

Relevance of Saadat Hassan Manto's Writings in the Post-Colonial Era

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the aesthetics of place and person in Saadat Hassan **Manto's works**, mainly his short stories that are masterpiece of South Asian **literature**. Saadat Hasan Manto was born in 1912 in a village in Ludhiana district, Punjab, then part of the British Empire. He lived in the cities of Amritsar and Aligarh for a while, before moving to Mumbai. After the partition, he migrated to Lahore in Pakistan. He died there, somewhat prematurely, in 1955. The government of Pakistan posthumously awarded him the Nisshaan-i-Imtiyaz, a prestigious civil award, in 2012. Manto is, therefore, a transnational entity.

He is known as a Punjabi writer, even though he hasn't written much in Punjabi. He wrote in Urdu, so he is an Urdu writer. It doesn't seem like he took religion very seriously – he is still known as a Muslim writer. In his youth, he was a member of the Indian Progressive Writers association. The latter had a distinct leftward lean. So Manto could be called a Marxist writer too. Something which is important from the point of view of his cultural and literary identity – and which is a point of contemporary controversy and relevance- is that his family has roots in Kashmir. After being displaced from Kashmir, his ancestors moved to Punjab. Manto lived in his characters: drunk men who had no morals, women who stayed up all night for men who did not want to go home, tortured souls all. He had a special corner in his heart for the women, he had observed them from his window in Faras Road, where he first stayed in Mumbai. Women who smelled of the men who did not care if her back ached or no, if the water pot beside the bed was washed or no. Saadat Hasan Manto's works have always been in vogue, with Partition stories such as 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Thanda Gosht' and 'Khol Do' forming a bulk of literary discourse not just in Pakistan and India but across the world. That the icon has such a fan following is not without reason, for no other writer comes close to describing so vividly, and with a brutal honesty, the horrors of that rupture the way Manto did. His stories, contentious and daring, are masterpieces of literature.

Key words: Manto, Trauma, Emotions, Partition, India, Pakistan.

Introduction

Manto was a fearless champion of the truth and was disdainful of any kind of hypocrisy. He wrote for marginalised peoples, openly mocking orthodoxy that sought to suppress some voices. Manto's critics got louder, angrier, but he produced one story after another that showed empathy for those on the periphery. Manto's characters are prostitutes and pimps, writers, even madmen. They are often nameless people whose human essence and relentless quest for identity and dignity he sought to explore.

'Mummy' is about an ageing and compassionate matron of a brothel. Although she is seen as a nuisance and is harassed by outsiders, Mummy cares for her clients. She is furious when her favourite client seduces a minor and beats him mercilessly. Yet, when the same client falls sick, she is the one who takes care of him. Despite her kind-heartedness, Mummy is compelled to leave town while those who visit her mehfiles, the well-off and the so-called respected people, continue to enjoy their status in society. Manto brings out this irony beautifully. The story shows his respect for women who are ostracised by society, but who nevertheless retain their dignity and humanness and expose society's hypocrisy. Manto believed that if given an opportunity, the marginalised could challenge the unjust mores of the times.

What Manto constantly tries to point out through his stories is that society has failed to provide succour to those who are most in need. It's a dog-eat-dog world; only the fittest survive. But even in those circumstances, love flourishes and dies, and small human deeds stand out for their poignancy. Manto's stories shock the reader with their graphic yet humane descriptions.

'Hatak' is another such story where a fille de joie, Saugandhi, falls in love with a policeman. One night, he warns her that no other man can come close to her. A constant game of betrayal and lies plays out with the human body as its site.

"Manto not only profiles his times but reflects unforgivingly on our collective consciousness. He clearly visualises the politics of marginalisation which disowns the very people that are the real constituents of a civic order," Anwar had said.

In fact, Manto thought of himself as uncared for, long before he migrated reluctantly to Pakistan. He was tried thrice for obscenity before he moved to the new country. He saw what lay in store for him in India and in Pakistan. He understood that people like him would never get their due. And while he lived, he was acutely conscious of his predicament.

