

VOICING THE MUTES

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto is considered as one of the best short story writers in South Asia. Most of his works explore the heinous acts of rape and murder which became common during the partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. This was the time when people with influence yearned for power which led to the constant ignoring of the plights of common people. Among these, there was a certain section comprising of people engaged in ‘petty’ occupations like washing, cleaning and prostitution. This group was neither represented in our age old stories nor during the time when Manto lived. But Manto being a modernist chooses to comment on the existing societal norms and beliefs by making these dejected people as characters in his stories. Manto does not discriminate between classes and he does not make a mistake of taking a particular side. He remains neutral and yet strong when it comes to his views. This paper discusses the unusual characters in short stories by Manto and it also comments on the Manto’s art of giving voices to this ignored section of the society.

Introduction

Dear God, Compassionate and Merciful, Master of the Universe, we who are steeped in sin, kneel in supplication before Your throne and beseech You to recall from this world Saadat Hasan Manto, son of Ghulam Hasan Manto, who was a man of great piety. Take him away, O Lord, for he runs off from fragrance, chasing filth. He hates the bright sun, preferring dark labyrinths. He has nothing but contempt for modesty but is fascinated by the naked and the shameless. He hates what is sweet, but will give his life to sample what is bitter. He does not as much as look at housewives but is entranced by the company of whores. He will not go near running waters, but loves to wade through slush. Where others weep, he laughs; where they laugh, he weeps. Evil-blackened faces he loves to wash with tender care to highlight their features. He never thinks about You, preferring to follow Satan everywhere, the same fallen angel who once disobeyed You.

Saadat Hasan Manto is one of the most misunderstood and controversial writers in Indian subcontinent. It is mainly because of his waywardness and bluntness towards the society which was going through political, geographical and moral changes during his years of literary boom. Born in Samrala in 1912, Manto became popular in the entire nation before he died at an age of 43 in 1955. Manto was a writer with 'progressive' ideas. He opposed the ideas of fascism and imperialism and wrote extensively for equality based on gender, region and religion. His short stories explored the contours of a woman's body in most vivid form possible and it was considered as sexist and obscene by those who didn't raise their voices when women were ripped apart and molested by people committed to protection of their caste and religion. Manto became a prey of this hypocrisy and he was tried six times in courts of law, three times in British India and later, thrice in independent Pakistan. To the charges of obscenity imposed on him he answers, "You find my stories bitter and sour. But what has humanity gained from the sweetness that has till now been dished out to it? The leaves of neem may be bitter, but they do purify blood."

Despite being one of the best short story tellers in this part of Asia, Manto was constantly ignored by the governments of the two nations, his friends from the filmy world and from the literary circle. It was because of this sheer rejection that sixty years ago his coffin was lowered in the grave amidst utmost poverty. Manto was a good storyteller and yet his contribution to the society and literature was not acknowledged even after his death. People who were afraid of him hurting the religious sentiments changed his epitaph which he himself wrote before his death.

"Here lies buried Saadat Hasan Manto in whose bosom are enshrined all the secrets and art of short story writing. Buried under mounds of earth, even now he is contemplating whether he is a greater short story writer or God." was replaced with "Here lies buried Manto who still believes that he was not the final word on the face of the earth."

Analysis

In his works, Manto has time and again presented the pictures of 'batwaara' or the partition of Indian subcontinent. He witnessed loots, rapes and bloodshed as people from two nations migrated to the newly formed nations which were supposed to be safer for people of a particular religious lineage. Amidst this chaos, there was a certain section of society which was ignored and considered as a blot on the face of society. Having

experienced similar kind of wrath and disregard, he found in them the characters for his stories. Similar to his own ways, the characters from his stories are usually in a dilemma and are found fighting for their dignity, however, most readers tend to ignore the conflict hidden behind the curtains of craft and imagination raised by Manto. Manto was a rare talent, a hoarse voice to the silent sufferers which no one could throttle, a voice to a restless soul which, till today, screams for the improvement of society. Manto lived in a time when pity and selflessness was kept at bay as most of the people cared more about protecting themselves from social and political uproar in the nation. These people, who were mainly from the lower strata of the society are the characters in Manto's stories. By unfolding lives of his characters layer by layer, he shows the heart throbbing tales of love, lust, revenge, deception and other traces of dark desires in humans. These physical acts are accompanied by hope and despair, life and death entangled with emotions of care, respect and tolerance leading to the emergence of the new dimensions of truth and understanding. The reason his characters look so convincing is because Manto spent his life among such characters in search of livelihood, alcohol and entertainment. According to his biographer J.C. Wadhawan,

Manto's characters are drawn from the flotsam and jetsam of society - down and outs. Rakes and debauches. Manto had spent a large part of his life among them, observed them day and night from close quarters, and had the inner feel of them as if he was one of them...

They comprise a portrait gallery such as Saugandhi, the pimp Khushia, the debauch and a womaniser like Babu Gopi Nath, a procuress like Mummy and a call girl like Mozel. Such are the characters among whom Manto spent his life and that is why they look so convincing in his stories.

