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**Hassan Manto – “A Literary World unto Himself”**

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**Abstract** - Hassan Manto (1912-1955) one of the finest writers of our age, is a short story writer of Urdu language, in addition to being a film and radio scriptwriter and a journalist. he has published twenty-two collections of short stories, one novel, five collections of radio plays, three collections of essays, and two collections of personal sketches. Acknowledge hundred years after his birth, he is one of the most powerful voices of our time. Originally written in Urdu, trifling in style and form, the stories focus on twists and turns of human psychology. Partition and subsequent loss of balance of life form a major ground in his short stories and he creates fabulous characters from among the common. The paper discusses Manto – as a writer and a social philosopher. His best stories are those that tell the awful stories of partition and also depict the so - called fallen women and prostitutes against the backdrop of filthy lanes and slums. He is no doubt a much criticized nevertheless widely read author.

Hassan Manto (1912-1955) one of the finest writers of our age, is a short story writer of Urdu language, in addition to being a film and radio scriptwriter and a journalist. Manto was born in Ludhiana in British India on 11 May 1912 to a Kashmiri Muslim family. In 1948, after Partition, he moved to Lahore. “My name is Saadat Hasan Manto and I was born in a place that is now in India. My mother is buried there. My father is buried there. My first-born is also resting in that bit of earth,” Manto wrote in one of his iconic *Letters to Uncle Sam*. He died a few months short of his forty-third birthday in January 1955 at Lahore. *Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto and with him lie buried all secrets and mysteries of the art of short story writing... under tonnes of earth he lies, still wondering who among the two is the greatest short story writer; God or he.* - the epitaph he wrote to mark his grave on August 18, 1954, a few months away from his death. Ironically, his family, afraid of the conservative mindset, changed the epitaph he wanted. They chose a milder couplet written by Ghalib: *Dear God, why does time erase my name from the tablet of the living? I am after all not one of those words that is mistakenly calligraphed twice, and on detection removed.*

Manto began his career with translating a few of the most popular French and Russian writers. He began his career with translating Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* while in 1934, Manto went on to study further and enrolled himself in the Aligarh Muslim University. Well he also worked in the Urdu service of the All India Radio in 1941, where he authored most of his radio plays. In all he has published twenty-two collections of short stories, one novel, five collections of radio plays, three collections of essays, and two collections of personal sketches. Acknowledge hundred years after his birth, he is one of the most powerful voices of our time. Originally written in Urdu, trifling in stylishness and form, the stories focus on twists and turns of human psychology. Partition and subsequent loss of balance of life form a major theme in his short



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stories and with this background he creates fabulous characters from among the commons.

Manto was tried for obscenity half a dozen times, thrice before independence and thrice after independence. Nevertheless, not always was he acquitted. His life has been the subject of countless anecdotes and narratives but as such no one has, however written a comprehensive biography on him. May be an inclusive biography would explain why his stories are marked by a sense that we are doomed to a life of solitude, agony and grief. Some of Manto's greatest work was produced in the last seven years of his life, a time of great economic and emotional hardship for him.

He is no doubt a much criticized nevertheless widely read author. He ruthlessly exposes the void of middle class morality and unveils its disreputable aspects. His style of story-telling is simple, but then the treatment of the subject and theme is unique and in a way devastating. The characters in his short-stories are mostly the so-called fallen or rejected members of the society. His best stories are those that tell the awful stories of Partition and that depict, so-called fallen women and prostitutes against the backdrop of filthy lanes and slums. Blending hard facts with the shards of realistic fiction, Manto was able to document the multifaceted nature of human suffering at the time of partition that had eluded professional historians. His stories bring an incomparable demonstration of human experiences amidst a multitude of themes ranging from innocence to lust, love and hatred, gratitude and devotion and the basic human nature. In them the readers not only find themes of killing, slaughter and rape, but also of lust, filth, decadence and perversion. The stories are short and crispy and as such the reader easily connect with the characters and empathise with their fortunes.

He was a rebel, and way ahead of his times. Dragged to court many times and on one such instance he said –

If you cannot tolerate my stories, this means the times are intolerable. there is nothing wrong with my stories. The wrong which is ascribed to my stories, is in fact the rot of the system. If you are opposed to my literature, then the best way is that you change the condition that motivate such literature. (“Adab-e-Jadeed” 1944, included in *Dastaver*, p.52)

The first set of his short stories are about partition they are contemptuous tales of a degenerated society. In these stories Manto questions the very definitions of *country, border and sanity*. In these stories Manto does not makes attempt to offer any historical explanation for the hatred and bloodshed. He blames no one and without any ideological covers he is able to describe an awkward and a corrupt time in which the sustaining norms of a society are erased and as such no ethical, social or political reason is available. For him 1947 is not an occasion to celebrate, but it is rather an epiphanic moment.



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This collection of short stories includes *The Last Salute*, a touching and heart wrenching tale of two friends who are forced to turn against each other in a battle because of the Partition. Here Manto gives his characters emotions and feelings so strong, that they are never in control of their life's situations. Another equally stunning story is *The Dog of Tithwal*. The story is a mockery on the futility of war and how it turns normal humans into suspicious beasts. It personifies the killings and sacrifice of lives through the death of a dog, which belongs to none of the fighting sides. The story depicts the irony of a stray dog that befriends both enemy camps, Indian and Pakistani, at a border post and is then shot. While another story *Toba Tek Singh* portrays the anguish of a madman's refusal and subsequent death, when an attempt is made to return him to his native town, which, after the partition, no longer lay in Pakistan, but is in India. The central character Bishen Singh, has not slept for years, nervous with madness and melancholy, wonders whether his hometown is in Pakistan or India. The last line of the story where the inmate of mental asylum makes the no-man's land as his divine abode is indeed a thought provoking and undeniably one of the best endings a writer could give.