Alcohol addiction stands out as perhaps the most significant of Manto's mental health difficulties. Although he always drank heavily, Manto's drinking escalated after his move to Lahore. His family became so concerned that they twice admitted him to the antialcoholic ward of the Punjab Mental Hospital for treatment between 1951 and 1952 (Jalal 2012). This was not successful; Manto progressed to binge drinking and started to experience hallucinations (Jalal 2012), a symptom of alcohol-induced psychosis (Hashmi and Aftab 2012). Noting the high rates of comorbidity of alcohol addiction and mood disorders, Hashmi and Aftab have suggested that Manto used alcohol for self-medication, arguing that he 'sought refuge in substance abuse to ease his psychological pain' (2012, 1096). This was a time when Manto was at his lowest, struggling financially and finding it difficult to situate his sense of identity in Pakistan. Manto's work was never moralising; he left it up to his readers to form judgements, preferring instead to record events bluntly without

comment (Jalal 2012). However, an engagement with, and indeed challenge towards, popular attitudes is implicit in “Toba Tek Singh.” Manto’s blunt and matter-of-fact descriptive style presents mental illness as a fact of life; it is neither dramatised nor evaded, nor is it trivialised as cheap comedy. It is just there. This was a normalising approach. Significantly there is a conspicuous absence of psychiatrists in “Toba Tek Singh”; the target of Manto’s criticism, as Saint has argued, was not mental health professionals or the practice of psychiatry but rather the bureaucratic procedures and those according to whose whims they were implemented (2012). The publication of the story may itself have had some impact on the exclusionist popular attitudes towards the mentally ill that were so prevalent at the time. Jain and Sarin have described how the Amritsar asylum psychiatrist, Dr. Vidysagar, by accommodating patients and their families together in tents due to the inadequacy of facilities, pioneered a model for greater family engagement in the care of the mentally ill (2012). Therefore, it does not seem unreasonable to associate his alcohol use with a potential depressive disorder. Ultimately, it was liver cirrhosis due to alcoholism that killed Manto at the premature age of forty-four.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **Saadat Hasan Manto's works; occupy a unique position in literature.** He documented Partition excessively, all the while placing the misery of losing land and lives at the centre of his narrative. The author’s influence not just remains untainted, but in many ways, is renewed with every passing year

A Stylistic Analysis of Manto

Yahaan Saadat Hasan Manto Dafan Hai.

Uskay Seenay Mein Fan-E-Afsana Nigari Ke Saare Israar-O-Ramooz Dafan Hain.

Woh Ab Bhi Manon Mitti Ke Neeche Soch Raha Hai Ke Woh Bada Afsaana Nigaar Hai Ya Khuda!

Translation: “Here is buried Saadat Hasan Manto. With him lie buried all secrets of the art of fiction writing. Under mounds of soil, he is still wondering who is the greater short-story writer: him or God?” reads the epilogue of one of Manto’s books, a self-chosen epitaph.

Saadat Hasan Manto, who wrote mostly in Urdu, who lived both in Bombay and Lahore, who loved collecting fountain pens and shoes, who penned images that mirrored and constructed pre and post-colonial realities with a flair of simplicity and brutal, cold honesty, was indeed one of the greatest short-story writers of Urdu literature. His stories, like the name of God, are still remembered today. Manto was born in Ludhiana, Punjab on 11 May 1912. Under the influence of the scholar and writer Abdul Bari Alig, he was introduced to Russian and French authors. And before he started writing for magazines and newspapers, he translated Hugo’s *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* in Urdu which was published as *Sarguzasht-e-Aseer* (A Prisoner's Story). After moving to Bombay, he associated with and became great friends with Ismat Chughtai, Naushad, Shyam, and Ashok Kumar. While in Bombay, he was an editor for a film magazine, until he left the job to move to Delhi to work for All India Radio’s Urdu service. During the short span of eighteen months, he produced four radio plays, only to return to Bombay again in 1942, where he stayed until after the partition of British India to move to Pakistan in 1948. Through this period, Manto earned a name for not just his stories but also for writing screenplays for Bollywood films. Adding to his oeuvre, were stories like ‘Bu’ (Smell), ‘Kali Shalwar’ (Black Salvar), short stories collection called *Dhuan* (Smoke) and *Manto ke Afsaane*, and an essay collection called *Manto ke Mazamin*.

While colonial India was in flux, he was transforming into a writer who would be recognized as Manto, a name that would carry with itself the radicalism, honesty, brutality, freedom and terseness that was unique to his writing. Four years before his death, Manto wrote a sketch on himself titled, Manto on Manto. In it, he would come to accept the fact that the beginning of his writing was “a result of the clash” between his parents. Many scholars thereafter would attribute the beginning of Manto, the writer’s rebellion to the man’s rebellion against his strict father.

