

VOICES OF THE MARGINALISED IN MANTO'S SHORT STORIES – BITTER HARVEST AND THE RETURN.

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Abstract

Saadat Hasan Manto's stature as an Urdu short story writer of the undivided India can be grasped through the journey of his candour writings. Born in a small village of Sambrala, Punjab, his variegated fiction dispenses his thoughts which revolved around the cataclysmic and disconcerting social-realities. At a time, when his contemporaries acted as the victims of moralistic conundrum and deliberately chose to disregard and strangle the voices of the marginalised, Manto dealt with the section of society which was castigated and condemned like prostitutes, pimps, eunuchs etc. Through stories like, *Bitter Harvest* and *The Return*, his multifaceted depiction of the naked truth could be witnessed. He was the flag bearer of modern and progressive ideas and so, always stood up to strengthen the voices of the underprivileged irrespective of religion, caste, gender, etc. His female characters were unconventionally presented, so that, the hypocrisy of religion and nationhood could be highlighted. He had a passionate disgust for religious acrimony. There were times when he was charged with obscenity but then, Manto proved that his stories actually evoked dejection and disillusionment. His exceptionally unique discernment of Partition was reason enough for him to be considered as the most controversial and misunderstood writer of his times.

Keywords: victims, hypocrisy, castigated, religious, acrimony, underprivileged, obscenity.

The disquieting dilemma of the partition was a subject matter to be depicted by a whole lot of writers, nevertheless, Manto possessed a gifted attribute of deciphering the multi-layered skin of partition horror in an immensely unique way. Saadat Hasan Manto was an Urdu short story writer born in Sambrala village in Punjab in an undivided India on May 11, 1912 and died in Lahore, Pakistan on January 18, 1955. He was the voice of the forbidden and marginalised society. He was deeply shaken by partition and was known especially for his revolutionary, rustic and realistic portrait of the human image in his writings. Irrespective of religion, gender or class, Manto dealt with the section of society which was castigated and condemned like prostitutes, pimps, eunuchs etc. His oeuvre mostly revolved around the partition and its aftermath. As far as the voices of the marginalised was considered, the protagonists in Manto's stories were mainly the plebians with petty professions, struggling for livelihood, showcasing their helpless despondency and trying to secure a decent

recognition in the society. His writings showed his progressive mindset, submerged in reality, unfolding the desire of lust, vengeance, love and deceit in humans. Manto for his boldness of being plain-spoken was considered the most controversial and misunderstood writer of his time. His tenets were wide and intricate and they bare the reality in its naked form. He had a comparatively short life, but, still in his 21 years of writing career, he positioned himself at par with many of his contemporaries. Several times, he was charged with obscenity, as by the courts and the orthodox lot, but his soul was completely against hypocritical and sanctimonious ideologies.

Looking into the dynamics of the inhuman and devilish behaviour of mankind at the crucial phase of partition, one could witness the fact that under the masquerade of religion and nationhood, the horrific xenophobia victimised women the most. Violence was initiated by men but was inflicted upon women, who were subjected to ineffable brutality. Manto portrayed such real life predicament in his short story, *Bitter Harvest* where the design of violence and madness had engulfed each and every human mind. The story unfolded through Qasim, a riot victim who on witnessing the corpse of his wife and the raped dead body of his daughter, indulged in strange madness of vengeance. In anger, he targeted a Sikh man along with three others enchanting religious slogan. Nevertheless, the burning fire of fury remained unquenched and he moved forward to infiltrate into a Hindu house and looted the honour and life of a young girl “like an animal gone berserk”¹. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, in their phenomenol work, *Border and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, provided a detailed account of violence:

“The range of sexual violation...stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing foetuses-is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells about women as objects in male construction of their own honour. Women's sexuality symbolises ‘manhood’; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it has to be avenged.”²

