

# Looking beyond Partition Stories: A Reappraisal of Manto

Saadat Hassan Manto has acquired the reputation of the greatest short story writer in Urdu. Though the greatness has been bestowed upon him posthumously, during his lifetime his writings remained mired in controversies. The greatest parameter for judging greatness of Manto has been his partition stories. Without any doubt Manto's short stories on the partition are the greatest documents of the horrendous tragedy, but Manto's greatness is not restricted to them only. Manto was not only great writer of partition, but he was an accomplished writer of all kind of stories. Every material he laid pen on became a story. The current paper is a study of Manto's selected non-partition short stories.

**Keywords:** Manto, Partition, Short Story, Prostitute.

## Introduction

Saadat Hassan has been vastly acclaimed as "the greatest balladeer of partition" (Nandi XVI). There is no doubt in the fact that inhuman tragedy of partition finds its greatest articulation in the short stories of Manto, but to consider Manto as only a great Chronicler of partition will be a great disservice to Manto the greatest Urdu short story writer. Manto's appeal to the readers can be judged from the fact that the stories originally written by Manto in Urdu are available in various translations. In English, for instance the translations are available by Jai Ratan, Khalid Hassan and others. Different translations of the same stories by different translators bring home two important points: firstly, the depth of the stories of Manto; secondly the opportunity seen for bettering the earlier translations. Not only the stories have been translated and retranslated; but academic papers about the faulty translation of Manto's stories by the translators have also appeared in the reputed academic journals.

## Survey of Literature

In the recent times many translation of Manto's works have appeared. The latest translation that has appeared is done by Aatish Taseer entitled *Manto: Selected Short Stories* (2012). Many scholarly papers have appeared on Manto. These include Virender Pal's "Partition and Violence: A Study of Selected Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto" (2011), Harish Trivedi's "Manto, God, Premchand and Some Other Storytellers" (2012). Most of these papers concentrate on partition stories, the researcher has not come across any paper on these two stories.

## Aim of the Study

The paper studies two non-partition short stories by Manto. Most of the studies done so far have concentrated on the partition short stories of Manto and a threadbare analysis has been done by the critics, but his non-partition stories are some what neglected. The current paper establishes that Manto's non-partition short stories are also relevant.

Manto the astute observer and the objective chronicler was also a great craftsman. His stories are not only great in reading; but they also impress the readers with their objectivity and their openness because he was deeply concerned about "the abysmal degeneration of humanity" (Pal 20). Due to his objectivity, he is the best known writer of partition stories. Manto was born in 1912 to Kashmiri parents in Ludhiana District of Punjab and "like most Punjabis of his generation, Manto was most influenced in the beginning by the progressive writers movements, and his early stories reflect the political concerns of the late thirties" (Flemming 99). However, the important thing about Manto's stories is not the themes; but the setting of the stories and the characters which inhabit the stories. (Deleted)



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It is pertinent to mention that Manto migrated to Pakistan in 1947. There he wrote his stories at a breakneck speed because in Lahore writing became his only means of sustenance. Manto at this point of life had become a morbid man; an alcoholic who was more dependent on liquor than any other thing for his life; but his personal difficulties sharpened his writing. His writings during this time challenged the moral sensibilities of a conservative society and Manto was subjected to severe criticism. His stories were rejected as “pornographic” and pessimistic. Anwer Azeem recounts that Manto’s censure during these times was on following lines:

1. Manto indulges in the obscene and the pornographic;
2. Manto’s stories are sex obsessed;
3. Manto’s characters are marked by a sick and sordid inner disposition and are mired in filth;
4. Manto’s stories contain nothing beyond the dissolution and degradation of humanity;
5. Manto turns his back on mankind’s most majestic prospects etc. etc. (Azeem 81).

