

“Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair”

Characters in the Short Stories of Saadat Hassan Manto

Abstract

“Fair is foul and foul is fair” is used by Shakespeare in his famous tragedy Macbeth to denote that things are not as they seem to be. Macbeth through the statement shows the equivocation of the evil, but in Manto’s short stories Manto shows that the people who are living comfortable lives and are respected by the society are not fair. These people are seen from a distance, they seem neat and clean who can do no wrong. Manto shows that all these people are not as clean as they seem to be. They are cruel and callous people who oppress the poor and push them towards the life of crime. On the other hand, the unprivileged people like prostitutes and pimps who are abhorred by these respectable people in broad day light are innocent and selfless. They possess the hearts of gold and are ready to help anybody. The paper is a study of Saadat Hasan Manto’s selected short stories.

Keywords: Foul, Fair, Calculate, Society.

Introduction

In the nineteenth and the twentieth century the portrayal of women characters became a primary criteria for judging the greatness of the writer. These were the centuries when the feminism grew and spread throughout the world. The new models of interpreting the texts emanated with almost every new development; the only thing common among these models was that they laid the criteria for women centered interpretation. The classics of literature were re-read and re-interpreted according to the gynocentric models.

Aim of the Study

The paper studies selected short stories by Manto. Manto is an unusual writer in the sense that he depicts the characters differently. In his stories the people in the degraded professions are innocent and good hearted while the respectable people are criminals. The aim of the paper is to study the characterization of the people of different walks of life in stories written by Manto.

Review of Literature

Manto is one of the most translated authors of the sub-continent. Manto’s short stories have been translated and re-translated by many translators. Aatish Taseer’s translation of Manto’s stories entitled *Manto: Selected Short Stories* (2012) is probably the latest translation available in the market. Other scholarly papers on Manto’s short stories include Virender Pal’s “Partition and Violence: A Study of Selected Stories of Saadat Hasan Manto” (2011). The researcher has not come across any other paper that has been published after 2012.

Content of the Study

The concept of androgyny was central to these interpretation. It was S.T. Coleridge, the master romantic, who probably said for the first time that a “great mind is androgynous.” Virginia woolf elaborated the idea further:

Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause and devotes itself to their interpretation. Perhaps the androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than the single sexed mind. He meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that



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it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. ("A Room of one's own")

Virginia Woolf puts Shakespeare, Keats, Sterne, Cowper and Lamb etc in the category of androgynous writers. One wonders where she would have put the great Urdu short story writer Saadat Hassan Manto. Manto has been restricted by some critics to be "the greatest balladeer of partition" (Nandi XVI). The term used by Nandi can be interpreted in both ways. Though it must be made clear that the context in which Nandi uses this term eulogizes him and points out so many merits of Manto and the most important among them is Manto's objectivity. However, at the same time the term is restrictive because it restricts the towering genius of Manto to the partition stories only. If one comes across this phrase of Nandi, then he may get inspired to read the partition stories of Manto and may leave the other stories of Manto. This would be a great injustice to Manto because Manto's greatness cannot be restricted to partition only; Manto was a great writer; probably the greatest short story writer that Urdu language has witnessed.

Manto was influenced by "progressive writers movement" (Flemming 99) and had been acknowledged as "a follower of the tradition of realism in the Urdu short stories" (Akhtar & Fleming 1). One wonders if Woolf would have put Manto under the category of 'androgynous writer.' Manto may not have qualified for the criteria laid by Woolf; but if Woolf might have come across Manto then she would certainly have amended her criteria to include Manto in the list of exclusive writers. Unfortunately Manto's greatness has been obscured by the language. Urdu during Manto's time was restricted to the pockets of Indian subcontinent only; so Manto's greatness was tasted by only a few people. Now Manto has been made accessible to all the readers due to the translations of his works. Manto may not have qualified as an androgynous writer, but he certainly did have a "resonant and porous mind."

Manto was himself aware of his greatness. He knew that he could narrate stories objectively. Being objective was not restricted only to language, religion or culture; it also included gender. Manto as a writer unraveled the new depths of objectivity. He was objective to the core where his own involvement was minimal. In the case of short stories his objectivity was like that of God. The God has been very objective to his creation. Similarly Manto has been very objective to his creation i.e. his characters. Manto himself wrote for his epitaph.

Here lies Saadat Hassan Manto with him lie buried all the arts and mysteries of short story writing. Under tons of earth he lies, wandering if he is a greater short story writer than God. (qtd. in Trivedi 63).

To a reader new to Manto, the epitaph might look like a bit egotistical, about a person who is too preoccupied about himself and about his perceived greatness. But the reader who has read Manto knows

that there is a sound reason behind Manto's comparison with the God. Firstly Manto is as objective as God in deciphering the situation where it becomes almost impossible to remain objective. Secondly, the short stories of Manto are creations unique in themselves. Like the God has created the world; Manto has created his world in his short stories. Trivedi writes about uniqueness of Manto:

Its [uniqueness] lies above all, perhaps, in the way he creates an imaginative world of his own soon as he begins telling a story. He weaves a web, he casts a spell, so that right from the first paragraph. We know that we are in a world which is distinctly his. (63)

Manto's way of perception of day-to-day life is different. His observation of his characters lays bare the reality of the characters. In the process the characters' inherent goodness or bad intentions are brought out in front of the reader. Social status of the characters does not bog him down, he does not see the characters according to the social status of his character rather he sees them only as human beings. That is why in Manto's short stories, readers come across golden hearted prostitutes, pimps and thieves and devilish rich people who have respectable jobs and boast of good family backgrounds. That's why "Fair is foul and foul is fair" in the stories of Manto.

