

**The major theme of Toba Tek Singh is mental illness. Do you agree?**

A 1995 publication by Indo-Pakistani writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, *Toba Tek Singh* is a profound short story about the relationship between India and Pakistan. It is as well a satire on the concept of Partition. Manto is known for his daring representation of the distress of Indians during the 1947 Partition. In his Partition stories he has located the actions at the time of the Partition of India and Pakistan. Originally written in Urdu, the story deals with the inmates of a Lahore lunatic asylum. Written with a tinge of autobiographical memory, Manto uses the asylum as the microcosm of the world. It is a world where people of different classes and religions live a life of mental imbalance and trauma. The protagonist of the story, Bishen Singh, is symbolic of the pain and trauma of dislocation, displacement. Beside him, his fellow inmates at the lunatic asylum are Partition refugees. But they appear saner than the outside world of governmental rift and political chaos.

The story begins with an image of the Partition, ridiculing political leaders on both sides, and reflecting the confusion of identity. The story takes us to a Lahore lunatic asylum and focuses on its old Sikh inmate, Bishen Singh, called Toba Tek Singh because he was once a wealthy landowner of that city. The no man's land between the two borders where he lies dead finally, perhaps symbolises Manto's rejection of the division of the country. As Gilmartin says, the partition of territory tears asunder the linkages of ancestry and place. And no work of literature encapsulates this more dramatically than Manto's Urdu short story, **Toba Tek Singh**.

The first light of Indian independence was accompanied by blood-drenched bodies and severed limbs of men, women and children. This is the nightmare of partition from which the Indian subcontinent never fully recovered. The gigantic human catastrophe of the Partition has been portrayed better by creative writers like Manto than by historians. Most of his writings, specially those dealing with the Partition, are gruesome, horrible. The two Holocausts, the Second World War and the Partition of India saw the worst butcheries of modern world history. Expatriate fiction, with its focus on emotional issues, reflects the pathetic problem of modern man. Getting uprooted from native cultural traditions; the loss of the indigenous language; man's position as the social outcast; together with multiple injuries to the psyche; all account for the identity deterioration in Manto's Partition stories. Bharti Mukherjee, another expatriate writer, has also admitted pulling oneself out of one's native culture, and trying to fit in an alien culture: is part of establishing a new identity and the trauma of partition. Manto was so deeply affected by Partition it was at least partly responsible for his alcoholism and consequent death about eight years after the partition. The torment Manto personally experienced during the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent is painted in the darkest colours in his most well-known story, **Toba Tek Singh**.

While the story is a piece of fiction, it is based on a real such exchange in 1950: when Hindu and Sikh lunatics were deported to India from Pakistani lunatic asylums and their Muslim counterparts in India were deported to Pakistan. Thus, the Lahore asylum in the story frames a larger picture within a small frame. The concept of Partition seems absurd, insane in itself. It has a profound psychological impact on the sufferers of Partition in general. Actually the inmates of the asylum represent the prevailing atmosphere of political lunacy that culminated in partition. The ruthlessness of mankind resulted in the

loss of the sense of belonging in the minds of the inhabitants of both the border provinces, disturbed identities, and a feeling of uncertainty. The character in the story of the Sikh lunatic asking a fellow Sikh inmate offers an insight into the plain lunacy of demarcation on the basis of religion: "Sardarji, why are we being sent to India? We don't even know the language they speak in that country. "This simple question shows that the lunatics are much more sane than the power-hungry political leaders.

The above quoted words of the Sikh lunatic throw light on the predicament of the lunatics caught in the web of the political world. They suffer loss of identity when they try to align themselves with the chaos of the outer world. The similar theme can be found in another of Manto's short story, The Dog of Titwal. Here an innocent creature, a dog named Jhun Jhun, is caught in the casual cross-fire between the Indian and Pakistani armies and dies a pathetic death like Bishen Singh.

Manto hints at the basic sanity of the lunatics of the asylum with these words; 'Not all inmates were mad.' This is an innuendo the real lunatics are outside the asylum; the power-hungry political leaders. The simplicity of the lunatics' minds saves them from any influence of the outer world: 'They probably had a vague idea why India was being divided and what Pakistan was, but as for the present situation, they were equally clueless.' The inmates are clueless about their loss of belonging and identity. One inmate is so puzzled with the politically complicated and lengthy procedure of partition, he climbs up a tree and refuses to come down: 'I wish to live neither in India nor in Pakistan. I wish to live in this tree.' The absurdity of this reflects the absurdity of the politically induced partition. All the chaos of partition is reflected in the Muslim lunatic's declaration that he is Qaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Above all, the absence of psychiatrists in the lunatic asylum shows Manto's criticism of bureaucratic procedures.

In the story, the main conflict is shown through the character of Toba Tek Singh, who speaks gibberish and is inquisitive about his home in the city of Toba Tek Singh. While his attachment with this city shows his belongingness, mad as he is, his gibberish is significant. It is an amalgamation of varied languages, religions and thoughts without any balanced proportion. The appearance of Fazal Din, one of Bishen Singh's friends from Toba Tek Singh, brings an idea of redemptive humanity. He brings news of his family. He falters momentarily when speaking about Singh's daughter, Roop Kaur. This indicates something has gone wrong with her during the migration to India. Fazal Din requests Bishen Singh to remember him to their mutual Sikh acquaintances, bhai Balbir Singh, bahain Amrit Kaur. Through these episodes, Manto shows the division of gods (Bishen Singh's gibberish actually indicates his indecision to choose between Muslim and Sikh faiths); denial of love (all these inmates have been left behind by their families); inability of communities to take decisions.

The action reaches its climax when Bishen Singh gets obsessed with Toba Tek Singh. He refuses to go to any place: but sits on the strip of land between the two barbed wire borders in the no-man's land between the two countries. He claims this land as his own while many persuasions are made to make him budge from the place: 'but it had no effect on Bishen Singh.' (p. 78) The narrator ultimately equates Bishen Singh with Toba Tek Singh. Bishen Singh himself suffers from the sense of loss of belongingness. Thus, in the narrator's formulation, the place becomes a victim of the loss of belongingness. Manto thus posits a satire

of the political power-mongers who toy with the psychological trauma of people irresponsibly; creating and dividing nations as their whims dictate.

As the story progresses, Bishen Singh's desperation to find out about the fate of Toba Tek Singh increases. He approaches an inmate who has declared himself God, and who replies it is 'Neither in India nor in Pakistan, because,...we have issued no orders in this respect.' (p. 75) This instance reflects the utter hopelessness regarding the issue of belonging. It also reflects the irresponsible, arbitrary bureaucratic policy-making when decisions like the Partition and the drawing of boundaries were carried out.

In the end, Bishen Singh stands unmoveable in the no-man's land between India and Pakistan during the transfer of inmates. He stands resolute despite the numerous attempts by the soldiers of both sides to remove him. It is in this no-man's land that he dies. His last moment is described thus by Manto: "Just before sunrise, Bishen Singh, the man who had stood on his legs for fifteen years, screamed and as officials from the two sides rushed towards him, he collapsed to the ground." (pp. 78-79) Here behind barbed wire fences, lay India and Pakistan. In between lay Toba Tek Singh; it is kept deliberately vague whether Manto means the man or the place. These last lines highlight the cruelty of the Partition and make us question the rationality of people behind this decision.

Thus, Manto uses the metaphor of madness, the setting of a lunatic asylum and his characters, specially Bishen Singh to comment on the irrationality behind the Partition of India. He problematizes the notion of sanity using the world of the asylum and presenting it as a mirror of the external world.