The censure of Manto was not due to the inherent faults of Manto or because of the obscenity, but the public opinion may have formed against Manto due to the reason that Manto refused to take sides in his partition stories. In a communally charged atmosphere where every body was blaming the other community for “riots, rape, pillage and killing” (Sarna XI), Manto refused to be swayed by the atmosphere. In other words, he paid the prize of remaining sane in insane time. He did not blame anybody for partition, rather he was very critical of communalism that was prevailing in Pakistan. His contempt for communalism is clearly visible in the series of letters he wrote to “Uncle Sam”:

Regardless of the storm India is kicking up, you must sign a military agreement with Pakistan since you are seriously concerned about the stability of the world’s largest Islamic state. And why not. Our mullah is the best counter to Russian Communism. Once military aid starts flowing, these mullah are the first people you should arm. They would need American made rosaries and prayer mats ... cutthroat razors and scissors should beat the top of the list, and also, American hair colouring formulas. (Cited in Jalal 4526).

The above cited letter dipped in ascorbic satire shows Manto’s disillusionment with Pakistan. Manto migrated to Pakistan following the foot steps of his family in expectation of residing in a modern Muslim state, but the letter shows that Manto was acutely aware of the fact that instead of becoming a modern Muslim state, Pakistan had become a “Mullah” state. The reference to American made

“rosaries” and “prayer mats” makes clear that Pakistan was on the road to become a theocracy where religious paraphernalia will reign supreme. Of course in such a state writers like M. Aslam who wrote that he is writing the Novel *Rags-i-Iblis: Inquilab 47 ki EK Khuchukan Dastan* to reflect the cruelty of Sikhs towards Muslims” (Cited in Zaman 61) were need to consolidate the theocratic base of the state; rather than the saner voices like that of Manto who depicted the violence objectively. The characters who dotted Manto’s stories were also unacceptable to the conservatives of the newly found country. The main characters of Manto’s stories are prostitutes, pimps or renegades who are considered peripheral elements in the society; but Manto celebrated these peripheral elements and thrust heroism on them and presented them as better human beings. How could Manto do this? How could he celebrate such human beings? These were the questions that were raised to Manto; but Manto did not deviate from his path Manto was one with these human beings. He wrote:

I am a human being, the same human being who raped mankind, who indulged in killing and destruction as if that what constituted man’s natural condition. I bear in my person all those weaknesses and qualities other human beings have. (Manto, “To My Readers, 655)

Thus Manto the human being and the writer, was censured in Pakistan because he dared to see beyond religiosity and narrow boundaries. A truly progressive writer and man; but his life and ideas were curbed by a regressive society which he had to adopt out of his love for his family.

One of the story that stands out in Manto’s collection is “A woman life.” The story is remarkable because the protagonist of the story Saugandhi is a prostitute but she is not a simple girl who sells her flesh for living; rather she is a girl with a golden heart. Through this story, Manto makes clear that a person cannot be judged by his/her profession. Sometimes people do not choose profession; rather professions choose people. Circumstances may force a person to choose a degraded profession; the degraded profession cannot malign the essential goodness of the person.

In the story, Manto introduces all the attributes of Saugandhi’s character which are among the parameters laid by the society to consider a person good. For instance, Saugandhi is a religious lady who would rub “the money against the picture she had of the Hindu elephant god Ganesha, for good luck, before, putting it away” (2). The women who indulge in flesh trade are often described as parasites; who are a burden on the societies and exploit men to the maximum, but Saugandhi is an anomaly in the profession:

Actually, Saugandhi was not as clever as she pretended. She didn’t have great number of clients either.

She liked men, which was why all her clever methods would desert her when it was time to use them. It only took a few sweet words, softly cooed into her ear, to make her melt. (4)

In the society cleverness is considered as a positive quality (this is also a problem with translated text because the readers cannot guess the word used in the original text), ordinarily the word "cunning" should have been the correct attribute of a prostitute who uses all her qualities to milk her clients, but Manto's (or translator's) deliberate use of word "clever" accentuates the simple heartedness of the protagonist.

