

Saadat hasan manto,
the controversial urdu
short story writer
essay sample



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Of the several hundred stories, the court found only two stories in which he had transgressed the law and was liable for punishment. But his critics and the custodians of society declared Manto to be retrogressive and licentious. Even the so-called “progressives” betrayed him. At one stroke they tarnished his entire writing career with the same dirty brush as the others... To call a writer’s work nothing on the basis of two stories is crass injustice. We cannot overlook the fact that Manto’s masterpieces such as “Toba Tek Singh”, “Moze!”, “Babu Gopinath” have nothing to do with obscenity.” (Jagdish Chander)

1948 to 1955 saw Manto writing most of his controversial stories. With the outcome that he was being hauled up in courts. He got into trouble for five of his stories. Boo (Odour), Kali Shalwar (Black Trousers), Thanda Ghosht (A Lump of Cold Meat/Flesh), were three of them.

In the short span of his life, he published 22 collections of short stories, a novel, 5 collections of radio plays, 3 collections of essays, and two collections of personal sketches, besides a full-length play. He wrote in Urdu but was as popular in Hindi, Punjabi, Kashmiri and some other languages.

It will not be wrong to say that Manto was a born story writer. He paid special attention to the structure of the story, bringing out precisely its significant details, invested with deep insight. His characters mostly comprise the fallen and rejected members of society- the fallen woman and prostitutes as in “Kali Shalwar”.

Khol Do was his second story that he had written after his emigration to Pakistan and the shortest. It was published in the “Naqoosh” magazine <https://assignbuster.com/saadat-hasan-manto-the-controversial-urdu-short-story-writer-essay-sample/>

around 1948 to 1949, which was forced to suspend its publication for six months. This was because the govt. feared that the story held a potential threat- a “breach of public peace”. Although the literary circles at the time forcefully opposed the govt.’s view, it cut no ice with the govt. which had taken an exception to the last portion of the story where the girl is shown pushing down her shalwar from her thighs in a state of semi-consciousness.

Manto’s story forms a part of what came to be known as “Partition Literature”. It can be understood as the “creative attempt” to make sense of one of the worst “pogroms” in human history. “In trying to grapple with the enormity of misery, writers dealing with this period obsessively developed imageries of rape, violence and destruction” (Anuradha Marwah Roy).

The story revolves around the father’s frantic search for his daughter Sakeena whom he has lost in the wake of the attacks on them in India. The title, “Khol Do” suggests Manto’s attempt at calling the reader’s attention to the last part of the story where one realises that the girl has been gang-raped by a group of men masquerading as “social workers” (Devendar Issar). In a broader sense, the story highlights the problem of the woman becoming a victim of the “male prowess” (Alok Bhalla) in the wake of the Partition. It is not just Sakeena but her mother too who is a victim. Though it may or may not seem to be Manto’s intention, I find the choice of the title interesting as “Khol Do” could be connected to the plight of Sakeena’s mother too, her stomach ripped open. But more than that, it is an uncovering of the shameful face of those ‘Razakars’ who see her as an object of desire. These lustful men derive their pleasure in exploiting her so much so that she is seen, opening her shalwar on hearing the doctor’s words- ‘Khol Do.

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Interestingly, Manto merges the story of Sirajuddin with the crowd. Though his story is centred around Sirajuddin and Sakeena, he does not fail to catch the reader's attention by referring to the 'others' too who were in 'need of sympathy' (Jai Ratan's translation). He is successful in sensitizing the readers by then placing him in the centre and the readers come to realise that this story is not just the girl's and her father's but of many others too.

At this point hence, it would be right to say that the politics behind the Partition had been successful in mind-numbing the people, in a way that they were unable to look at one another as beings. Rather they were repelled and attacked in the name of politics and religion. Manto seems to suggest the madness of the Partition and this is reflected in Toba Tek Singh as well. Perhaps even more disturbing is fact that the so-called 'Razakars' torment her. It is ironic as the word 'Razakar' is a Persian word meaning 'a volunteer'. These were like social workers who had the reputation of 'recovering women and children'- missing or abducted- from the other side of the border at their own risk.

One realises then that there is no rational or "political explanation" of what has happened (Shashi Joshi). This also answers the question of success of Manto's stories that have successfully shocked readers. As Alok Bhalla puts it, "What is scandalous about Manto's partition stories is his radical erasure of all social, moral or religious reasons which normally inform civilizations. Manto's primary argument is not only the Hobbesian one that when men are freed from responsibilities they become predators, but also that in a world which is as heartless and selfish as ours there is no reason for mercy and pity to create a safe ground for the frailty of goodness to survive."

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How do we place this cynical world view of Manto's in perspective? Is it just cynical or is he doing more? Is he not reflecting what he has already seen and become aware of during the days of the Partition? Four things happened when and after Manto left for Pakistan.

One, the reality of the devastating situation, the rioting, the loot that accompanied the Partition lay before his eyes and he suffered from acute mental depression. He had considered Pakistan as a space to be hoped for, a kind of " utopia" as Tarun Saint suggested once. This is clear in his early letters to Ismat Chughtai too.

Two, after having settled in Pakistan, he wrote a couple of humorous articles and essays. These formed the volume " Talkh, Tursh aur Shirin" (Bitter, Sour and Sweet). It would seem that the frustration and bitterness in Manto's life had crystallised at one point and had manifested itself as satire in his writings (Jagdish Chander).

The film industry being virtually non-existent, Manto couldn't earn a living there. Add to that his drinking problem, the govt.'s indifference to Manto's contribution to literature and the response of the progressive writers to his writings, wasn't helping his situation. Financially, the period up till his migration to Pakistan was an easy time considering his life in Pakistan, where he had to sell his stories to earn money to support his drinking habits and his family. It was a task of no easy magnitude and it succeeded in ensuring a further increasing consciousness over his inability to support his wife and their three daughters.

Manto was known for being very short tempered, aggressive, foul-mouthed. If you would sit and praise a certain kind of literature, he would, sure enough, praise a different kind of literature, just for the sake of opposition.

Nobody tried to see the real Manto that dwelt within the man. No one tried to delve into the recesses of his mind. His detractors failed to realize that like them he was also made of flesh and blood and had the same shortcomings (Jagdish Chander).

He left the world, his wife and three daughters on 18th January 1955. His drinking and the depression post-Partition accumulated to a point where there was no more turning back. Tragic as his death does some to me, I seem to find solace in his very own lines that seem to speak to me:

“ It is possible that Saadat Hasan may soon die but Manto may still live on.”

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