore the absurd condition should be regarded as the natural and only possible explanation of the world.

## II. Identity and Land in "Toba Tek Singh"

The short story "Toba Tek Singh" stands as a testimonial to the incoherence of the partition project of the Indian subcontinent. In August, 1947, as the partition of India and the formation of Pakistan were declared, the Hindu community in the provinces of Pakistan and Muslims in India had to migrate. These immigrants had no clue whatsoever about the ultimate aim of such political project. Those who migrated did it under the fear of being persecuted by the fanatics of both the religious groups. So, those who were morally against such suggestions could not help but comply with the collective will of the majority and find shelter in the new found land. The lunatics in the story, however, show the confusion that emerged after the partition was declared. The asylum is an instance of a miniature society where both the Hindu and the Muslim lunatics lived oblivious of their religious identity. It is a reflection of the borderline community who were being swayed by such totalizing ideologies as Nationalism, freedom etc during the Freedom Movement. But as a marginalized unit of a functioning community, the asylum along with its inmates is far removed from the politics that was taking place in the heart of the country. Such absence of the lunatics from the mainstream of history creates a void in their collective memory where the theory of the two nations cannot be accommodated.

The use of irrationality or madness as a driving motive of the story is notable from the existentialist viewpoint. Following Kierkegaard it can be said that all the lunatics in the asylum are unable to comprehend their true purpose in the world. It is because of their 'thrownness', a strayed subjectivity, that they become incongruent in the space and time of the story. Even when some of them take sides against each other as supporters of Pakistan or Hindustan, they are eventually motivated to contemplate the authenticity of such identity. The asylum is metaphysically located in the margins of rational discourse; therefore the inhabitants are left in a state of ontological lostness and bewilderment:

"Where [Pakistan] was, what its shape and size were of these things they knew nothing. And for this reason, the lunatics who were not entirely deranged, were forced to wonder whether they were presently in India or in Pakistan? And if Pakistan how was it that they had ended up here, despite never having moved and having been in India a short while ago?" (Manto? o 2)

In this particular story by Manto, the event of partition is interpreted as some vague or even absurd proposition

for the apolitical citizens of the country. After a long period of alienation under the British rule people took a long time to discover their identity through Nationalist discourses. So it was even more difficult for the subaltern society who was far removed from the political propaganda of the contesting sides, to immediately grasp the metaphoric significance of nationhood. To confront such state of meaninglessness, according to Camus is utter absurdity. He tells us, "[the] absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (26) The characters of the absurd world are forced to In such a Kafkaesque world of the story, even the lunatics try to establish a stable meaning to overcome the elusive idea of the partition. Here a lunatic can be seen fixated on confronting the absurd with an absurd of his own : I neither want o live in India nor in Pakistan. I'm happy in this tree." (Manto 3)

These words are spoken by a lunatic who faced a feat of anxiety over the confusion of India and Pakistan. While some inmates of the asylum were swayed by a vague sense of patriotism and fought each other, there were also such individuals, who faced an existential crisis in choosing their national affiliation. One of such inmates, Bishen Singh faced a similar crisis when he sought to find out where he belonged to amidst the confusing discourse of the partition:

"Whenever a discussion about India and Pakistan and the exchange of lunatics began in the asylum, he listened with keen interest. And, if ever, anybody asked his opinion, he gravely replied, 'Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di badhayana di mung di dal of the Pakistani government.' Later, however, in place of the Pakistani government', he had began to say, 'of the Toba Tek Singh government' and would regularly ask the other inmates if they knew where Toba Tek Singhhis native land-was." (5) The eponymous protagonist of the story asks an essential question: where does he belong? Through the existentialist approach this might be translated into a quest for essence, the search for a stable meaning to make peace with. But for Manto, the arbitrariness of the Partition really destabilized the meaning of nationhood and nationality for everyone who wished for a unified, meaningful concept of a free nation so much so that everyone who lacked such signification were forced to imagine quite arbitrary and irrational places as replacement for their 'home'. We realize it when we see a lunatic persistently trying to believe a tree as his 'home'. Manto could see the insurmountable gap between human understanding and political prudence and expresses the inherent destructiveness of such confusion:

"Nobody knew whether it was in India or in Pakistan. Whoever tried to explain would slide into confusing speculations that if Sialkot, which had once been in India, was now in Pakistan, would not tomorrow be in India? Or that all of India would become Pakistan? And who could say with any conviction that one day both Pakistan and India would not be wiped off the face of the earth?" (5) The existential trace of the story is its search for meaning in the shape of individual space and identity. All those citizens who migrated from both Pakistan and India had the least reason to relocate themselves and accommodate to a new national identity. Especially people like Manto who considered Partition as an act of utter mindlessness, felt the sense of alienation in the artificial atmosphere of the post-partition society. They therefore engaged in a form of self-identification by tracing the pre-partition memories in literature. There is an interesting conversation between Bishen Singh and a lunatic who believed himself to be God. Unable to find the any proper answer to his question, he asked 'God' whether it was in Pakistan or in India. The answer of the madman is as comical as it illustrates the absurd situation of Bishen Singh's life:

"It is neither in India nor in Pakistan. For the simple reason that I haven't given the order yet."(7)

The reaction to such an absurd proposition might be a bewildering dizziness for Bishen Singh for he bursts out saying, "Opadh di gudh gudh di annexe di badhayana di mung di dal of wahe Guruji da Khalsa and wahe Guruji di Fateh?jo bole so nihal, sat sri akal"(7). He receives a similar vague answer from his friend Fazal Din who was also unable to find a place for Toba Tek Singh in either India or Pakistan. Towards the end of the story we see the exchange of lunatics between the two nations take place at the border. Most of them had resigned to their fate either through protest or by choosing sides. But for the existential individual like Bishen Singh succumbing to the 'bad faith' of other lunatic would be meaningless. Rather he faced the absurd condition of his life by realizing that he was unable to find Toba Tek Singh in India or Pakistan. This acceptance of meaninglessness constitutes the death of his essential self. His symbolic location in no man's land highlights his alienation from essential truths of nationality:

"There behind the barbed wires was India. Here, behind barbed wires, was Pakistan. In the middle on a nameless piece of earth, lay Toba Tek Singh." ??10) It can be assumed that the way Bishen Singh wanted to face absurdity was through death. For Camus, to live or commit suicide is the only true philosophical question, because death is the ultimate philosophical reality. In the beginning of the story Bishen Shingh wanted to find Toba Tek Singh, at the end he resisted forced affiliations and inscribed his individual freedom by choosing to die in the metaphysical void of the no man's land.

## 2 III. The Mercurial Life in "Khaled Mian"

The story "Khaled Mian" is built up on the conflict between an inauthentic feeling of fear and the redeeming force of existential angst. The existential anxiousness or angst is necessary for coming into terms with the meaninglessness of worldly reasoning that is the absurd. According to Sartre the existential human being must face the absurd situation of human life. Life as such is not guided by any logical progression or divine providence. Therefore, whatever transpires cannot be explained by relation of cause and effect. In a world bereft of god, it is futile to establish meaning to with the absurdity. Man can only overcome the condition of despair and

subjectivity, when he recognizes and acknowledges the absurdity of our existence and becomes an existential being. In "Khaled Mian", the protagonist Mumtaz is obsessed with the wellbeing of his son Khaled. His daily life starts with cleaning "cigarette butts, burnt matchsticks and things of this kind from every nook and cranny in the house" (Manto 54). He is careful that his son would not pick those up as he is in the habit of putting these in his mouth. Mumtaz is half aware of his sub-conscious obsession for his son Khaled. Thus when the fear of death consumes him, he argues with the irrationality of such convictions. As a devout muslim he insists his instincts to have faith in God's benevolence. The fear of death to Mumtaz is akin to a satanic dictate that can be fought off with God's presence:

"Placing his hand on him, Mumtaz said, 'God, be my son's protector.' "(57)

It is the thought of this impending death that places the self stark naked before the existential absurdity. The self that believes in essence cannot come into terms with this brutal reality and succumb to "bad faith". But the existential self acknowledges the absurdity of the lived world. It foregrounds its experience over the essential belief system. But in the process of this metamorphosis of the self into an individual the person is inflicted with the existential angst. Mumtaz tries to fend off his fear of his son's death and tries to replace it with his faith in God. He realizes his schizophrenic fear as a result of his will to be free from the trepidation of death. He says, "it's my excessive love for this child that's causing this fear" (56). The lived reality of death haunts him in the form of existential question: "Does every father live with the fear that his child will die?" (56)

If life thrives on essential, transcendental ideas we are vulnerable to halting situations which needs an existential explanation. Life stripped of 'a priori' reasoning, consequently wants individual meanings to be inducted by the experiencing self. Thus in confronting feelings like conflict, guilt suffering and death which are non-negotiable in essential terms "a person finds out that there is no essential self" (Reynolds 10). The supernatural voice that dictates Mumtaz holds his actions in control. It starts colonizing his mind by infusing the fear of death with his everyday life. It tries to "He thought he would stop and have a glass of water. But, God knows from where, a sense of foreboding suddenly took hold of him. 'Look, if you drink water,' it seemed to say, 'your Khaled will die.' "(62) This alter self is an expression of his fear. His fears originate from his social obligations, his duty to his son, wife and the larger society and also to the transcendental God that provides meaning of his being. So when he confronts the inevitability of Khaled's death, he is actually experiencing such boundary situations, as mentioned by Karl Jaspers, which ultimately allows him to realize the existential truth that death is a constitutive part of this finite life. In fact, normalizing death and ignoring it altogether or experiencing fear in death is considered 'inauthentic' by existential mode of Heidegger. While focusing on the relative absence of Khaled after his death, Mumtaz falls prey to the fear of death as an 'empirical actuality'. This way he cannot (Reynolds 83-84). However, anxiety caused by death is authentic because it is expressed by an individual who separates himself from the homogenizing ideology that everyone will die to death is my ownmost reality. So, finally he prays not for the life of Khaled, but to claim his individuality back: "He prayed not for Khaled, but for himself. 'God, free me from this ordeal! If you want to kill Khaled, then kill Khaled! What torment is this?' (Manto 65)

This 'authentic angst' individualizes him by destroying his illusion of having a fixed and stable identity constructed with social ties. Rather he finds solace accepting death as a phenomenon of experience. Succumbing to fear, he lived in a future alerted always by the death knell of his son. With the realization of the redeeming quality of death, he discovers his persona which seeks freedom of the self: "Khaled did not move his head to say no. Mumtaz implored him, 'Khaled mian, will you take my fears away with you?' Mumtaz thought Khaled nodded his head in assent" (66)

The story gains its existential thrust from the meaningless apprehension of death that intervenes the inauthentic daily life of the protagonist. Mumtaz was busy in arranging the first birthday of his son Khaled, a celebration of life. But he is transformed by an irrational fear of his son's death. Formerly he was busy with the daily chores that befell on him as his social role of a father. His obsession with cleanliness ensued from his attempt to avoid any possibility of harm or threat to the life of Khaled. Therefore, when that irrational foreboding of death engulfs his mind, his obsession moves from cleanliness to the escalating fear of the inevitable. Mumtaz never questions the rationality of the premonition that he has but overtly depends on the assurance provided by his wife to appease his agitated thoughts. But his overt experience of anxiety leads him to question the sanity of his emotional attachment with his son: "But why do I love him so much? Do all love their children in this way? Does every father live with the fear that his child will die? What the hell has happened to me?" (56)

These lines reflect the internal torment of Mumtaz that will later lead him to question the accepted death as a "ownmost possibility" authenticity of his being. Through a major part of the story, he depends mostly on the external truths like assurances from his wife, the doctors, the servant, to suppress his existential experience of the truth that Khaled is going to die anyway. It is strikingly notable the number of times he prays to God to take the responsibility of his son's condition.

