Regarded widely as Manto's greatest short story, "Toba Tek Singh" brings together most of the distinctive features of his style and his most urgent themes. The story displays his characteristic surreal blurring of reason and unreason, as well as his focus on the rich diversity of human perspectives and experiences that the modern nation-state often suppresses. While emphasizing the role of religion and politics in the devastation of innocent lives, the work celebrates the resilience of the individual spirit.

Toba Tek Singh[1]

A couple of years after the Partition of the country,[2] it occurred to the respective governments of India and Pakistan that inmates of lunatic asylums, like prisoners, should also be exchanged. Muslim lunatics in India should be transferred to Pakistan and Hindu and Sikh lunatics in Pakistani asylums should be sent to India.

Whether this was a reasonable or an unreasonable idea is difficult to say. One thing, however, is clear. It took many conferences of important officials from the two sides to come to this decision. Final details, like the date of actual exchange, were carefully worked out. Muslim lunatics whose families were still residing in India were to be left undisturbed, the rest moved to the border for the exchange. The situation in Pakistan was slightly different, since almost the entire population of Hindus and Sikhs had already migrated to India.[3] The question of keeping non-Muslim lunatics in Pakistan did not, therefore, arise.

While it is not known what the reaction in India was, when the news reached the Lahore lunatic asylum, it immediately became the subject of heated discussion. One Muslim lunatic, a regular reader of the fire-eating daily newspaper *Zamindar*, when asked what Pakistan was, replied after deep reflection: 'The name of a place in India where cut-throat razors are manufactured.'

This profound observation was received with visible satisfaction.

A Sikh lunatic asked another Sikh: 'Sardarji,[4] why are we being sent to India? We don't even know the language they speak in that country.'

1. Translated by Khalid Hasan. The story takes its title from the name of a small town, primarily known as a Sikh pilgrimage center, now in Pakistan.

2. Most of the Indian subcontinent, or what is now South Asia, was a single political unit in the British-Indian empire. When the British decided to leave in 1947, the continuous mainland was "partitioned" into India and Pakistan, with Nepal and Sri Lanka forming separate nations. Here the narrator refers to the undivided mainland, before decolonization, as "the country."

3. The British decided on the Partition of 1947 mainly in response to the demand by the All-India Muslim League for a separate homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims. In 1947–48, about 14 million people migrated across the new borders of India and Pakistan, with numerous Muslims moving into Pakistani territory, and comparable numbers of Hindus and Sikhs moving into Indian territory. After independence, Pakistan explicitly defined itself as a Muslim nation, whereas India defined itself as a secular republic.

4. Sikhism emerged as an organized religion in the early sixteenth century but continued to evolve under its first ten gurus (masters) until the eighteenth century. Since then, the Sikh male has often been known as a *sardar* (leader, prince); "Sardarji" is therefore a common term of respectful address.