The mad violence of partition had metamorphosized Qasim's sanity and he killed Bimla, the Hindu girl. However, there was a tint of humanity left in Qasim as when he realised his misdeed, he covered her dead body with a blanket and turned numb. On being asked by his acquaintance of what was he doing in his house, Qasim merely pointed out towards the corpse with his trembling voice as Sharifan. Bimla's father on witnessing the whole situation transmitted into Qasim's counterpart and he in order to quench his vengeance moved out of the house to avenge it. The tragic tale highlighted the irony that in utter demand of revenge and anger, everyone was involved in sexual violence and murder of their own daughters. Manto's marginalised, subjugated and deprived protagonists were taken from real life situations, as visible in his controversial short story, *The Return*, which depicted a riot situation of religious communities. Sirajuddin was an injured victim of the cruel time frame who found out that his young daughter, Sakina was missing. The father retracted himself from the state of shock and found himself in a refugee camp. A series of images resurfaced in his mind:

“Attack...fire...escape...railway station...night...Sakina”³

He regained himself howling his daughter's name Sakina. She was nowhere to be found. His desperation and helplessness needed to be consoled but similar was the situation with everyone around him. He recalled his recent past to search the point where he got disconnected with his vulnerable daughter but all in vain. Nevertheless, he found a group of men who declared themselves as saviours of humanity. He provided them with his daughter's description in order to search her out and prayed for their success. The men after a few days did find the girl who was scared and shaken to the core, assured her to be normal and collected her in the truck to make her reach the destination.

Days passed out and Sirajuddin continued to enquire about his daughter, to which, they reassured him with their false dedication. However, in the same evening, he saw few men carrying the body of an unconscious girl, whom they found from the railway tracks, to the camp hospital. Sirajuddin went in and eventually recognised his daughter. The doctor felt her pulse and looking at the window, directed the old man to open it. The young girl on the stretcher stirred a bit, and involuntarily untied the cord, and prepared herself for the sexual infiltration. Sirajuddin's joy had no limits on acknowledging the fact that she was alive, however, the doctor was completely shocked. Niaz Zaman remarked on Manto's story, *The Return*:

“to the tragic story of the girl gone mad after repeated rapes so that she no longer recognizes her father except as a rapist, Manto gives the starkest and bleakest pictures of partition.”⁴

The subtle description of psychological violence was not only shocking, but represented the epitome of mutilated and degraded civilized ethics. Sakina's father literally prayed for the success of the ill-motivated lusty bunch of goons who appropriated the painful situation of partition to satisfy their sexual gratification. Manto wonderfully cited the point that how the female body became the single handed motif of revenge to be extracted out. The multi-layered skin of violence in the partition era strangled the voices of the marginalised section who were mere victims of the holocaust. *The Return* was structurally a masterpiece where Sakina placed herself in memory initially, had a short appearance in the middle of the story and became the centre of the focus with the story's termination. Despite of Sirajuddin's anxiety, his loneliness, his introspection, his helplessness, his desperate search for his daughter and his colossal suffering, Sakina replace him to become the protagonist of the story.

Both the stories, *Bitter Harvest* and *The Return* highlight the fact that the female body was the site of honour, as framed by the patriarchal structure, and in order to harm the other, one simply needed to dishonour and disfigure it. However, in Sakina's case, the fact that her immediate torturers were, in all possibility, Muslim themselves, adjoin altogether a different aspect to the tragedy.

Literature as always was enticed with great human tragedies and partition was one such horrific event. The distressing and traumatising affect of partition was considered to have had such momentum that the writers of the time had to put strenuous effort in describing the reality of the situation. There in, came the role of short story technique through which the depth of agony and desolation of the dislocated common masses could be presented. Arjun Mahey remarked in his work, *Partition Narratives; Some Observation*:

“If nations could suffer trauma, the partition certainly ignited one in both India and Pakistan. And as in some traumata, the victims dissolved into catatonic shock that displayed itself as silence.”⁵

The partition was instrumental in silencing the voices of the marginalised-common man, common friends, common neighbours, common feelings and common pathos. The strange silence of this particular predicament demanded writers like Manto who inhibited in himself the respect for human values and compassion. His stories instilled in itself the tears, emotions, dislocation, loss, nostalgia, deceit, shock and several other pessimistic sentiments. Partition or division in the human emotion could put someone into melancholy and depression, leading the same to irreparable damage. Manto firmly believed that the dark memories and scars of partition had paranormal repercussions. The religious biasness and gender discrimination caused due to socio-political crisis had distorted, disfigured and debased the human ethics and disposition.

