Saadat Hasan Manto

Saadat Hasan Manto (IPA: [sa'ɑdɑt 'hasan 'maŋʈo]; 11 May 1912 – 18 January 1955) was a Pakistani writer, playwright and author considered among the greatest writers of short stories in South Asian history. He produced 22 collections of short stories, 1 novel, 5 series of radio plays, 2 collections of essays, 2 collections of personal sketches[1] and his best short stories are held in high esteem by writers and critics.

Manto was tried for obscenity six times; thrice before 1947 in British India, and thrice after independence in 1947 in Pakistan, but never convicted.[2]

1 Writings

Manto chronicled the chaos that prevailed, during and after the Partition of India in 1947.[3][4] He started his literary career translating work of literary giants, such as Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde and Russian writers such as Chekhov and Gorky. His first story was “Tamasha”, based on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar.[5] Though his earlier works, influenced by the progressive writers of his times,[4][6] showed a marked leftist and socialist leanings, his later work progressively became stark in portraying the darkness of the human psyche, as humanist values progressively declined around the Partition. His final works, which grew from the social climate and his own financial struggles, reflected an innate sense of human impotency towards darkness and contained a satirism that verged on dark comedy, as seen in his final work, Toba Tek Singh.[7] It not only showed the influence of his own demons, but also that of the collective madness that he saw in the ensuing decade of his life. To add to it, his numerous court cases and societal rebukes deepened his cynical view of society, from which he felt isolated.[8]

No part of human existence remained untouched or taboo for him, he sincerely brought out stories of prostitutes and pimps alike, just as he highlighted the subversive sexual slavery of the women of his times.[9] To many contemporary women writers, his language portrayed reality and provided them with the dignity they long deserved.[10] He is still known for his scathing insight into human behaviour as well as revelation of the macabre animalistic nature of an enraged people, that stands out amidst the brevity of his prose.[3]

Saadat Hasan Manto is often compared with D. H. Lawrence, partly because he wrote about taboos of Indo-Pakistani Society.[11] His concerns on the socio-political issues, from local to global are revealed in his series, Letters to Uncle Sam, and those to Pandit Nehru.[3] On his writing he often commented, “If you find my stories dirty, the society you are living in is dirty. With my stories, I only expose the truth”.[12]

2 Biography

2.1 Early life and education

Saadat Hassan Manto was born in Paproudi village of Samrala, in the Ludhiana district of the Punjab in a Muslim family of barristers on 11 May 1912.[13][14] The big turning point in his life came in 1933, at age 21,[15] when he met Abdul Bari Alig, a scholar and polemic writer, in Amritsar. Abdul Bari Alig encouraged him to find his true talents and read Russian and French authors.[16]

2.2 Early career

Within a matter of months Manto produced an Urdu translation of Victor Hugo’s The Last Day of a Condemned Man, which was published by Urdu Book Stall, Lahore as Sarguzasht-e-Aseer (A Prisoner’s Story).[17] Soon afterwards he joined the editorial staff of Masawat, a daily published from Ludhiana.[18]

This heightened enthusiasm pushed Manto to pursue graduation at Aligarh Muslim University, which he joined in February 1934, and soon got associated with Indian Progressive Writers’ Association (IPWA). It was here that he met writer Ali Sardar Jafri and found a new spurt in his writing. His second story, “Inqlaab Pasand”, was published in Aligarh magazine in March 1935.[5]

Saadat Hasan Manto had accepted the job of writing for Urdu Service of All India Radio in 1941. This proved to be his most productive period as in the next eighteen months he published over four collections of radio plays, Aao (Come), Manto ke Drame (Manto’s Dramas), Janaze (Funerals) and Teen Auraten (Three women). He continued to write short stories and his next short story collection Dhuan (Smoke) was soon out followed by Manto ke Afsane and his first collection of topical essays, Manto ke Mazamin. This period culminated with the publication of his mixed collection Afsane aur Dramey in 1943. Meanwhile, due to a quarrel with the director of the All
India Radio, poet N. M. Rashid, he left his job and returned to Bombay in July 1942 and again started working with film industry. He entered his best phase in screenwriting giving films like Aatth Din, Chal Chal Re Naujawan and Mirza Ghalib, which was finally released in 1954.[2] Some of his short stories also came from this phase including Kaali Shalwar (1941), Dhuan (1941) and Bu (1945), which was published in Qaumi Jang (Bombay) in February 1945. Another highlight of his second phase in Bombay was the publication of a collection of his stories, Chugad, which also included the story 'Babu Gopinath'.[5] He stayed in Bombay until he moved to Pakistan in January 1948 after the partition of India in 1947.