Manto showcases a distinct sensibility in portraying female characters. Kumar points out that "Manto demonstrates an androgynous sensibility and an extraordinary sensitivity." Female Characters in Manto's short stories comes from different backgrounds but their background can not be used to decipher them. In fact, in Manto's short stories the women who come from respectable backgrounds are not respected at all, on the other hand the women in the degraded professions like prostitution show that they have hearts of gold. The story "A woman for All Seasons" showcases the story of one such woman Lateeka Rani who comes from a good family and becomes a respectable and successful actress of her time. Lateeka Rani is not a beautiful girl, in the opening sentences of the story Manto tells us: "There was nothing about her that could be called attractive, but her first appearance on the screen made her an instant hit" (95). In the subsequent pages Manto tells her that Lateeka Rani is a girl who "kept account of every single coin that fell into her account" (96).

Lateeka Rani is not only a money minded girl like anybody else, but what sets her apart is her calculations. Her every move is calculated and she leaves nothing to chance. She comes across as an automaton, a robot totally devoid of emotions or feelings. In the whole span of eleven pages, readers do not come across any single sentiment shown by her. For her life is like a science experiment where she plans everything in advance. Nothing can be left to speculation, even while choosing a husband for herself she showed her clinical attitude. She did not choose her man because she loved her; but she chose an older man as a husband because he could "help her fulfil her dreams":

A young man from Madras, a fellow student, fell in love with her and she decided to marry him, but in between she met a middle aged Bengali on a visit to London who was studying to become a barrister, and changer her mind in his favour. It was a well considered decision because. She had seen something in the older man, which she knew would help her fulfill her dreams. (96)

For Lateeka Rani, life is not simply life rather it is game where the moves are to be calculated in advance so that victory can be assured. While plotting for her win Lateeka Rani dehumanizes everybody around him. All the people around her are robbed of their humanity and are reduced to the level of toys and she plays mercilessly with the toys. While treating everything in the "same unsentimental, practical manner" she plays havoc with the lives of others. Consider her thought process while rejecting the "young man from Madras":

The Madras man whom she has agreed to marry was studying pulmonary diseases in Germany what could he give her except guarantee good care of her lungs! She decided that she did not need that. (96)

The decision taken by Lateeka Rani to marry Prafula Roy is an important one because she knew that "She was no beauty and her charms were limited" (97). She knows that Prafula Roy did not love her or consider her beautiful; on the other hand the Madras Doctor's love for her was genuine (97) and probably he was the only man who considered her beautiful from his heart. But Lateeka Rani is a clinical, unsentimental lady who knew that being successful is different thing and being loved and considered beautiful is a different thing. For clinical Lateeka Rani love meant nothing, she knows that love will not change her life, success will. That is why she leaves behind the Madras doctor who loved her for Prafula Roy who did not feel for her Prafula Roy did not love her for what she was, rather he wanted to redesign her according to his own needs.

She felt as if he were quietly taking her apart, every facet of her personality, her smile, her features, the way she moved, and reassembling it all according to his own particular scheme. He saw her not only with his own eyes but as others saw her. (98)

Lateeka "always calculated her moves carefully" (98) and she knows by her calculations who would prove useful to her in her life. She marries Prafula Roy for his utility and cultivated a friendship with Sir Howard Pascal for his "usefulness" (99). Manto is at his ironic best when he tells the readers:

Lateeka would arrive early and spend a little time with Sir Howard, who was a peen gardener. She had made it a point to talk flowers to him

for half an hour every morning. Then she would return home and pay what attention had to be paid to other things, including her husband. (102)

In the above lines Manto makes clear that the "husband" of Lateeka Rani has been reduced to the status of a "thing" by her. In other words, Prafula Roy does not exist as an individual a human being rather he has been reduced to the level of a non living entity, a "thing" that can be picked by Lateeka Rani and kept anywhere.