"O God it's all in your hands" (Manto 57)

"God be my son's protector" (57)

"Perhaps now we've seen God's mercy" (60)

"By God's will, it'll take effect" (61)

It seems that Mumtaz transplants his ego on God's will to save his son. But it is actually a denial of existential responsibility on his part. Freedom means freedom to choose and inscribe meaning in the phenomenon of life. Mumtaz is unable to explain the fatalistic foreboding that prevents him from conventional responses. It prevents

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him from drinking water and smoking a cigarette. It tells him to leave the hospital, order and to throw it away. Amidst this psychological torment he faces the questions of life and death, of existing and dying:

"Why are children who are meant to die born in the first place? Why is that life born that has to go so quickly into the mouth of death?"(64) This questions forms the ultimate limit of human comprehension of being which Karl Jaspers has described as "boundary situations"(Grey 118). It is such a feeling of uncanny when one cannot penetrate or see beyond the future possibility of one's condition. In spite of that such recognitions of human finitude are significant in making life meaningful. Until now Mumtaz was unaware of the anxiety of truth that results from facing the unreasonable phenomenon of human life. The voices in his head reminds him that he can do nothing to save his son from death as it was ascribed to Khaled's life from the moment of his birth. His existential reasoning has nullified all the traces of God, society and relations as inauthentic factors. But before reconciling with this truth Mumtaz faces 'angst' as a penultimate step towards achieving existential selfhood. So it is not surprising that he hears no voice after liberating himself from all the responsibilities of Khaled's life.

Therefore the man who was trying to escape his existence by deluding himself into believing the in authentic fear of death, can overcome his fear by acknowledging his existential angst, that he can only establish his individual self if he denounces the fear of death. Like Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, he finally realises that the phenomenon of death is his' own most reality'. Social and religious mores like paternal love, affection, family ties, responsibility constitutes his 'das man' self. This subconscious self directs his actions and obstructs his individuality. So, he expresses his discontent and decides to face the reality without any 'bad faith' of the 'das man'. By the end it can be fairly understood that Mumtaz only wanted his existential freedom back. As his will becomes resolute, he wishes death for Khaled, an act not prompted by his existential angst. But it liberates him and "he will no longer avoid exposure nor the shudder of dread before Nothingness" (Grey 124).

IV.

### 3 Conclusion

In his short stories Manto can succinctly capture the effect of the partition on the civilian life and both of this stories enumerates the psychological trauma that the innocent apolitical people had to go through. Their existential condition is due to a loss of belonging, both in the material and emotional plain. The sense of disorientation that is captured in "Khaled Mian" is a reflection of the fragmented social self of the migrated individuals. But the protagonists of the stories do not conform to their situation but become engulfed in a search for its existential significance. Existential interpretation of life is a rejection of all given interpretation of human existence an attempting to rebuild it as it takes place. But unfortunately for Bishen Singh, his whole identity is essentialised and coordinated with a geographical location which defines him as a name: Toba Tek Singh. His struggle was not to escape it but to establish it by locating it in either India or Pakistan. He faces the absurd in the irrationality of the Partition hence becomes alienated. In spite of that he does not succumb to the hegemony of the common discourse of nationality, instead dies in a metaphorical blankness of the no man's land. Mumtaz, on the other hand experiences a violent dilemma between the worldly and the existential. He is tormented by the possibility of freedom but unable to recognise it. In the true existential manner he faces a traumatic condition of existential angst which enables him to see the truth in death. They both experience nothingness in contesting the impersonal nature of life and their actions questions the essential interpretations of human deeds that determine the ontological experiences of humanity.



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