

COLUMNS

Some Stray Thoughts on Manto and His “Hatak”

SAADAT HASAN MANTO, the iconic figure of Urdu fiction, has had a strange fate: being either idolized or roughed up by his critics. His detractors have found him guilty of pornography. Despite having radically different takes on his fictional corpus, the majority of his lovers and haters share at least one common trait: their critical discourse—if that’s what it is—has little to do with the nature of fiction and, by extension, Manṭō’s fiction. They have either commended or condemned him for his use of certain societal and political issues, assuming that the use of such issues defines a writer’s calling, namely exposing society’s ills. For them, fiction is merely a convenient peg on which to hang a whole agenda of social amelioration, very much in the vein of Munshī Premchand, who unabashedly used fiction as a tool to reform society. For an astute reader such issues are, by and large, irrelevant to the fictional art.

As a preamble, what, exactly, is Manṭō’s appeal? At some subliminal level of cognition, his fiction coincides with our innate, if not our empirical sense of truth—a truth that exists in a parallel universe of refined emotion and sublime expectation. If fiction is moral, it is precisely in this sense, in its very human pursuit of what does not exist, but in some inexplicable way is infinitely better, and necessarily so. In other words, it is an evocation of the absent, of what should have been, from the depths of yearning. But fiction is not moral in the conventional sense of the word, or rather it is indifferent to this conventional sense.

This is what characterizes the outer perimeter of good fiction and what good writers strive to achieve. “Strive to achieve” might suggest conscious effort and design and, therefore, a dichotomy between self and other. But writers strive because striving is inherent in their nature, is part of who they are. Even unconsciously they would not act any differently. In this sense, one absolutely cannot tame a writer. He may live in a society, yet stand outside of it, in violation of its norms and values, because they don’t jibe with his notion of reality. He will behave in unpredictable ways, ready to surprise you, but even more to surprise himself, by becoming conscious, with wonder in his eyes, of what was always inherent in him, or even to articulate that which he knows only vaguely.

As for intractability, a scene from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* comes to mind. The coffin has been lowered into the pit for burial, the mourners stand around the freshly dug grave in a semicircle, the orator is only halfway through intoning his eulogy for the dearly departed when a "neurotic gust of wind" lifts the hat off of Papa Clevis's head and drops it at the edge of the grave. Eventually it will tumble into the grave, but, for now, Clevis, hesitating between should he or shouldn't he pick it up, lets his gaze crawl along the erratic course of the bobbing hat. The attention of everyone among the small band of mourners has wavered. No one is listening to the eulogy anymore; instead their eyes are riveted on the comic drama unfolding before them. The funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born.

Such utter disregard for decorum, such hilarity at the most solemn moment of grief and loss—only a writer thinks about such contrary situations because he is not beholden to the rules of conventional decorum. He cannot be held hostage to the tyranny of conventional attitudes. Such playfully discordant details often occur in Manṭō's fiction as well. They do not in any way confer greater density and weight to the main story, nor otherwise seem indispensable, but they do reaffirm our belief in the autonomy of the writer and his penchant to see the comic in a very solemn moment.

Mere human aspiration and striving for something that exists "beyond the sphere of our sorrow" does not by itself guarantee a work's success. Art enters while translating the aspiration, however unconscious, into a sellable—or, at least, plausible—commodity in a very conscious world where the foot is firmly dug into the ground and the head is screwed on in its right place. In doing so, it gives the reader an intimation of the possibility of an existence beyond the empirical world.

This perspective argues vigorously against any reduction of the imaginative world of the writer to a handful of societal or political issues. Lamentably, too often Manṭō has been drafted into the service of one such issue or another. The greater part of the critical commentary on his writing has unwaveringly focused on prostitutes (a social phenomenon) and Partition (a political event).

Of course the remnants of the Progressives and a fair bunch of those too eager to deny fiction its radical autonomy would likely rush to declare—teary-eyed, I might add—"Hatak" (The Insult) as yet another story about the degradation of women. They would go for the nearest truncheon, if a cleaver could not be found, to bash the head of a society intent on sending its womenfolk to eke out a living by selling their charms and the physical repository of those charms. They would not fail to stick a feather in Manṭō's

cap for exposing this crass injustice. And they would also dig up a motive for his doing this: infinite compassion for the downtrodden, disenfranchised female of the South Asian subcontinent.

To speculate on why a woman chooses to sell her body is the business of sociologists, to judge the morality of such a choice is the business of the custodians of morality. Is it also the business of fiction? Was it Manṭō's business? No, the business of fiction is to see what she makes of this life, independently of the circumstances that brought her to this choice.