Though, Saugandhi was in flesh trade; but she was not after carnal desires. Her longing was for love; the elusive emotion which she could not find anywhere. In the society, prostitutes are considered as helpless automatons whose hearts are dry and are bereft of emotions. They are incapable of loving someone; or even getting loved. They are treated as money loving bodies without any soul. However Manto's Saugandhi is different; she is a prostitute; but her heart is of gold; it is full of love:

When a man said to her, "I love you, Saugandhi she would go weak in the knees, although she knew he was lying. Love, what a beautiful word, she would think. Oh, if only one could rub love like a balm into one's body. However, she did like four of her regulars enough to have their framed pictures hanging on her wall. (4-5).

It is important to know that Manto himself did not live a happy life or even a happy childhood. His father Ghulam Hussain married twice and Manto was his child from his second wife. Manto and even his mother were unwanted intruders for his father's family who already had eight children from his first wife. Thus Manto and his mother were considered a burden by his father's family. This sense of unwantedness was a source of bitterness for young Saadat Hassan: His daughter delineates on his bitterness:

He was always restless and a big reason for this was his older stepbrothers who lived abroad. Our grandmother (Saadat's biological mother) and father did not have place in the family they should have had. Grandfather (Manto's father) would always make comparisons between his sons living abroad and our father, and would belittle him. That was one of the many reasons he was always bitter since childhood (Cited in Hashmi 6).

The influence of his father's relations with him is also visible in his stories. His father worked as a judge in the local court; a profession that is

considered very respectable in the society. His father had a respectable position in the society; but for Manto he was a tormentor, a source of bitterness. This might be one of the reasons that in Manto's stories people working on lowly profession are humane and possess human qualities. Manto must have seen his father in all the people who occupied respectable jobs in the society. That is why his stories are full of characters who may be prostitutes or pimps; but they are not degraded. The professions may be considered degraded by the society; but the people who are in these professions are more virtuous and kind when compared to people doing white collar jobs.

Saugandhi's goodness is not restricted to herself only, rather she is a gem of a human being who is readily to help all and sundry. She wakes up in late night to earn some money to help a woman who is in "need of money" (8). She needs money to help a destitute woman:

In the next kholi lived a Madras women whose husband had recently died in an accident. She had a grown-up daughter and they wanted to go back to Madras but didn't have the train fare. Saugandhi had said to her, "Don't you worry, sister, my man is expected from Poona any day. He'll give me some money and you'll be on your way." While Madhu was indeed expected, the money, of course, was to be earned by Saugandhi herself. (8)

The above quotation makes clear that Saugandhi may be involved in world's oldest profession, but her heart is not dark, her heart is that of gold.

In search of love, she runs after a mirage. She is exploited in the name of love by a man called Madhu. She has a realization that he is exploiting her economically as well as physically; but she carries on with her exploitation in search of love; however phoney it may be, she was "living a pretension" and was "quite happy with it" (6). Madhu visits her every month and assures her that he will send the money once he reaches Poona where he works as a Police Sergeant; but the money never arrives. Madhu also scolds her for her profession:

Aren't you ashamed of selling yourself, putting a price on your body? Ten rupees you take with one-fourth going to that man, Ram Lal .....(5).

He further says:

Saugandhi, if you resume that old business of yours, you'll never see me again. Yes, about this month's household expenses, the money will be on its way as soon as I get to Poona ... so what did you say the monthly rent for this place was (6).

The money never arrives and Saughandi keeps on doing her business for sustenance. Both of them know the reality, but keep on carrying with the relationship. The difference is though in the intention behind the relationship. Saughandi keeps on pretending for love; and Madhu does it for money. Manto's intentions are clear, for him goodness is not exclusively present in the people involved in white collar job; it can be present in people like Saugandhi who may be in prostitution; but their goodness is visible to all. In fact, it is due to this goodness that leeches like Madhu are able to exploit good people like Saugandhi. The message is loud and clear don't look at the profession, rather observe the person.