The anger and frustration prevalent due to utter chaos and anarchy in the partition era left no other choice to common people like Qasim in the short story, *Bitter Harvest*. If scrutinized from a superficial account, what else could he do, but to hit the opposition in such a way that they feel the maximum pain, i.e., to rape their daughters, after all, his own daughter had been raped. However, in the most fundamental sanity, could his act or such father's act be justified? It drew a pathetic aspect leading to the point that what was Sharifan's or Bimla's fault in the hostile atmosphere. Women, as such, imbibed in themselves that they would be raped and murdered in these situations or it would be preferable that they undergo suicide so that the facade of honour could be restored for them and their family. These suffocating patriarchal mechanisms left little space for women to breathe in their individual thoughts and understanding. Manto was incapable of understanding the ambiguous hypocrisy of human ethics. Completely contrary to the stereotypical and orthodox, he deliberately provided the uncomfortable portrait of societal depravity and sham morality. Manto had a passionate disgust for the resentment of humankind which germinated from the embryo of religious sectarianism. He through his writings cried for a revolution which had no space for ornamentation and fakeness:

“ In my reform house, I keep no combs, curlers or shampoos because I do not know how to apply make-up to human beings. If Agha Hashr (celebrated playwright known as the ‘Indian Shakespeare’) was cross-eyed, I have no device that can straighten his crooked eye, nor can I make him shed flowers from his mouth in place of the four-letter words that were his forte.”⁶

His ruthless directness and brutal portrayal of realities of human suffering, through his unconventional and apparently uncomfortable titles, such as, *Colder Than Ice*, *The Blouse*, *Odour*, *A Women's Life* etc. show the under belly of human life as no other author of his time. The title initially titillates the pessimistic emotions of humanity such as, discrimination, lust, criminality, violence, deceptiveness, riots, sex and killings. However, after going through the journey of his short stories, one could be left with introspection and dejection instead of vulgarity and salaciousness. *The Return* is another masterpiece attached to the above given list, for which, Manto had to encounter the charge of obscenity. Instead of distinguishing the actual need of proceedings to rectify the plight of women in the society, the then pseudo intellectuals found it more significant that it would be far better to obstruct such ‘so called’ vulgar stories of society from coming into the hands of readers. Ironically, the same distinguishing parameter was getting lost in the story, where Sirajuddin or Sakina could not comprehend whether the group of men they were dealing with was attackers or saviours. These debased criminals of mankind and humanity under the garb of being the social workers and saviours were engrossed in raping women belonging to both the communities. Manto did not shy away to attack the institution of social work which had nationality's ideologies at its base. It proved the point that the taste of opportunists of the time, whether elite or commoner, was more in their own whims and fancies than in their community's upliftment.

Manto, intellectual elite, was much ahead of his time and was antagonistic to religiosity and conformity. His writings enlightened the readers and brought them out of their comfort zone. Ayesha Jalal in her book, *The Pity of Partition*, highlighted Manto's intellectual attack on human conscience by unraveling the taboos as,

“whether he was writing about prostitute, pimps or criminals, Manto wanted to impress upon his readers that these disreputable people were also human, much more than those who cloaked their failing in a thick veil of hypocrisy.”⁷

Manto, thus had always considered this fallen category to be an imperative part and therefore, leaves aside the moral judgement and allows his readers get the taste of his time. His characters look immensely convincing as they are authentic and natural in approach.

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