Manṭō leaves Saugandhi's reasons for selling her flesh entirely opaque, or rather, creatively vague, as any good writer would. He is not interested in telling us why she opted to become a *fille de joie*. Was it a forced or bad marriage? Had her husband ditched her and, disgraced, she could not return to her parental home? Was she abducted and raped? (This is precisely what happened to many Hindu women during Partition. Many interviews with such women in Ritu Menon's *Borders and Boundaries: How Women Experienced the Partition of India* attest to the fact that, after being repatriated to India, these women chose to live and die in an ashram rather than return to their ancestral homes and bring ill-repute to their families.) Or was it domestic abuse or sexual violence? Dire poverty? What? In a devilish vein, one might also posit that she turned tricks simply because she loved sex, though this possibility should quickly be ruled out because the story does not offer any compelling grounds for such an assumption. In fact, Saugandhi's "mind considered sexual intimacy patently absurd," and yet "Every limb of her body yearned to be worked over, to exhaustion, until fatigue had settled in and eased her into a state of delightful sleep." No, Manṭō does not give us a clue. He refrains because it is not important for him or for us to know. On the other hand, he forecloses any possibility of our being tempted, or being rash enough, to ask by deftly slipping a line into the narrative: "Of course, she didn't look quite as fresh and vibrant as she did five years ago when she lived with her parents, unencumbered by any cares whatsoever."

So there was a time, not so long ago, when Saugandhi lived a carefree life with her parents. But between that and selling her body in a seamy neighborhood of Bombay there lies a dark abyss into which Manṭō does not care to look, nor does he invite us to look. Whatever happened in the intervening period is anyone's guess, but any reason that might be suggested will have absolutely no bearing on the story or its protagonist. Manṭō, rather, wants us to know what happened this particular night when she was spurned and rejected out of hand by a potbellied seth who came along in his fancy car, pointed the beam of his flashlight at her, and sounded his disapproval with a cryptic "Oh no!" Manṭō wants us to know

how she dealt with this heart-wrenching denial of her being, this denial of who she was, by initiating a veritable ontology of selfhood.

A man feels the need for a woman, runs to the nearest bordello and finds himself a floozy. End of story. Manṭō would not be doing that, would he? And if he were, what is the point of the story. You feel thirsty, you drink water, or sugarcane juice. Where is the story? No, he wants to deal with Saugandhi as a woman, yes, a woman very much her own, not simply some type that could be enlisted for a dramatic dressing down of society. What society is like is for us to decide, independently of whether it has any critical role to play in the story at hand. Manṭō wants to deal with Saugandhi as an individual—a *fille de nuit*, yes, but unlike any of her sisters in the profession. In her unexpected reaction lies the falsity of any overt or covert notion of an agenda to take society to task.

Here I might add that the greater number of Manṭō's prostitutes do not behave as one might imagine they do. In the end, they resist categorization into a particular type. Many—such as Siraj and Sharda and Shakuntala—jealously guard their virginity by not letting any “passengers” (Manṭō's favorite word for a prostitute's client) ride their train. And they all seem to crave love. Siraj had willingly eloped with her lover, who ran away during the night leaving her asleep in the hotel. This clouded her entire existence. Only after she had exacted her vengeance—turning the table on her fickle lover by spending a whole night with him and then abandoning him in like manner, throwing her burqa over him while he slept—could she recover. Society plays little, if any, part in this drama, or in the story “Shārdā.” Sharda gives herself physically to Nazir in a manner he had never experienced before, but she is unwilling to enter the profession or allow her sister to enter it. When she leaves Nazir, who does not believe in love, she does so with a dignity few respectable women could rival. Zeenat, the Kashmiri *kabutri* in “Bābū Gōpīnāth,” eventually settles down with the respectable Hyderabad landowner Ghulam Ali. And Kanta opens the door for her pimp Khushia while she is stark naked. Khushia doesn't like this show of immodesty. “You could have let me know you were bathing. I could have come back another time.” She smiles and throws every ounce of his male pride into a tumultuous vortex with her answer, “When you said it was Khushia, I thought what's the harm. It's just our Khushia. Let him come in.”

And Navab of “Sarkanḍōñ kē Pīḥē” (Behind the Reeds), as the narrator tells us, “wasn't averse to her profession.” When her mother, or whoever she was, introduces her to her first man, the terribly simple and naïve girl thinks that this is how young women “got initiated into their youth.” She gets “used to her prostitute's existence” and believes that her life's ultimate purpose lay in sleeping with men, and she quite liked the expen-

sive silks and jewelry they brought as gifts. There is no trace of regret in her acceptance of this life. But “she was every bit an indecent young woman—which is how our noble and chaste women are wont to look upon her and her ilk—but if truth be told, she didn’t even faintly think that she was living a life of sin.”

