

Manto's 'Toba Tek Singh'

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'No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality'

Shirley Jackson *"The Haunting of Hill House"*

'Toba Tek Singh'

*'Toba Tek Singh'*¹ is a tale about the partition of the Indo-Pak sub-continent. It is, by some accounts, the best short story ever written on this subject². 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 more 'sane' and 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. When news of this decision spreads, it causes consternation among the inmates of the asylum. Their fear is made worse by their ignorance of 'Hindustan' and 'Pakistan'. According to one of the inmates, Pakistan is 'the place in Hindustan where razors are made.'¹ Another volunteers that the people in Hindustan 'go strutting around like devils.'¹ One of the inmates

climbs a tree, seats himself on a branch and gives an unbroken two-hour speech about the subtle problem of Pakistan and Hindustan. When the guards ask him to come down, he climbs even higher. When he is warned and threatened, he says, "I don't want to live in either Hindustan or Pakistan. I'll live right here in this tree." A quiet radio-engineer, for some obscure reason decides that the situation warrants freedom from clothes and starts to wander around the garden completely naked.

Manto gives us brief, pithy descriptions of some of the lunatics e.g. A Muslim lunatic from Chiniot, a past member of the All-India Muslim League, announces that he is Quaid-e-Azam and then promptly declares war on a Sikh, who, in his madness considered himself Master Tara Singh.

Midway through the story, Manto introduces the titular character, known to everyone as 'Toba Tek Singh'. His real name is Bishan Singh and he has been confined to the asylum for fifteen years, during which 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.'¹ Once a month when his relatives came to meet him, he agrees to take a bath and cleanup. He has a daughter who has grown older visiting him, and still cries every time she sees her father.

In the aftermath of partition his relatives have stopped visiting him. His one desire is that they visit him again. The reason he asks repeatedly about 'Toba Tek Singh' is that his lands were in Toba Tek Singh and he thinks the relatives are in Toba Tek Singh too. A Muslim friend from Toba Tek Singh, Fazal Din, arrives to inform him of his family's safe arrival in Hindustan. Just as Toba Tek Singh begins to remember and ask after his daughter, Fazal Din mumbles, stammers and tells him she is fine. But we realize what has happened to her. The same fate that befell tens of

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Contribution

All Authors have contributed in Study Design, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Data Interpretation, Manuscript Writing and Approval.

thousands of women during the madness of partition has claimed the innocence and perhaps the life of Toba Tek Singh's daughter, Roop Kaur as well.

'Toba Tek Singh' also learns from Fazal Din that the tehsil of Toba Tek Singh is now situated inside Pakistan. He is unwilling to leave the place of his ancestors. When he is taken to the border he refuses to cross-over into Hindustan. Instead he runs off into the no-man's land in between the two countries where 'in the pre-dawn peace and quiet, from Bishan Singh's throat came a shriek that pierced the sky.... From here and there a number of officers came running, and they saw that the man who for fifteen years, day and night, had constantly stayed on his feet, lay prostrate. There, behind the barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh.'¹

Thus ends Manto's most poignant short story. The partition of India and Pakistan literally ripping into two the soul of Toba Tek Singh and claiming his life.

Saadat Hassan Manto suffered from anxiety and other mental issues from an early age. He later became alcoholic. He continued to suffer from symptoms of anxiety and depression all of his life.³ It has been suggested that his mental distress was a source of his creativity and helped him write some of his masterly short stories.⁴ The relationship between madness and creativity is a matter of great popular, as well as scholarly, fascination. It is a hotly debated topic⁵, to say the least. Perhaps this debate will never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Suffice to say that the long list of illustrious names that have succumbed to melancholy and madness ensures that this topic remains alive: Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Vincent Van Gogh and others in the West, to name a few. In our part of the world Mir Taqi 'Mir', Mirza Ghalib and many others who have fought with the demons of melancholy and madness. Some triumphed, others succumbed.

'Toba Tek Singh' is Saadat Hasan Manto's most personal story. He wrote it while he himself was an inmate in Lahore's mental hospital. It was, in many ways, reflective of his own inner confusion and lost sense of identity. "Writing, at its best, is a lonely life,"

the great Ernest Hemingway had 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. 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."

Could Manto's life have been saved? Was there a way to help him overcome his demons and continue creating his masterpieces? We may never know the answer to these questions but one thing is certain: the urge to create extracts a high price. It is our task as healers to understand that and help our patients understand it as well. Modern medicines may not offer a panacea to the wounded artist but a sympathetic ear and a compassionate heart can go a long way in helping them heal and perhaps continue the fight against their inner demons.

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