People like Madhu are dangerous for the society; not the Saugandhis. Madhus are to be found everywhere in the society who can go to any extent to make their ends meet; and Saughandhis though they know the reality of Madhus, remain silent in expectation of ever elusive, honest and selfless love. Manto shows how Madhu drains Saughandhi economically:

There is bad news though. I am in trouble. There was this police investigation I botched up and unless I can get twenty or thirty rupees together and bribe my inspector, I can say good bye to my job. But never mind that you look tired. Lie down darling and I'll press your feet ... Now lie down and turn your feet towards me. (12).

The society may think that people like Saughandhi are pests; but real pests are people like Madhu who remain hidden and keep on inflicting serious damage to the society. Saughandhi at last comes sheds her meekness and takes Madhu to task. Here again Manto stresses on the inherent goodness of Saugandhi. She reacts to prevarications of Madhu; but it takes some special circumstances to do so. Manto carefully builds the scene. On that particular night she is in inebriated state and was woken up at two in the morning the Ram Lal, her pimp, for a rich man. But the man rejected her and drove the car away and "the pain and humiliation" (10). She underwent many things that complicated the problems. All these things paved for an outburst that stuns Madhu:

You creep! Why do you come here?  
Am I your mother, who will give you money to spend? You miserable beggar who do you think you are?  
Tell me are you a thief or a pickpocket? (15)

Here Manto establishes Saughandhi as any common person who keeps on getting exploited. The common man does not react till the threshold is reached. Saugandhi also reacts only when limit is crossed. She is ready to help everybody and even Madhu is not out of that sphere. The reaction of Saughandhi is against her exploitation where Madhu

thinks that he is cunningly managing everything and Saughandhi does not have even an iota of realization about her exploitation. Manto tells about another incident that confirms the inherent goodness of Saughandhi:

She was soft-hearted. Last year at Christmas time when she was living in the Golpitha area, this young fellow from Hyderabad who had spent the night with her had found his wallet missing in the morning. Obviously, the servant boy, who was a rogue, had picked it and disappeared. He was extremely upset because he had come all the way to Bombay to spend his holidays and he hadn't the fare to go back. She had simply returned the money he had given her the night before. (10)

All the incidents make it clear that Saughandhi has a golden heart. All these characters and all these stories of Manto are hidden under the pile of partition stories which are more visible to the readers in India and Pakistan. Manto himself was aware of his greatness as a short story writer. That is why when he wrote an epitaph for himself on 18 January 1955, he warts;

Here lies Saadat Hasan Manto with him lie buried all the arts and mysteries of short story writing under tons of earth he lies, wondering if he is a greater shorter story writer than God. (Cited in Trivedi 63)

Manto's comparison of himself with God is important. For God every human being is equal, He is biased against none. Similar is the case of Manto. Manto as a storyteller is biased against none. Be it is the case of his short stories on the theme of partition or the general stories. Manto's objectivity, his craftsmanship and his greatness as a short story writer is visible everywhere. Saughandhi in the story does not remain a prostitute; she becomes a human being; a person who is much better than many other people who live respectable lives in the cities. Manto forces the readers to see the prostitute from a new angle and forces them to develop a respect for her. Manto tells the readers that whatever people like Saughandhi do are visible to everybody. They do it openly and in front of everybody so they are not dangerous. The people like Madhu who remain hidden and commit crimes are really dangerous.

In the story "An Old Fashioned Man" Manto introduces readers to one such man. Manto starts the story by giving the description of Khan Bahadur Muhammad Aslam Khan. He tells the readers that Khan had three children, two daughters and a son. The eldest daughter was only thirteen year. In the next paragraph of the story Manto tells us that Khan has retired from the service of Agriculture department.

In the beginning of the story Manto establishes that Khan is man who is extremely fond of

reading and he passes most of his time in his study. Khan is so preoccupied with his study that he seldom finds time for anything else. The readers get the impression that Khan is man who is deeply immersed in family life. Consider for instance:

Farkhanda Khanum my love, we have grown old and it is time for us to be concerned about each other, as one shows concern for a child. (58)

There is only one character in the story who does not belong to the family and her name is Shadaan. She was a Christian girl who was kept by Khan's wife to do house hold chores. Shadaan was a "good tempered girl and she had become immediately popular" (59).

