

ABDUL BISMILLAH

A Letter from Manto¹

MANTO AND HIS WRITINGS have been, and continue to be, assessed from different perspectives, and one finds both admiration and denigration. In fact, Manto's stature has neither increased nor suffered any setback. Well, it is the same with all writers. Manto's stature, however, may undergo reevaluation if he is taken out of the world of his stories and assessed in the light of his other writings. Often it happens that the identity of a writer becomes entrenched in a particular mold, while the writer himself sometimes breaks out of this familiar mold and does something that shows him in an entirely different light.

Years ago the writer Jerzy Kosinski was born in Poland. He was separated from his parents during the Second World War. After a time he reached America and settled there. He learned English and wrote all his works in it. For the Americans, he was an American writer writing in English, and for the people of Poland, a Polish writer writing in English. For us Indians, Manto is an Indian writer who wrote in Urdu; for the people of Pakistan, a Pakistani Urdu writer. The truth is, just as Jerzy Kosinski articulated the feelings and sensitivities of both the Polish and the American people in his writings, Manto did the same through his work, articulating the sensitivities of both the people of undivided India and the newly created country of Pakistan.

Manto has written quite a few stories on the trauma of Partition, and they have been studied fairly thoroughly. But the letter he wrote to Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, reveals some other facets of Pundit Manto. The letter in question constitutes the foreword to his book, *Baghair 'Unvān kē*. The book is dedicated to Nehru, as well as

¹*Editors' note:* No citations for the letter of Manto discussed in this paper have been provided.

the foreword, which is entitled “Pundit Manto’s First Letter to Pundit Nehru.” This so-called Manto letter brings to light some grave issues related to Partition, some special facets of Nehru’s personality, and some controversial trends of Indian politics in such a manner that it can constitute the subject of a meaningful debate today. This epistolary preface bears the date 27 August 1954—i.e., it was written about seven years after the independence/partition of India. It is evident that the injuries caused during Partition had not yet healed. The people from *this* side had complaints against those from *that* side, and vice versa. Manto, by sheer quirk of circumstance, belonged to *that* side. This is why it is interesting as well as important to know what he thought about *this* side.

In those days, the name “Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru” assumed the dimensions of a myth. Legends about him were legion which, though not recorded in history books, were a matter of popular belief. According to one such legend, ladies from abroad felt irresistibly drawn towards him. The following extract from Manto’s letter relates to this:

By the grace of God you’re considered very handsome by the Americans. Well, my features are not exactly bad either. If I go to America, perhaps I’ll be accorded the same status.

In other words, the secret of Nehru’s good looks is that he is considered handsome by the Americans. If an ordinary person like Manto made it to America, he too would obtain the certificate of beauty. That is to say, beauty is neither a gift from God nor of Nature, but is a slave to the Western notions associated with it. Even if this remark lacks substance where Nehru is concerned, it certainly assumes significance when we reflect on the ways in which the titles of Miss World, etc., are acquired nowadays.

This was about the impact of Nehru’s physical looks on others. His impact on politics was far greater. Even years after Independence, Pundit Nehru and Indian politics would appear synonymous. Manto admitted as much, but in his characteristic way: “In politics I can mention your name with pride because you know well the art of contradicting yourself.” Who could say whether self-contradiction was peculiar to Nehru, or has been a common element in politics? However, Manto was sad, probably because he did not expect it from Nehru even if others practiced it. He also did not expect that Nehru would stop rivers from flowing through Pakistan. How could a Nehru, i.e., a person wielding the strength of a *nahr* (a river) stop rivers? Manto was amazed and angry with himself:

I was surprised to hear that you want to stop rivers from flowing through our land. Pundit-ji, you're only a Nehru. I regret that I'm just a measuring stone of one and a half *sēr*. [Manto has referred to it on several occasions—in this letter too—that etymologically *manṭō* is derived from the Kashmiri word *munt* which means a measuring stone of one and a half *sēr*.] If I were a rock weighing thirty or forty thousand maunds, I would have thrown myself into the river so that you would have to spend some time consulting with your engineers about how to pull it out.

If Manto had anything to do with politics, he would not have felt surprised or sad. In economics, land is defined as a free gift from God. It includes water, air, light, etc. Then how can water be appropriated by an individual? But if land can be divided, why can't water? That is why it was not surprising to restrict the flow of the Beas River through the land of Pakistan. (It may be noted here that this event relates to the controversy following the India-Pakistan pact.) For Manto, water may have been a free gift of Nature, but in politics it has always been used as a potent weapon. It needs to be mentioned that Manto was so upset by this state of affairs that he wrote a moving short story, "Yazīd," on this very theme.

It is clear from Manto's above remarks that Nehru's politics left him terribly dissatisfied. On the other hand, he felt so attached to the land he had migrated to that he felt like throwing himself into the river in the form of a heavy rock. Undoubtedly, this "act" of Manto's may seem strange to Indians and Manto-lovers, but it is necessary to look at it from Manto's vantage point and against the background of the circumstances prevailing at the time. Maybe Manto was right; and then again, maybe he was wrong.