If we look at these women as individuals, all the talk about society’s role in reducing them to a life of ignominy and want loses much of its force. Manṭō doesn’t use “Hatak” as an occasion to spill his guts against society’s treatment of so-called “fallen” women. (Nor do these women themselves indulge in this exercise.) He is far removed from handing out judgments. In fact, he wouldn’t even use the word “fallen” to describe these women because of its judgmental overtones. Rather, he is using the story as an occasion to discover some truth about the person that Saugandhi is. And in doing so, he shrewdly guards his role as a narrator, never once surrendering his neutrality and objectivity. This is in contrast to a story such as “Nannhī kī Nānī” (Tiny’s Granny), where ‘Iṣmat Čughtā’ī has smothered the individuality of her Nannhī and turned her into a mouthpiece for the author to vent her anger against society. Manṭō never allows his narrator to transmogrify into an interventionist, even when the narrator bears his own name, which happens quite often in his stories. At several points in the short story “Sirāj,” Manṭō purposely alerts us to the fact that as a writer-narrator he has no right to inject his own reactions and thoughts into the story. For instance, “This was more than enough detail for me. How I reacted to it is my concern, not something I should tell you, not as a short-story writer anyway.” And, “I don’t want to talk about the background my mind had formed for Siraj [...]”

It is about time that we discarded the myth about Manṭō tacitly following some Progressive-Socialist-Reformist agenda in his fiction; if anything, he was following his own agenda as a writer true to his calling.

Lest the above sound too partisan, I am only arguing for the self-sufficiency and autonomy of fiction. No writer lives outside of his time and place. Something of his environment and its peculiar aura will inevitably find its way into his writing. Moreover, unlike poetry, the linear structure of prose makes it impossible to transcend time and place. To read fiction merely as a social or political document is a fundamental outrage against its nature. We cannot judge it by extraneous criteria. Its success or failure will be determined by whether it has lived up to its own promise.

So, does Manṭō’s fiction live up to its promise? Some of it undoubtedly does. Indeed some of it is superb. But a good deal does not. Even “Hatak” is overdone in places. Part of the problem lies with the relatively young life of the short-story form in Urdu literature. Manṭō stands roughly in the

fourth and fifth decades of this life. He also suffered from over-productivity. A story a day—nay, even in a couple of hours for what you might call “his bottle”—is not the best way to write fiction. Reading only fifty stories in tandem from the gargantuan corpus of his work offered by Sang-e Meel in five fat tomes (unedited and replete with typos and omissions) forces the unavoidable impression on the reader of terribly rushed writing. However, a writer must be judged more by his finer works. And even in his minor, hastily slapped together works the spurs of a great writer are visible everywhere. □

—MUHAMMAD UMAR MEMON

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Caste in Urdu Prose

THE HISTORICAL DIVISION OF SOCIETY in South Asia along caste lines is now an acknowledged sociological, political and economic fact. Caste, however, as a literary or social discourse does not, for several reasons, form a part of the predominantly Muslim culture of Urdu. Nor has there been much academic exploration of the role caste plays in the life of South Asian Muslim communities compared to other communities in the region.

As far as Urdu literary writing is concerned, it has traditionally focused exclusively on the lives and concerns of conquerors, their cohorts and their descendants, who typically prided themselves on their real or perceived foreign origins. Even after modern, socially-committed writing began in Urdu around the 1930s, caste as a variable for social exploration was largely ignored in favor of economic class.

Professional interpreters of religion, on the other hand, as well as conservative Muslim social and literary critics, usually deny even the existence of caste divisions among South Asian Muslims. This is done in the face of an abundance of evidence to the contrary. Since the “social reformers” of both the religious and less-religious persuasions came from the upper castes of the Muslim society—Syed, Mughal, Afghan and Shaikh—they seem to have retained all the traditional prejudices and preferences of their castes. They strictly kept as their goal the well-being of the people of their own background in competition with their non-Muslim counterparts, and, as such, singularly failed to acknowledge, let alone tried to address, the inequality within Muslim society along caste lines. If anything, they actively supported the existing caste hierarchy. Thus, among Muslims, there were

no movements that resembled those initiated by Jyotirao Phule and other reformers in Hindu society.