Through the story, Manto introduces the readers to the dangerous white collared people. In the beginning of the story, Manto tells us about the Khan from the point of view of the society. Whatever he tells us about Khan is the impression of the society about him, but the real character of Khan is revealed in the later part of the story when the readers came to know that "Khan Bahadur had been picked up by the police" because "Shadan had returned home that evening, her clothes all bloodied" (65). Though Manto does not tell directly, the description is clear enough for the readers to understand that Shadaan has been raped by Khan Bahadur. Shadaan dies of that inhuman crime committed by Khan.

Khan undergoes a trial and is acquitted. Manto describes:

There was a trial but the only witness were the girl's blood drenched clothes and her dying words. The prosecution had not doubt that it was Khan Bahadur who had killed her. There was one witness who had seen Shadaan entering the Khan Bahadur residence that evening. There were only two defense witnesses: Khan Bahadur's wife and a doctor who had testified that Khan Bahadur was incapable of sexual relations with a woman least of all a minor. Khan Bahadur's wife had said that the doctor was right. (65).

Through this story Manto tells the readers that the white collar/respectable criminals are more dangerous because they know how to manipulate legal system. This story also shows the craftsmanship of Manto. In the end of the story, Khan is acquitted because he is incapable of sexual relations with a woman. The readers at once understand that justice has been compromised because in the beginning of the story the readers are told that youngest child of Khan is only nine years old. It is clear that a man who could sire children nine years ago is certainly capable of making sexual relations.

Khan has to be compared with Saughandhi. Khan may have committed many such crimes earlier also, but he is caught once and gets acquitted by

using money. On the other hand, people like Saughandhi have to undergo public trial everyday due to their profession. Through the two stories Manto shows how judging a person by his social standing and profession can have serious consequences. Hidden criminals are certainly more dangerous than the criminals who commit crimes in open.

The story unravels how the society ignores such criminals. Khan Bahadur's wife herself observes changes in Shadaan's behaviour, but she does not have ever an iota of doubt on her husband. The changes in Shadaan are abrupt:

After giving it some thought, she came to the conclusion that Shadaan had got something going with one of the young men from the street. (62)

Khan's wife does not suspect Khan of any foul play because Khan is a respectable person. His advances towards Shadaan remain hidden under the garb of his social status. Because of immense respect of her husband, Khan's wife ignores the most important things even after noticing:

Shadaan had begun to take greater care of her appearance. No longer were her clothes plain. They were now well stitched and in keeping with the day's fashion. Once she came in wearing a spotless, white cotton Shalwar and a shirt made of silk georgette. (62)

All these changes were observed in Shadaan only after she started working in Khan's home for two months. Where from Shadaan got money for all these things? It is obvious that Shadaan started spending so much money only after she started working in Khan's house. Only Khan was capable of giving her so much money; but Khan's wife is so much blinded by her husband's aura and respect that the question did not even come to his mind. Similar is the case of Shadaan's parents who would have not confronted Khan because of his social status.

Manto's message is clear. He shows that people like Khan are more dangerous because they remain hidden and never get caught. The crimes of such criminals become even graver when one realizes that Shadaan was of his daughter's age. People like Saughandhi sell their body to sustain themselves, but people like Khan give money to young children like Shadaan to push them towards prostitution. Saughandhi sells her body to live, but people like Khan entice young children like Shadaan to fulfill their carnal desires using their money. In the process they are not questioned by anybody because of their status.

Manto's stories show how the people who are despised by the society because of their professions might not be that bad at all. On the other hand, he shows that the respectable people of the society are responsible for people like Saugandhi. These respectable people keep out churning people

like Saughandi and never get caught. Manto's craftsmanship, his wit and irony makes sure that the unadulterated to the readers. Manto's genius does not distinguish between the human beings on the basis of their profession this characters are human beings first and are judged as human beings only. Their humanity is permanent, the profession are temporary.

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