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Manto Reconsidered

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Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) has the distinction of being the much maligned yet the most widely read short story writer in Urdu. No other Urdu fiction writer has so ruthlessly exposed the hollowness of middle class morality and unmasked its sordid aspects with such telling effect. A master craftsman and a short story writer par excellence, he blazed a trail of glory in Urdu fiction unmatched by any other writer. His way of telling a story may well appear to be simple, but the treatment of his subjects and themes and the light he shed on human nature were marked by refreshing, rather devastating originality. His stories, one after another, sent shock waves through complacent minds. So much so, that some of them were even branded as obscene or lewd and he was unceremoniously expelled from the fraternity of newly emerging progressive Urdu writers. He was considered a reactionary and even degenerate in his thinking. He was hauled up before the law courts on the heinous charge of peddling pornography, not once but several times. No abuse was too great for him and no humiliation too small. The 'progressives' as well as the traditionalists bestowed these largesses on him in generous measures. But this in no way blunted the rapier-sharp thrust of his pen, nor diminished the boldness of his thinking. Manto spent the last years of his life in great penury. Poverty, lack of a regular income, excessive drinking, removed him from our midst at the young age of forty-three.

It is well known that Manto's characters mostly comprise the fallen and rejected members of the society, the so called fallen and rejected who are frowned upon for their depravity. Undoubtedly, his best stories, and the ones for which he is remembered most, are those in which he depicts, with great mastery, fallen women and prostitutes against the backdrop of filthy lanes and slums. Here touts and pimps rub shoulders with tarts, drawing customers into their coils. The stories unfold their lives layer by layer, offer one revelation after another. Manto takes no sides, holds out no pleas. He only reconstructs the spectacle of life as it passes before him. With ruthless objectivity, he unmasks those hypocrites who masquerade as the

custodians of society and who day and night dole out, parrot-like, moral homilies, but are in fact the lords of oppression and are solely responsible for the degradation of women. Spurned by the society, these women are ground between two millstones. Manto does not go into the reasons for their downfall, nor does he lament over their loss of innocence and grace. He only gives a glimpse of that humane space which they have vicariously created for themselves in this hell for their survival. Most of his characters are condemned to a sordid existence, yet they transcend it.

While rereading Manto after a long lapse of time, a few things strike the mind rather sharply. Manto was a supreme rebel, he was up against doxa, be it in arts, literature, customs, manners, social norms, morality or whatever. Anything that was conventional, familiar, acceptable, or belonged to the realm of the so-called *ashrafiya* (the elite, bourgeoisie), was rejected by him and he rebelled against it vehemently. At the core of his creative effort lies a total rejection of all forms of doxa, and a radically different view of literature and reality which sent shock waves among his readers as well as his contemporaries. He was way ahead of others, and perhaps no other fiction writer of Urdu in his time was as clear about the nature of literature as he was. The predominant climate in Urdu at that time was utilitarian and didactic as propounded by Hali in his *Maqaddama* and taken to ecstatic heights by Akbar and Iqbal. Manto, while defending his writing, said that it was painful for him to record that "After Iqbal, may his soul rest in peace, it is as if the Providence has put locks on all doors of literature and handed over the keys to just one blessed soul. If only Allama Iqbal were alive!" (Comments on the court case regarding "Boo" (Odour), vide, *Lazzat-e-Sang/Dastavez*, p. 57). At another point, regretfully he quips, "Most of the respectable journalists who are considered to be custodians of literature are in fact fit to be termed, *tila furosh* i.e., peddlers in drugs for potency" (ibid, p. 57).

Manto was dragged to the courts, time and again, and his patience was stretched to the utmost. On such occasions, while facing a utilitarian readership and an equally ill-informed judiciary, he seems to give the impression that for a while he too favoured the reformist role of literature:

> If you cannot tolerate my stories, this means the times are intolerant. There is nothing wrong with my stories. The wrong which is ascribed to my stories, is in fact the rot of the system. ("Adabe-Jadeed," 1944, included in Dastavez, p. 52)

He goes on "If you are opposed to my literature, then the best way is that you change the conditions that motivate such literature" (ibid, p. 53).

Manto here seems to be supporting the view that if social conditions change, the need for literature to attend to the woes of fallen women will be obliterated. In yet another defence, he emphasises:

> Maybe my writings are unpleasantly harsh. But what have humans gained from sweet homilies? The *neem* leaves are pungent but they cleanse the blood. ("Afsana Nigar our Jinsi Mailan" – The story writer and the subject of sex, in *Dastavez*, p. 83).