In recent times, we have been witnessing a resurgence of interest in prose writings belonging to the latter half of the nineteenth century and earlier, but the celebration of the so-called “indigenous literary masterpieces”—especially the *dāstān*—has been distinctly marked by an utterly uncritical acceptance of their form and substance. This interest seems to have strong revivalist tendencies as its active proponents seem to glorify not only the literary quality of these writings but also the worldview and attendant social and moral values upheld by the writers and their contemporary readers or listeners. So far there has hardly been any discernable dissenting voice which dares to read these texts—their style, content, concerns and language—with a modern critical perspective and point to the significant prejudices inherent in them based on religion, gender, class and, of course, caste.

Every language is supposed to be a unique way of looking at and interpreting the world. If one takes a close look at its lexicon, however, Urdu is found to have certain strong biases common with languages of at least the northern part of the Subcontinent.

As matters of language are decided by the power-wielding sections of a linguistic community, we can find innumerable expressions revealing a deep-seated belief in the caste hierarchy as a social organizing principle. Examining collections of common expressions and sayings, one cannot fail to sense the contempt on the part of linguistic decision-makers for those stigmatized at birth by the fact of their lower caste background. Those forced to live a life of misery as a result of the society’s adherence to unjust laws and customs are considered mean, foolish, criminal-minded, open to all kinds of abuse and so on.

Names of many of the lower castes are used as terms of abuse: cobbler, vegetable vendor, meat-seller, sweeper and so on. But some of the choicest insults have been reserved for the community of cloth weavers. This traditional hatred for *julābās* might have been further enhanced by the fact that they participated in the revolt of 1857 and threw the loyalty of the Muslim elites into question, which had disastrous consequences for the latter in the years immediately following the mutiny.

However, if expressions and phrases revealing a certain mindset current in a language at a particular point in time are to be used as data for sociopolitical analysis, they have to be examined with caution. In many instances such expressions seem timeless to the extent that it is difficult to pinpoint with any accuracy the circumstances under which they might have been invented and adopted into the lexicon. In the case of a literary

creation, on the other hand, it can be viewed in the perspective of the place and time of its writing and publication.

In order to point to a few trends with regard to caste that have been prominent in Urdu prose literature, I have selected a passage from a text which is, in my view, relevant to the subject. This passage reflects some firmly-held beliefs on the part of the writers and their readers or listeners. I begin with an episode in *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*, one of the many *dāstāns* loosely connected to each other in the overarching tale of the fictitious character Amir Hamza and his adventures of war and conquest. Such *dāstāns* used to be told by a professional storyteller, or *dāstāngō*, whose audiences were comprised exclusively of royalty and the nobility—including those who aspired to be a part of the higher social circles if only as lesser beings.

With the introduction of the printing press, such oral texts started to be brought out as published books. One of the earliest was the one-volume *Dāstān-e Amīr Hamza*, committed to writing by Ghālib Lakḥnavī and published in 1855. It gained a lot of popularity and was read and rendered into other languages in different northern parts of the Subcontinent. Maulvi Ghulām Rasūl of Punjab, for example, composed his *Amīr Hamza* in Punjabi poetry based on the 1855 Urdu text.

Successive volumes of *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* began to be published from the turn of the century and went on till the 1920s. In a subplot to the adventures of Amir Hamza, his grandson Shahzada Asad, at one point in volume one, finds himself captured by the female ruler of a city in the *ṭilism* and she then imprisons him in a garden where there are many other prisoners working as gardeners to earn their food.

The prince is invited by the gardeners to join them so that he can also eat at the end of the day. He rejects the preposterous idea out of hand, saying, “God forbid, I can’t bring myself to this ‘*mālī-pan*’. You may continue with your menial work but count me out.” He then tries to pluck fruits from trees and drink water from streams, but since they are all magical, his self-righteous attempts at satisfying his immediate needs prove unsuccessful. In the evening, the prince watches the gardeners exchange garlands with the Queen’s maids for trays of food and then eat to their hearts’ content while he is forced to go to sleep on an empty stomach.

This principled moral stand against the infamy of working with one’s hands to earn a living—although in this particular case it was nothing more horrifying than picking flowers and making garlands for the Queen, who apparently wanted to provide the pretext of an honest day’s work to her prisoners—must have touched an empathetic chord among the typical audience for the *dāstān*, namely the Muslim *shurafā* (members of the

upper caste élite).

The colonial setup had entrenched itself by now, and the aftermath of the 1857 revolt had raised a question for some of them to think of the unthinkable. The story, however, is not meant to disturb them further with a reality check, but rather to provide relief through an agreeable use of the imagination. Therefore, the next day the enraged prince beats up the maids, strips off their clothes and snatches food from them. So now he is able to eat all the delicious royal food without having to undergo the unthinkable, while those who worked the whole day for their meal are deprived of it. Later, he is arrested for his riotous behavior and taken to the Queen, who duly falls in love with him and offers him food in exchange for his amorous attention. □

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