Manto was now a citizen of Pakistan. But before this, he was a citizen of India. This is why he sometimes speaks in the present tense and sometimes his heart bleeds for the past:

Pundit-ji, there's no doubt that you are a great personality. You are the Prime Minister of India. You are the ruler of the country that was formerly my country too. You are everything. But pardon me if I say that you have never cared for this humble person [who is also a Kashmiri].

These lines highlight two of Manto's persistent agonies: one, he cannot

call his former country his own; and two, though a Kashmiri, he's unable to do anything for the people of Kashmir. Nehru himself was an example of how much love a Kashmiri harbors for Kashmir. In Manto's words, "I know and believe that you've clung to Kashmir because, being a Kashmiri, you feel a sort of magnetic love for that land."

For both Manto and Pundit-ji, Kashmir was their homeland, but others have known it only as a nagging problem—not only at the time of Independence, but even today. One does not know how many debates have taken place to date about the solution of the problem. However, there seems to have been no organized debate among the literary people of both the countries. It may happen in the future. But Manto had already started it way back in 1954. One of his observations on Kashmir has just been quoted (viz., Nehru "clinging" to Kashmir). This is not a simple statement, but one filled with deep irony. It can be construed simply as the expression of his utter dissatisfaction with the current dispensation whereby Kashmir was left with India. Well, the allegation regarding Nehru's "magnetic love" for Kashmir applies to Manto with equal validity. Manto's heart bled for Kashmir for the simple reason that he was a Kashmiri himself.

Many of Manto's Indian readers may feel let down after knowing his view on Kashmir. But his observations, as has been pointed out already, were relevant to literature, not politics. That is why he could afford to contradict himself over and over again. Perhaps great writers harbor great contradictions within themselves. Manto, who accuses Nehru of "clinging" to Kashmir, adds in the same breath: "... I had been to Banihal only. I have seen places like Kud, Bataut and Kashtwar. I have seen their poverty alongside their beauty. If you have removed this poverty, then keep Kashmir to yourself." In other words, it was not important to Manto whether Kashmir remained in India or Pakistan. His real concern was the removal of its poverty. He wished prosperity for Kashmir, regardless of the country with which it remained. He was ready to do everything for its well-being. One wonders whether the following sprang from genuine emotion or merely from Manto's predilection for tongue-in-cheek humor:

Between us Pundit brothers, do this: call me back to India. First I'll help myself to *shaljam shabdēg* at your place and then take over the responsibility for Kashmiri affairs. The Bakhshis and the rest of them deserve to be sacked right away. Cheats of the first order. For no reason you've given them such high status. Is that because this

suits you? But why at all ... ?

Students of history know that by Bakhshi, Manto meant Ghulam Muhammad Bakhshi who became the chief minister of Kashmir after the arrest of Sheikh Abdullah. As far as the removal of poverty is concerned, Manto probably considered himself more competent than either Bakhshi or Nehru. In truth, however, an ordinary person like Manto could do nothing. Given half a chance, the common people of Kashmir could have done a lot on their own. And Manto, in any case, was one among those common Kashmiris. That is why Manto was thinking about Kashmir on behalf of its common people, while Nehru's thoughts on the matter were entirely political. Not only Nehru but all the political leaders after him kept on saying that whatever happened to Kashmir was right. They reflect the same thinking about contemporary events. But if one were to make a survey of public opinion in Kashmir, would one draw the same conclusion as the politicians did? One palpable injustice that was done to the people of Kashmir was that the Kashmiri language was pushed to the margins and Urdu was foisted upon them as the state language. It is important to stress this point because Manto was worried about the fate of Urdu, and his anxiety is recorded in this letter. (More on this later.)

Manto was unhappy that Kashmir was retained in India; all the same he had no complaint if India removed its poverty. He had a point here, but the question is: Had poverty been removed from other parts of India? Had Pakistan been able to alleviate the poverty of its people? Even then Manto had great expectations from Nehru in regard to Kashmir, because Nehru was a Kashmiri. There was little else but poet-like emotionalism in it.

On the other hand, his outburst on Junagarh did not seem to spring from this kind of emotionalism. Manto concludes: "You've illegally occupied Junagarh, which a Kashmiri could do only under the influence of a Maratha. I mean Patel. (God forgive him!)." Everyone knows the power Patel enjoyed in independent India. But the issue of Junagarh was different. Though it was a Hindu majority province, its *navāb* intended to accede to Pakistan, which generated great discontent among the people, and in February, 1948, the government of India had to send in troops and hold a referendum. The majority of the people voted in favor of accession to India, and the *navāb* fled to Pakistan.