But these were simply positions of defence to absolve himself of the charges that were levied against him and thwart the warrants of prosecution. In actual fact, by his terribly dispassionate realism and totally uncompromising attitude, he had introduced Urdu fiction to an absolutely new concept of art, i.e., the relative autonomy of aesthetic effect not subservient to any demands of the *ashrafia* morality or social reform. When free from the exigencies of judiciary and prosecution, he elucidated his point of view much more convincingly. He knew that the questions he was involved with were much deeper. They touched the labyrinths of human psyche, and were some of the perennial questions to which there are no simple answers. Thus:

> If humanity could have listened to the exhortations that stealing or lying is bad, then one Prophet would have been enough. But the list of Prophets is large....We writers are no Prophets, whatever we understand, true or false, we present it to our readers; we do not insist that the readers should accept it as the only truth....We criticise the law, but we are not law-makers, we criticise the political system, but we do not lay down the system; we draw the blue prints but we are not builders; we speak of the malady, but we do not write out prescriptions (ibid, pp. 81-82).

In yet another essay, "Kasoti" (Touchstone) he said:

> Literature is not a commodity that like gold or silver it should have a rising or falling index. It is made out like an ornament, so it has some adulteration. Literature is not pure reality. Literature is literature or non-literature. There is no via media, as man is either man or he is an ass (*Dastavez*, p. 84).

It need not be overemphasised that Manto's concerns were different from any of his contemporaries. He thus ushered in an altogether new form of realism, which the Urdu literati took time to understand and accept. Having assimilated his Russian and French masters at an early age, Manto knew that the fire that raged within him was of a different order. In 1939, when he was barely twenty-seven, he wrote to Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, "Whatever the situation, I remain restless. I am not satisfied with anything around me. There is something lacking in every thing" (*Nuqoosh*, Manto Number).

It is in this context that his delineation of fallen human beings and his constructions of fictional situations needs to be reassessed. The obvious, the familiar, or the conventional face of reality, i.e., the doxa never triggered his creativity, rather he always endeavoured to expose it. While giving an address at Jogeshwari College, Bombay, a few years before partition, he had said in his peculiar style:

> In my neighbourhood if a woman is daily beaten by her husband and if she cleans his shoes the next morning, she is of no interest to me. But if after quarreling with her husband, and after threatening to commit suicide, she goes to see a movie, and her husband is terribly worried, I am interested in both of them. If a boy falls in love with a girl – it is no more important to me than somebody catching common cold....The polite, decent women and their niceties are of no consequence to me.

Obviously Manto's fancy thrived on his disdain of doxa. Given his urge to look at the other side, the non-conventional, the basic question about the core characters of Manto, especially his fallen women, is whether they comprise only what they seem to be? Isn't it a paradox of Mantoiana that the fallen characters of Manto were misunderstood during his lifetime, and they continue to be misunderstood even after this death, though the nature of misunderstanding in either case is different. During his lifetime, Manto was opposed tooth and nail and all that was written about him was trivial and perfunctory. The criticism of Manto during his lifetime is undiscriminatory, bordering on total rejection. The climate changed after his death. If he was totally rejected before, he was a eulogized after his death. The rejection all along was for reasons sentimental and highly subjective. So was the later eulogization. Both lacked on objective, scrupulous, critical base in literary appreciation. Generally, the critical eulogization of Manto was the obvious, the subaltern, the socially degraded, and of the perennial flesh trade and women's right to it. The later Mantoiana suffers from a glut of this eulogization of

the obvious, with the result that the image of Manto, which has gained currency, underscores Manto as a writer of prostitutes, pimps and perverts; as one who rejoices in the portrayal of the seamy side of life. This perhaps calls for some reassessment.

It may be recalled that Manto time and again laid stress on the maxim that "A *veshya* is a woman as well, but every woman, is not a *veshya*" ("Ismat Furosh," Prostitute, in Dastavez, p. 92). He says, "We do not go to the prostitutes' quarters to offer *namaz* or *dorood,* we go there because we can go there and buy the commodity we want to buy." ("Safed Jhoot," White Lie, in *Dastavez,* p. 73).