2.3 Migration to Pakistan

Manto and his family were among the millions of Muslims who left present-day India for the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan.[19]

2.4 Life in Lahore

When Manto arrived in Lahore from Bombay, he lived near and associated with several prominent intellectuals including Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Nasir Kazmi, Ahmad Rahi and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi among others. They all used to gather at Lahore’s iconic Pak Tea House, witness to some of the most fiery literary debates and passionate political arguments back in 1948-49. Pak Tea House holds a special place in the memories of those who know about Lahore’s vibrant literary and cultural past. “There was absolutely no external influence and people would share their opinions on any subject without fear even during the military dictators’ regimes.”[20]

2.5 Legacy

On 18 January 2005, the fiftieth anniversary of his death, Manto was commemorated on a Pakistani postage stamp.[21]

On August 14, 2012 which is Pakistan’s Independence Day, Saadat Hasan Manto was posthumously awarded Nishan-e-Imtiaz award (Distinguished Service to Pakistan Award) by the Government of Pakistan.[22]


Manto must be the only Short Story writer whose life story became a subject of intense discussion and introspection.[24] During the past two decades many stage productions were done to present his character in conflict with the harsh socio-economic realities of post partition era. Danish Iqbal’s stage play ‘Ek Kutte Ki Kahani’ is one such production which presented Manto in a new perspective on occasion of his birth centenary. Now in 2015, film director Sarmad Sultan Khoosat has made and released a movie titled ‘Manto’ about his life.[25]

3 Bibliography

- Atish Paray (Nuggets of Fire) – 1936
- Chugad
- Manto Ke Afsanay (Stories of Manto) – 1940
- Dhuan (Smoke) – 1941
- Afsane Aur Dramay (Fiction and Drama) – 1943
- Lazzat-e-Sang-1948 (The Taste of Rock)
- Siyah Hashiye-1948 (Black Borders)
- Badshahat Ka Khatimah (The End of Kingship) – 1950
- Khali Botlein (Empty Bottles) – 1950
- Load Speaker (Sketches)
- Ganjey Farishtey (Sketches)
- Manto ke Mazameen
- Nimrud Ki Khudai (Nimrod The God) – 1950
- Thanda Gosht (Cold Meat) – 1950
- Yazid – 1951
- Pardey Ke Pechhey (Behind The Curtains) – 1953
- Sarak Ke Kinarey (By the Roadside) – 1953
- Baghair Unwan Ke (Without a Title) – 1954
- Baghair Ijazit (Without Permission) – 1955
- Burquey – 1955
- Phunduney (Tassles) – 1955
- Sarkandon Ke Pechhey (Behind The Reeds) – 1955
- Shaiytan (Satan) – 1955
- Shikari Auratein (Women of Prey) – 1955
- Ratti, Masha, Tolah-1956
- Kaali Shalwar (Black Pants) – 1961
- Manto Ki Behtareen Kahanian (Best Stories of Manto) – 1963
- Tahira Se Tahir (From Tahira to Tahir) – 1971
4 Further reading


5 Manto’s works online

- ‘Toba Tek Singh’ in Urdu and English, plus essays with translation
- ‘Toba Tek Singh’ in Hindi or
- ‘Thanda Gosht’ (Cold Meat) in English
- A collection of short stories in Hindi
- ‘Mera Sahib’ - Manto’s writing about Muhammad Ali Jinnah
- ‘First Letter to Uncle Sam’
- ‘Second Letter to Uncle Sam’
- ‘Third Letter to Uncle Sam’

6 References

[1] Saadat Hassan Manto Author detail at penguinbooksindia.
[10] He presented women as humans Nasira Sharma, BBC Hindi, 2005, 12 August 2015
[18] Author Profile Lekhal at abhivyakti-hindi.
7 External links

- Saadat Hasan Manto at the Internet Movie Database, Retrieved 12 August 2015
- Remembering Manto on his 101st birth anniversary
- Manto, After Fifty years; A tribute at BBC Hindi
- Watch Video Play of Saadat Hasan Manto
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