As a child, Manto had been a witness to the freedom movement in his home city Amritsar. He was seven at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. He wrote his first story, ‘Tamasha’, with an urge for originality after writing several translations, based on the Massacre of 1919 which was narrated from the perspective of a seven-year-old. His impressions of society thus, became the source of his writings. While living in Bombay, he made the city his muse. His stories set in the city, utilize the setting as an unfazed part of it, without any ornate descriptions. Stories like ‘Khaled Mian’, ‘Ram Khilvan’ or ‘Ten Rupees’, which mentions a child sent into prostitution by her mother, a chawl and a sea, all of which foregrounds the girl’s innocence and her love for cars.

“If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth.”

Manto’s stories were themed on a range of issues, exposing the psyche of the society that contained them. He wrote about prostitution, adolescent anxiety, sex, communal conflicts and most importantly, Partition of India. The exploitation of oppressed females and their psyche gets spoken through the life of a prostitute (‘Hatak’, ‘Black Salwar’) or that of an adolescent’s sexual discovery through the means of a violet coloured blouse (‘Blouse’). The confusion and madness that ensued with the partition of British India is mirrored in his widely acclaimed story ‘Toba Tek Singh’ and the horrifying violence against women in the light of the partition in ‘Khol Do’. He also penned down the violence that followed the Partition as chilling episodes published in 1948 in a collection of sketches called ‘Siyah Hashiye’ (Black Margins), some of which were written in as short as the length of a paragraph, like ‘Jelly’, in which a child mistakes an ice vendor’s blood mixed with melted ice from his cart for jelly.

Unable to classify his work in a single box, critics, writers and people of his time called his work obscene, progressive, left-leaning, reactionary, sensational and more. While he had already been tried for his story ‘Bu’ under a colonial law of obscenity, it was in post partition Lahore, where the litigation against his story ‘Thanda Gosht’ (Cold Flesh) got more serious and drew backlash from both literary and religious fronts. The story which exposed the destruction of conscience in the wake of partition, was one of his most unsettling works. The trial resulted in a punishment of three years in jail and three hundred rupees fine, but Manto was later on left off by the judge.

Manto’s migration to Pakistan, which had also led to arguments between him and his dear friend Chughtai, brought more problems for both the writer and the man. Aside from the exhaustion of the trials, there were financial troubles and his increasing alcoholism. “My present life is full of hardship. After working day and night, I barely make enough to fulfill my daily needs. The fear that keeps gnawing at me is that were I to die suddenly, who will look after my wife and three little daughters?” he wrote in an essay.