Manto's concern is not the commodity, but the pain, the suffering, and the loneliness of the human soul that sells it. The two are not the same. You can pay for the commodity, but you cannot set a price on the dignity of the human soul. Manto laments the attitude that for many people the very existence of a woman or the very nature of man-woman relationship is obscene. If this were so, why then did God create woman? He is equally critical of the man-made codes of morality that do not equate the two. He asks, "Isn't morality the rust on the razor-edge of society which simply is there because it is left there thoughtlessly"? He makes it abundantly clear that he is not a sensationalist: "Why should I take off the *choli* of society, it is naked as it is; of course I am not interested in covering it up either, because that is the job of tailors, not of the writers" ("Adab-e-Jadeed," *New Writing*, ibid, p. 53).

It is no coincidence that time and again Manto's insights scan the interior landscape of these fallen and marginalized women. He strongly believed that a majority of these women though they plied the trade, in fact despised it and possessed a heart purer than those men who came to buy them (*Dastavez,* p. 88). The semantic field of Manto's characterisation needs to be examined afresh. His themes are intricately intertwined with the anguish, the suffering, and the loneliness of the soul he is trying to chart. It is not the body but the being, the inner self, or the air about the 'misery-ness' of the misery which Manto tries to recapture and recreate. It shouldn't, thus, be out of place to take a fresh look at some of the core protagonists of Manto's stories.

In "Kali Shalwar" (Black Shalwar), the most touching part is where Sultana, having been deceived by both the Khuda (God) and Khuda Bakhsh (her man) and having lost her business after moving from Ambala Cantonment to Delhi, feels forsaken and forlorn:

> Early in the morning, when she came out into her balcony, a weird sight would meet her eyes. Through the haze she could see the locomotives belching out thick smoke which ponderously rose in columns towards the grey sky, giving the impression of fat men swaying in the air. Thick clouds of steam would rise from the railway lines, making a hissing sound and then dissipate in the air in the twinking of an eye. Sometimes a detached bogey, getting an initial push from the engine, kept running on the track by its own momentum. Sultana would feel that an invisible hand had also given a push to her life and then left her to fend for hereself. Like the bogey which switched from one track to another under a locking device manipulated by an invisible cabinman, an invisible hand was also changing the course of her life. And then a day would come when the mementum would be spent up and she would would come to a dead stop at some unknown spot where there would be no one to take care of her (*The Best of Manto*, ed. and translated by Jai Ratan, p. 15).

There are moments in a *veshya*'s life when, shorn off *veshya*'s costume, she remains only a woman, a tender-hearted woman. On such occasions generally the archetypal image of woman shines through Manto's writings. Sughandhi in "Hatak" (Insult) is a frail, yet strong woman. Madho, her lover from Poona, has been making a fool of her by taking advantage of her and even fleecing her of her earnings. Sugandhi, though clever, is not really so clever, since she can be fooled by simple words of love and affection, and Madho is a past master at this game.

Every night her new or old lover would say, "Sugandhi, I love you". And Sugandhi, although she knew that the man was telling a lie, would melt like wax, deluding herself in the belief that she was really being loved. Love – what a beautiful word it was! How she wished that she could dissolve the word and rub it over her skin, letting it seep into her being.

So overpowering was her desire to love and be loved that she tried to put up with the vagaries of all the men who came to her. Among them, were the four men whose photographs now adorned her wall. Being herself essentially a good soul, she failed to understand, why men lacked this goodness of heart. One day when she was standing before the mirror the words escaped her lips: "Sugandhi, the world has given you a raw deal" (Ibid, pp. 27-28).

Isn't the whole concept here built around the archetypal mother-image of woman? Does't *prem* (incarnate love) permeate her total

existence, everything that is within and without; doesn't it draw the being into its fold and put it to sublime sleep attuned to the music of the eternal lullaby? This feeling of deep compassion, *karuna* or *mamata,* by whatever term you call it, flows through the whole narrative till Sugandhi is rejected by a *seth* in the middle of the night. Shocked and dejected, having finally seen through the hypocrisy of man, she takes out her rage on Madho who happens to be visiting her at that time. The anguish and loneliness once again rend the soul, there is emptiness all around. The metaphor of a lonely shunted train deserted on the rails of life is once again invoked in this story, and telling effect thus:

> Sugandhi looked up startled, as if she had come out of a reverie. The room was steeped in an eerie silence – a silence she had never experienced before. She felt as if she was surrounded by a vacuum – as if a train on a long haul, after depositing the passengers en route was now standing in the loco shed, looking deserted and forlorn. An emptiness seemed to have taken root in her heart (ibid, p. 38).