In a time when Manto lived and set up most of his stories, pimps, prostitutes, eunuchs were the people who were deliberately ignored in literature and forums of public discussion. Manto stood tall on these blurring images of humanity and redefined humanism to involve this neglected part of the society as well. He had a tender regard for these outcasts of the society and he tried to see the world through their eyes to decipher their inner voices. This essay discusses in detail, Manto's characters which were looked down by the society and Manto's unique ways of expressing grief and humanity. All the characters in his stories are adults. The few, who are minor by age, work as sex workers or are a part of the adult world. Here, Manto plays cunningly. He refrains from using the word 'children' for these characters probably because of the childhood which is missing from their lives. Being a master at manipulating situations and telling tales, Manto chooses a different path to introduce to his readers the 'adult children'. In "Ten Rupees", Sarita is seen "... at the corner of the alley, playing with the girls" of the chawl where she lives. Sarita is a child prostitute who is in this business because of household poverty but she is still shown as any other young girl who likes to play and have fun with friends. People generally carry this notion that women who sell their bodies are insensitive and different from normal because of their profession. Manto, through such expressions, tries to rub the line drawn between people and 'other people'.

In “The Wild Cactus”, he chooses to introduce Nawab not by her name or age but with her pitiful situation by saying that “Some people said the young girl was not really her daughter, but an orphan whom she had taken in and raised.”

Humanism is the core of many of his short stories but it is worth noticing that even though his characters are people who were socially marginalized, they are strong and mostly dominating. The women are not slaves of patriarchy not even if they are into flesh trade. They have a sense of self-respect and pride. “Yuck” was enough for Saugandhi to get the feeling of rejection in “The Insult”. “Siraj” is yet another example of a story where Manto carves out the feeling of revenge which the female protagonists holds within her. The final act gives the story as well as the character a new meaning where Siraj covers the face of her lover with her burqa. She does so and makes it clear that it’s not her but the people who are wrong who should hide from the society. Yet again, Manto does not find it necessary to introduce her lover to the readers probably because for him a lover should love and there is nothing more which a reader should be aware of.

Another story of temptation in mankind is "My name is Radha." Radha is condemned by society for being sexually assertive, the time when she is battling within herself and trying to explore difference between love and lust. Manto shows how behind the fake mask of human goodness, elite people in film industry like Raj Kishore hides the soul of a pretender, an egoist and a sadist.

The one major thing which differentiates Manto from other writers of his time is his commitment towards truth and society. In spite of numerous ups and downs in his professional and personal life, Manto’s works were similar in all the situations – crisp, to the point and hard hitting. When Jews were being tortured and killed barbarically in the west, Manto considered it as his social responsibility to bring out the best out of him to present this community. “Mozail” is a story of a Tarlochan, a Sikh, who is in love with a Jewish girl and Kirpal Kaur, a Sikh girl, in the later half. Mozail mocks Tarlochan on the way he keeps his beard, the type of underpants he wears and his hairy body but when a riot breaks out in the locality of Kirpal Kaur, Mozail chooses to die to protect the fleeing couple. When people around were fighting to their religion, Manto considered it a foolish idea. In “Mozail”, he didn’t mind using phrases like “Take away this rag of your religion. I don’t need it.” It was clearly inscribed in his mind that religion, which became the reason of the crimes and murders, could not protect anyone anymore. To begin with, Mozail was murdered because Tarlochan refused to take off his headgear because it would have made him lesser Sikh. Manto, here, raises his unaddressed dilemma in which he fails to choose religion over humanity which people around him could do without any second thought.

Besides prostitutes, pimps and religious workers, some of Manto’s works are based on people who were slightly less controversial but equally ignored and discriminated. These people include washermen and street bullies.

In “Ram Khilavan”, Ram Khilavan is a washerman or a dhobi who maintains his faithfulness towards the narrator even in a drunken state. Till the end he maintains his belief that Saeed Salim was grateful to him and Begum saab took him to hospital in her motor car when he was ill.

Similarly, Mammad Bhai in “Mammad Bhai” was a gangster and yet he is shown more helpful and caring than any non-criminal character. Dada Karim in “Hamid’s Baby”

is a gangster too but when he is asked by Hamid to kill his new born child for 1000 rupees, he says “I don’t have it in me to kill such a young baby. I’ll bring it to you and you can do whatever you like with it. Your secret will die with me- you don’t have to worry about that.” In both the stories, professional gangsters appear more sympathetic and humane than people around them who pretend to be better than them at handling people, emotions and society. Manto yet again, raises the thought that humanism is above every religion or profession and false virtues of any kind should not be mixed with these beliefs and betrayal to the truth should not be tolerated in the society.

Conclusion

Manto was insane and stubborn. Once, the ‘sane’ leaders tried to shut this insane voice because he dived into the armpits of women and wrote vividly about their privates chores. Throughout his lifetime he was cursed for obscenity which was a regular thing in his stories to which he replied by saying “My stories are for healthy people, for normal people, who take a woman’s breast for a breast and don’t go further than that”. Through this statement, Manto tells how much filth is already stocked up in human minds. It was a part of this filth that busted out in the form of riots and hatred based on religion which remained a matter of concern for Manto till he died.

Manto’s characters reflect his thoughts and beliefs. They are victims of humans around them and yet they maintain their identity till the end. The turbulence which the society is seen undergoing through in his stories don’t affect the acts and humanism in the so called lesser humans. Women are given special attention and as a reader goes through Manto’s works, he ends up building a positive image for these women. They don’t appear to be dirty anymore. They are better than those who pretend to be so. These are the reasons why Manto is often considered as a feminist. In words of Fahmida Riaz, an Urdu feminist poet.

It is strange that other writers, especially in Urdu, are so blind to the reality of women. They would not even notice bravery or intelligence in their female subjects. On the contrary, they are capable of giving the most perverse 'psychological' twist to the most remarkable traits in a woman. Even today, Manto stands more or less alone in the position that he takes on women. After Manto, there is none like Manto.

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