PARTITION IN THE WORKS OF MANTO

Partition was both the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia and a historical process that has continued unfolding to this day. It is common to hear in the subcontinent that the most pressing problems besetting India and Pakistan today have their origin in the decisions of expediency taken in 1947. Painful memories of displacement and the horrific killing of kith and kin left deep psychological scars that have not healed. The traumatic memories have fuelled hostile relations between India and Pakistan, compounding the difficulties in resolving disputes like Kashmir, sharing of Himalayan river waters and the issue of Muslim identity in postcolonial South Asia. An exploration of Manto's life and literature provides, a novel way to address the complex relationship between the event and the process of partition. Micro historical detail can illuminate the texture of macro historical change. Historical investigations of causation and experience have been running of late on parallel tracks and would benefit from being put on a collision course. The aim however is to seek innovative insights into the modern and contemporary history of India and Pakistan through the prism of fiction. An astute witness to his times, Manto's *A Tale of 1947* (Saha'e) gives an immediate and penetrating account of those troubled and troubling times. It also gives us some clue to the reasons for Manto's own migration to Pakistan. The story is set in Bombay. It is about two friends Jugal and Mumtaz. When Jugal came to know that his uncle is being killed by some Muslims in Lahore and he said to his Muslim friend 'if Hindu-Muslim killings start here, I don't know what I'll do'. 'What'll you do?' Mumtaz asked. 'I don't know. May be I'll kill you', he had replied darkly. Mumtaz kept quiet and for the next eight days he didn't speak to anyone; on the ninth day he said he was sailing for Karachi that afternoon (216). In the meantime Manto told a story of Sehai (a hindu) to his friends to make himself clear in front of Jugal. Sehai, a victim to communal violence, spent his last moment of life in Mumtaz hands. And he gave him money and ornaments as a trust, "There's a packet in there... it contains Sultan's ornaments and her twelve hundred rupees... I wanted her to have her money and the ornaments... would you please give them to her... tell her she should leave for a safe place... but... please... look after yourself first!"(220-221). At the time of partition nobody was willing to trust on anyone. But Sehai did. At the end of the story Jugal understands his friend but it was too late. His best known post 1947 stories, *Thanda Ghost* (Cold Meat) and *Khol Do* (Open it) tackled the horrors of partition. His depiction of women and young girls being kidnapped from refugee camps, trains or even their homes and the subsequent horror they went through is sadly, only conveys the reality of that time. Manto stormed the literary circles with *Toba Tek Singh*, which he wrote in 1954 after spending time in Lahore's mental asylum for his alcoholism. Regarded as his magnum opus *Toba Tek Singh* is a scathing comment on the absurdity of the decision and the policy of the two postcolonial states to split up the inmates of the mental asylum according to their religious affiliation – "The majority of the lunatics were against this exchange. This is because they could not understand why they were being uprooted from their homes" (219). Manto's message is searing but clear, the madness of partition was greater than the insanity of all the inmates put together. The illogically of borders between India and Pakistan was the theme of several of Manto's stories, including *Titwal ka kutta* (The Dog of Titwal) and *Aakhri Salute* (The Last Salute). But it was in his short story *Yazid* evocatively translated as "When the Waters will Flow again" that Manto provided the most thought-provoking insight into the real nature of Indo-Pakistan enmity. *Yazid*, set against the backdrop of partition violence that had resulted in the death of protagonist Karimdad's father and his wife's brother, the story questions the absurdity of expecting fairness from an enemy. While his wife wallows in grief for her dead brother, Karimdad adopts a stoical position. He counters the villagers' condemnation of his father's murderers with the statement "Whatever has happened has happened due to our own fault" (102) Manto acted as bold chronicler of history that no one could wish away. His personal struggles and setbacks gave

him a perspective on the uneasy nexus emerging between state and society, making him particularly discerning spectator and critic of the post-colonial moment. Today Manto stands taller on the literary horizon than others who wrote about the mass migration of 1947. If Margaret Bourke-White froze the scenes of this event with her black-and-white photographs for LIFE magazines. Manto archived this historic foolishness of Partition in his stories. His popularity on both sides of the borders drawn in 1947 makes him an especially valuable source for the historian, scholar, artist, anthropologist and social scientist to glean innovative insights into the modern and contemporary history of South Asia. A reunification of the two countries like that of West & East Germany is impossible

Saadat Hasan Manto's later years

The writer's years post-partition were troublesome and led to the destruction of the man. Away from the city of his birth, away from the land that was his muse, where his mother and son were buried, he breathed his last in Lahore on 18th January 1955. The corpus of his works comprises 22 collections of short stories, a novel, five series of radio plays, three collections of essays and two collections of personal sketches. Referred by many names during his time, from pornographer to a communist, a reactionary and sensationalist, Manto now survives only as a writer, one of the best to have lent his pen to the crucial crises of his time, and his stories still continue to do that for ours, as we read into their relevance. As he had himself said, much like a prophecy, "... it is also possible, that Saadat Hasan dies, but Manto remains alive."

Conclusion

Manto never wrote from a distance. What society considered filth, he considered sacred. He always walked hand-in-hand with his characters. He is present in every scene that he depicts — he is the invisible ethereal form, assessing, empathising, dissecting. His stories are up close and personal, giving us the feeling that they are not fictional accounts but personal anecdotes. This is also perhaps why Manto carried throughout his life the accusation of being vulgar. But he never apologised. For his detractors, Manto had this to say: "If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty."

Manto has understated the harsh realities of his society in his stories and especially in the sketches. He has understated how people killed one another without feeling any sympathy or empathy towards others. The Hindus killed their own fellow human beings because they considered them as Muslims, and the Muslims slaughtered the people of their own faith because of taking them as Hindus.

Manto has demonstrated how innocent beings were sliced into pieces and how virgins were raped and tortured. Manto has also understated the pathetic condition of women and prostitutes. He has also given an account of the alcoholics and the erotic desires of people.

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