The most baffling and unusual story is, "Babu Gopi Nath," in which a neo-rich man is fond of the company of pimps and hangers-on, and peers and *faqirs,* because he maintains that if one wants to deceive oneself, then there is no better place to go to than the *kotha* of a *veshya* (den of a prostitute) or the *mazaar* of a peer (mausoleum of a saint) since these are the places that thrive on sham and deceit. At the *kotha,* they sell the body, and at the *mazaar* they sell God. Babu Gopi Nath is involved with the young Zeenat, a Kashmiri girl, utterly naive and uncouth, who could never learn the tricks of the trade. Babu Gopi Nath is trying to find a man to wed Zeenat so that she can have a home. In this, he is prepared to go to any length and spend all his wealth. It is an unusual situation. On the one hand, there is an undercurrent of dark humour in the naivity of Zeenat, and the cleverness of pimps and hangers-on; and on the other, it is the benevolence of Babu Gopi Nath that permeates the events. One cannot help thinking that in Babu Gopi Nath, Manto has created a male protagonist, who in fact is such an embodiment of the qualities of the mother-image. The situation is full of irony, and it is through Babu Gopi Nath that the milk of compassion and the spirit of sacrifice and service flow through the story and render it unique.

If there is a female parallel to Babu Gopi Nath, who else could it be than the humane and motherly Janaki (in the story of the same name) who, though not in the profession, changes hands from one

man to another, and yet is full of the tender feelings similar to that of *mamata* for the men she comes across. She hails from Peshawar where she was committed to Aziz. She cares for Aziz day and night. She tends to his needs, takes care of his food and clothes, nurses him through his illness and lives him. She comes to Bombay looking for a job and in the course of events gets involved with Saeed, while at the same time she nutures feelings of love for Aziz as well. This is resented by Aziz. Eventually Saeed also forsakes her, but in turn she gets involved with yet another person, Narain. She adores him and bestows the same care and affection on him. Men come and go, but Janaki remains the same, a fountain-head of love and devotion who like a goddess nurtures her men.

This leads us to consider if there wasn't a cherished mother-image lurking somewhere in the labyrinth of Manto's unconsious. None of his biographers has dwelt on his relaltionship with his mother, but whatever sketchy information we have confirms that he had a harsh and curel father, and a host of step brothers. Maybe, the only thing that filled this deprivation was the affectionate care of his loving mother, Babi Jan. One gets the feeling that Manto was profoundly familiar with suffering from his earliest days. Imploringly, at one point, he says, "O God, take me away from this world! I cry where I should laugh, and I laugh where I should cry.' ("Pas-manzar," Context in *Dastavez,* p. 159). His *dukha, udasi* and *karuna* seem to have a Buddhist ring. But for Manto, perhaps suffering, compassion and love were different faces of the same for reality. "Suffering is ordained, a predicament," Manto says, "Suffering (*alam/dukha*) is you, suffering is me, suffering is Saadat Hasan Manto, suffering is the whole universe" ("Kasooti," p. 86). He perceived one through the other. Repeatedly, he stresses that the body can be bartered or branded, not the soul ("Ismat Furosh," Dastavez, p. 90). He elaborates that many of the women in the flesh trade are god-fearing, devotionally attached to incons and images, and observe religious rituals. Maybe because religion is that part of their self which they have saved from the trade, and through which they redeem themselves.

Nonetheless, Mozel is entirely different as she pokes fun at religious observances, whatever their from. This is yet one more example of Manto's dialogic art in the sense Bakhtin uses it. Isn't it amazing that one comes across such a large variety of men and women in Manto's fiction? Mozel is a bohemian girl of Jewish descent, vivacious and carefree, she is full of ridicule for religion that divides man from man. She makes fun of the turban, *kesha* (hair) and other manifestations of Trilochan, who is a Sikh. But the same playful Mazel

comes to Trilochan's rescue when riots break out in Bombay, and without caring for her personal safety, saves Trilochan's fiancèe, Kirpal Kaur, and in the process becomes a victim of the killers. One can see that once again a woman of doubtful character rises to the occasion and, through her compassion and devotion, delivers the persons around her from destruction.