Thus, in Manto's eyes, this act was illegal. But his dissatisfaction seems to spring more from the fact that Nehru had done it at the insistence of Patel. What would be Manto's reaction if the decision had been

taken by Pundit-ji alone? But the more important question here is whether Manto's indignation against Nehru was called for. Obviously, it was called for if one sees it through the eyes of the Pakistani citizen Sa'adat Hasan Manto. However, if looked through the eyes of a Kashmiri pundit, then whatever the other Kashmiri pundit did was absolutely the right thing to do.

Manto's grievances against Nehru are not of a political nature only. Basically he was a writer concerned about language and literature. One of his grievances pertained to the fact that Indian publishers published his books without his permission. If Manto were only aware how many authors from abroad are published this way! It cannot be said that the state of affairs in Pakistan is any different. Another strong complaint of Manto's had to do with Urdu: "You are a litterateur in English. Over here, I write short stories in Urdu, a language which is being wiped out in your country." Manto emphasizes two things in the above statement: one, India was no longer *his* country; it now belonged to others. Hence the sarcasm and sting in the phrase "your country." It is quite natural for one to feel distressed if one can no longer call something which formerly belonged to him his own. Two, Manto underscored the efforts aimed at wiping out Urdu from India. This was propaganda which was being spread in Pakistan with a lot of noise. The Indian Muslims were also affected by it. However, it seems that Urdu faces greater danger in Pakistan because in not even a single province there does it enjoy the status of a local language. Urdu has been imposed on the people of that country exactly in the way it has been imposed on the people of Kashmir. Nevertheless, Manto offers an illustration of how Urdu was being wiped out in India:

Pundit-ji, I often read your statements which indicate that you hold Urdu dear. I heard one of your speeches on the radio at the time the country was divided. Everyone admired your English. But when you broke into so-called Urdu, it seemed as though some rabid Hindu Mahasabha member had translated your English speech ...

Here it would seem that while Manto had no complaints about Nehru's language, he had plenty of objections to the shadow cast on that language by a rabid Hindu Mahasabha member. He had earlier commented on a Maratha's influence on Nehru. By now it has also become established that Sardar Patel's outlook was becoming increasingly communal. For instance, in his book *Modern India*, Sumit Sarkar quotes Mahatma

Gandhi on the Sardar's alleged communal outlook as follows: "You are not the same Sardar who I knew once." Presumably, this is the reason for Manto's ironical comment on Sardar Patel. Likewise, by drawing attention to the shadow of a rabid Hindu Mahasabha member, Manto probably wanted to say that the Congress, despite its secular pretensions, was not free from the influence of communal forces.

In this epistolary preface, Manto has focused primarily on Nehru's personality, just as he did in his sketches on Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Agha Hashr Kashmiri, and several of the protagonists in his stories. With due respect to Nehru, Manto revealed what he thought was the negative side of his personality. There came a time in Indian politics when the slogan "Indira is India" was given publicity bordering on the obscene. Even if one ignores this slogan, one cannot ignore the fact that after Independence, not only Nehru-ji and Indian politics, as pointed out earlier, but also Nehru and India were considered indivisible. Catherine Clement—author of the book *Edwina and Nehru*, written originally in French (*Pour l' amour de l'inde* [For the Love of India])—said in one of her recent interviews: "You cannot divide the two. It is both together—India and Nehru" (*The Hindu*, 5 May 1996). When a foreigner can think in this way, one can easily understand the feelings of a person who was once a citizen of this country. Manto was unhappy probably because Nehru, who was not only a person but the "state" itself, had with him or his Congress Party forces which were both communal and reactionary, and neither Nehru nor his Congress Party was immune from their pervasive influences. One might also say, appropriately, that here Manto could be right or he could be wrong. However, it is hard to escape the truth that deep down in his heart he felt an agony which made him restless. That is why he exploded over Nehru, Patel and Radcliffe at the same time. Commenting on Radcliffe's activities, he says:

It was the time when Radcliffe had turned India into two slices of a single loaf of bread. It is regrettable that they have not been toasted yet. You're toasting it from that side and we, from this side. But the flames in our braziers are coming from outside.

In other words, the only reason for Manto's anguish and sadness was that India was turned into two slices of a single loaf of bread. And a greater reason was that the fire which toasted the slices came from outside. As a matter of fact, it was both Manto's compulsion and his writerly obligation to reflect on Partition, its causes and consequences. Like many

others, he too was against the vivisection of the country. This position is substantiated by this letter as much as by the story “Ṭōba Tēk Singh.” The anger expressed against Radcliffe in Manto’s letter may have been at work while he was writing “Ṭōba Tēk Singh.” Radcliffe stood as a symbol for Manto—the symbol of a man who draws boundary lines between countries, between hearts, between peoples. And, regrettably, he is an “outsider.” Manto could bear the fire stoked from within, but he could not bear the fire from outside. The reason could be: when India was divided into two parts, the writer named Sa‘adat Hasan Manto was split into a double self—one divided, the other undivided.

Manto, in any case, was Manto. For us he may be great or small. But in reality he was just Manto—a measuring stone weighing not one, not two, but exactly one and a half *sēr*. □

—*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*