In all those calculations, Lateeka may appear to the readers as a harmless creature who plotted her way to success by making astute calculations, but the shock awaits the readers in the climax. One of the hallmarks of the story is the style adopted by Manto. While narrating the story Manto gives a peep into the mind of Lateeka Rani in the beginning only. He shows the thought process of Lateeka Rani only in the beginning when she chooses her husband. Manto shows us why she chooses Prafula Roy and rejects Madras doctor through her thought process. The rest of the story is narrated by the narrator and only hints are provided to the readers by other characters. The readers know that Manto is a careful artist who does not give any unnecessary details in the story; but at the same time Manto is a master story teller who knows when to reveal the suspense. Consider the following detail in the story for instance:

The studio's costume department that had been idle for many months one day found that it had a most unexpected visitor: Lateeka Rani she asked that a long sleeve blouse, which she was going to wear with a black silk sari, be stitched for her. She left detailed instructions about the design. (107)

Before narrating this incidence, Manto tells the readers that Prafula Roy's company began its work on its "twenty-second production" (106). So the readers suspect that the blouse Lateeka Rani ordered may be for the new project and Manto re inforces that point of view by telling that "people linked it with the mysterious new movie" (107). Manto drops the bomb shell in the climax and reveals the suspense that Lateeka Rani wore "a splendid black sari and a finely cut blouse" on her husband's funeral. The readers who know Lateeka Rani at once realize that the death of Prafula Roy was also a part of her calculations.

Readers now realize that Prafula Roy did not die a natural death rather he was murdered by Lateeka Rani. Prafula Roy had lost his utility for Lateeka Rani so she planned his murder immaculately. She planned a "mysterious movie" to push Prafula Roy towards insanity and his eventual death. Manto writes:

The shooting got under way and seemed to proceed smoothly till the day Prafula Roy appeared on the set unexpectedly, watched the scene being shot for a couple of minutes and began to scream at the cameraman

then slapped him on his ear, which knocked the man out (107).

This is the beginning of the end of Prafula Roy. He loses his sanity and ultimately dies. By the end of the story readers understand clearly that Prafula Roy's murder was calculated by Lateeka Rani. Through the character of Lateeka Rani, Manto tells the readers that everything that glitters is not gold. Lateeka Rani is a respected lady who had money, fame and almost everything one could think of, but she was not a human being. For her life was a game which has to be played and won while plotting for the victory the other people are treated as pawns.

Manto in his short stories is critical of criminals like Lateeka Rani who commit crimes that go unnoticed in the society. If the crimes of such people are noticed at all then they manipulate flaws in legal system to get acquitted. In his story "An old fashioned Man" he tells the story of Khan Bahadur Muhammad Aslam Khan who rapes a young girl and gets acquitted by using his money power.

There are certain white collared criminals whose crimes remain hidden under their respectable professions, social prestige and wealth. On the other hand there are certain people who have to enter the professions which are not sanctioned by the society in broad day light. However, under the cover of darkness, the most respectable people of the society hire the services of such people. These people are treated as inherently bad by the society. A Pakistani feminist writer rightly points out:

Manto's artistry is such that he never preaches but continues to enlighten your mind and stir your conscience. Women have been subjected to humiliation and Manto through his writings empathized with their plight and showed solidarity with their cause ... this is why we women consider him to be a mature feminist. He raised the character of a prostituteand familiarizes the reader with the humanity of women. His portrayals of domesticated women and prostitutes are unique for he associates unconventional attributes- for example, determination, will, not being content in every situations and above all the ability to laugh. (cited in Rumi 81-82).

In Manto's short stories the characters, who are considered "foul" by the society turn out to be fair. Manto in his short story entitled "A Woman's Life" presents a prostitute called Saughandi who has the heart of gold. She is a prostitute, but not a degraded human being. She is a golden girl who is ready to help anybody and everybody. While Lateeka Rani pretends to be in love with Prafula Roy to succeed in life, Saughandi gets exploited physically and economically for love:

When a man said to her, "I love you" Saughandi, 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)

In the course of the story Manto tells us that while the white collared people are selfish who exploit the people for their selfish motives, there are people like Saughandi who are involved in degraded profession due to their circumstances, but they help the people selflessly. In this case Virender Pal rightly asserts that Manto depicts "the abysmal degeneration of humanity" (Pal 20).

This goodness is not restricted to Saughandi only in the story "The Girl From Delhi", Manto narrates the story of Nasim Akhter who migrates from Delhi's 'red light' quarter (109) to Lahore. She gives up her degraded profession on getting first chance. She tells her trainer Ustad Achhan Khan:

No, Khan Sahib, my heart is not in that sort of thing any more I don't even want to live in this neighbourhood. Please find me a small place in some nice, normal locality. Delhi is behind me that life for me is finished. I just want to live like a normal woman (114).

Nasim Akhtar indeed changes and becomes "very religious" (115), but her change of life style is not enough to save her from white collared predators. Through the story Manto shows that Nasim is also an innocent girl who does not know the ways of the world. In this aspect she is same as Saughandi. An old woman Jannatey starts visiting her "who was a procuresses who enticed young girl and sold them into prostitutions" (155). Thus Manto shows that prostitutes are not born rather they are made by white collared and respectable people like Jannatey.

Manto's short stories are full of women like Saughandi and Nasim Akhtar who are considered foul by society, but on a close look readers find that they are fair. On the other hand there are women like Lateeka Rani who are wealthy and famous but turns out to be murderers. Thus Manto himself wrote about himself in a prayer to God that he is person "does not so much as look at housewives but is entranced by the company of whores" (Hassan, Khalid). Thus Manto in his short stories thrust humanity upon the people who are considered foul by the society and brings out in humanity of the people who are considered "fair."

Footnotes

1. "Fair is foul and foul is fair has been taken from the opening scene of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*."

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