Whereas in *Khol Do*, we see a tormented father who is overjoyed to find his daughter alive on a hospital bed at a refugee camp, unaware of what she has had to endure. It is a story of a girl who loses the sight of her father during the partition and ends up being raped and gang raped again and again by the people of her own religion. The author shows how India-Pakistan partition provoked inhuman approaches and aroused the negative feeling of eagerness, of satisfying one's dreadful pleasure irrespective of any religious sentiments. While in *Thanda Gosht* a Sikh man returns home from a round of killing, confessed to his wife how he raped a beautiful corpse. This story was written before the story *Khol Do* but was published later, also asked for legal fury.

Manto's another collection of short stories contains some of his famous stories such as *Bu or odour*, *Insult or Hatak*, *Mozail*, *BabuGopinath*, *Shiraz* and *Khushiyan* and others. The exceptional point about these stories is the way in which he appeals the subaltern subject -designing them out as real flesh and blood characters, capable of stumbling and transcending their physical limitations at the same time. Here he presents a picture of the invisible and silent women, the women fallen from the main stream of so called honourable ladies and gentleman. He talks about the dehumanisation of society which nourishes the cruel male exploitation of female sexuality. His short-stories *Kali Shalwar*, is a story that revolves around a small-town prostitute Sultana and her disillusionment in Bombay, a city which inspires people to dream. It is a distressing story of identities, disappointment, relationships and sheer void. His other stories *Sharda*, *FobhaBai*, *Burmese Girl*, etc. are stories where the protagonists are moved by the underlying force of compassion. *Deal of Loss* raises the question of molestation of women on religious basis. Whereas in *Sharifan* the rape and murder of



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Sharifan and Bimla speak of the dreadful crimes against women on the basis of communal bias and the fate meted out to these two victims have symbolic implications so far as the predicament of the woman is concerned.

Time and again Manto lays 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 further says -

We do not go to the prostitute ‘quarter to offer *namaz* or *dorood*, we go there because we can go there and buy the commodity we want to buy (‘Safed Jhoot’, in *Dastavez*, p.73).

His anxiety is not the commodity, but the pain, sufferings, solitude and frustration of the human soul that is forced to become a commodity, an object for sale and entertainment. He laments that in the present society this attitude is quite outrageous, awful and disgraceful. In humanising women, Manto successively exposed the typical hypocrisy of a traditional male and the nervousness men face in reaching social standards of masculinity. He looked beyond gender distinctions and not playing the blame game. He saw human beings struggling with their instincts within those contexts, gender and otherwise. He says that –

Maybe my writings are unpleasantly harsh. But what have humans gained from sweet homilies? The Neem leaves are pungent but they cleanse the blood (*Dastaves*, p.83)

The literary works of Manto are spread over a wide canvas making the difficulty to cover them in a single paper. The review of his literary works and the study of his social - political philosophy is an equally difficult task. But it is interesting to view the socio-political context of that time. It was the time of India- Pakistan partition. But Manto refuses to endorse any political ideology, yet his stories do possess a sharp political and social consciousness. He does not recognise the political boundaries and he raises questions on the bases of being a humanist writer. He tries to find answers to the problems from his own land and its history. His characters are engaged in the struggle for existence. His short stories provoke contradictory response. His approach is difficult to understand as he avoids making any direct references to historical events. In one of his writings he says –

I am scared of jail. The life that I am leading is no less painful than an imprisonment. If another jail is created within the jail I am already in, I will die of suffocation within seconds. I love life. I believe in action..... however, if somebody breaks my head in a Hindu-Muslim riot, every drop of my blood will cry. I am an artist. I do not like shabby wounds. (‘Lzat-e-





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Sang', in *Manto Namah*. P.621)

Manto stands apart from his contemporaries and his greatest input is that in a society where humanity was divided in cast, county and religions, he ends that division. And he sympathised with those with whom people were not sympathising, the down-trodden. He perceives humanity in each and every person. He internalises, feels and portrays the pain of partition, not as a Muslim or Hindu or as a speaker of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi or Marathi but as a human being, and is traumatized and devastated in the process. Manto stands out among the short story writers of that time, basically because he was against any partition on the basis of religion. He could not understand how culture, civilisation, art, music, dance and architecture could be partitioned. Possibly that is why he could write a great story like *Toba Tek Singh*. Zaheda Hina says -

The Mahabharat of Partition was written on the body of the hapless and helpless women of all religions of the subcontinent. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, all can see the images of their own savagery and barbarism in Manto's ruthless writings. "Khol Do", "Thanda Gosht", "Woh Larki", "Mozail", "Sahaey", "Ram Khilawan", and "Gormukh Singh ki Wasiyat" are stories which put many questions to our collective conscience. Manto has been rightfully called the creative conscience of the subcontinent. ([How does Manto stand apart from his contemporaries?](#) From *InpaperMagazine* 06 May 2012)

While Fahmida Riaz says –

*Manto stands apart from other writers because there is no ambiguity in his message. He conveys it to the reader directly and forcefully, hitting the nail on the head, as one says.... It was quite a galaxy of writers in those days. But Manto had to suffer much more than others for his literary creations. That too sets him apart.* ([How does Manto stand apart from his contemporaries?](#) From *InpaperMagazine* 06 May 2012)

Manto was a literary world unto himself. Although he is remembered as a writer of short fiction, Ayesha Jalal, his grandniece and a historian, described him as a "terrific writer of memoir" Riveting and enthralling, many of his pieces leave you feeling almost exploited, but there is no way one can stop reading. Truly a legend, he deserves more credit for his progressive and honest writing.



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