In this context it is needless to belabour "Boo" (Odour), one of Manto's best-known stories. Suffice it to say that this story of consummate copulation can refreshingly be read as a story of the cycle of seasons, falling raindrops and the soaking of the virgin mother earth, i.e., the union of the elements where Randhir is Purush and the Ghatin girl Prakriti, who lies dormant, but is the giver and receiver of pleasure in abundant measure.

"Sharda," "Fobha Bai," and "Burmese Girl" are some of the other stories where the protagonists are moved by the same underlying force of benevolence. In "Burmese Girl," we have a fleeting glimpse of a girl who shares a flat with two young boys for a few days and is soon gone like a whiff of soft breeze. In her short stay, she leaves behind sweet memories of setting the house in order and infusing the whole place with an atmosphere of affection, charm and motherliness. But before the boys get to know her better, she is gone. In comparison, Sharda and Fobha Bai (dialectal variation of Shobha Bai) are actual mothers. Sharda is a complete embodiment of womanhood as she is simultaneously a mother, a sister, a wife and also a whore, and none of these roles is in conflict with one another. Fobha Bai has tragic strains in her, as she has to sell herself in the city to protect the mother within her by substaining a young son back home. But the son dies, and with this the woman who sold herself for his sake is also devastated. Similarly in "Sarak ke Kinare" (By the Road-side), motherhood is accomplished, but remains unfulfilled in the sense that as an unwed and forsaken woman, she cannot bring up the child. In the dead of night, the child is left by the roadside. Manto raises the question, "Is the coming together of two souls at a single point and then giving up everything in a cosmic rhythm mere poetry? No. Certainly this is the merging of two souls, and then rising to enfold heaven and earth and the whole universe. But then why is one soul left behind wounded, simply because she helped the other to rise to the heights of the cosmic rhythm?"

This is the kernel of unmitigated suffering, the predicament from which there is no escape. The infinite sorrow in Manto at the deeper level sustains his creativity, through which are constructed his fallen women. Once, opening his heart to Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, he

wrote: "I, in fact, have reached a point in my thinking where faith or disbelief becomes meaningless. Where I understand, I do not understand. At times, I feel as if the whole world is in the palm of my hand, then there are times when I feel insignificant, as insignificant as an ant crawling on the body of an elephant" (*Nuqoosh,* Manto Number).

Manto, in his finer moments, is attuned to the symphony of the mystery of creation, and in this symphony his dominant note is the note of sorrow. The sorrow of existence, the loneliness of soul, and the unfathomable suffering, *dukha,* which is part of the music of the infinite. Many of his protagonists turn out to be more than life-size, more durable, more lasting than mere frail men and women of flesh and blood. They become the embodiment of something more pervasive, more universal; that is, the benevolence or compassion incarnate, the sublimest of the sublime, the fountain-head of *mamata* and *karuna* which flow through the emotional space of Manto's narrative, and with which we all identify.

INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTRE NOTES

Linguistic Diversity and National Integrity in India

The notion of 'national integrity' has become an obsessive concern not simply with the Indian state but even for a large number of scholars and statesmen. As seen in relation to the process of nation-building, 'national integrity' certainly is a noble concern, but only when it is envisioned in terms of peoples, cultures and societies. Unfortunately, in recent years, the entire 'national integrity' enterprise has been perverted into territoriality. Thus, there has been so much of rhetoric on provincial and national geographical boundaries in recent years. This rhetoric manufactures populist consent that legitimizes the apparatus of governance at different levels to embark on a large scale war, declared or covert, for even 'an inch of our land'.

The obvious and natural consequence of such a pathological concern for national integrity has been that the country has built up a massive military and bureaucratic establishment which is used to annihilate chosen adversaries. In the process, we end up destroying our own best defenses. We have sacrificed our health, wealth and the best hands and minds to the false gods of domination (if not, assimilation) and war. Why have we come to such a pass? Why have we tied ourselves to military options? In fact, any voicing of equality, pluralism and democratic solutions is seen as a threat to national integrity and security. This results in a vicious circle where yesterday's solution becomes today's problem. The issue can well be illustrated through our national language policy and planning.

Since the Constituent Assembly Debates on India's language policy, both the rulers and scholars have found the country's linguistic diversity an untractable problem. It's a different matter that the number of language and speech varieties spoken within the territory of India have kept fluctuating from census to census. Through the constitutional provisions to the innumerable legislative and executive measures, the attempt, by and large, has been to reduce the number of languages to be used in public domains such as the school, the court of law, in different technical spheres and the like. This, in consequence, has provoked people to engage in language