

The One with a Wriggly Worm

By Muhammad Umar Memon

In his delightful little book *Letters to a Young Novelist* Mario Vargas Llosa describes the writer as someone afflicted with a “tapeworm.” His own life—why, even his own will— is forfeit to this creature; whatever he does is for the sake of this grisly monster. What about his themes? Well, he feeds off of himself, like the mythical “catoblepas.” So writing is a calling and one writes from an inexorable inner compulsion, unlike the “graphomaniacs” Kundera deplures. The compulsion arises from what some might call the wayward desire to see a different world in place of the real, with its inherited values and mores and certainties that admit of no contradiction and stifle questioning. Seen from this vantage, the fictional landscape of Urdu would appear hauntingly bleak, with only a few occasional lights shining palely in the gathering gloom, and out there, somewhere in the distance, suddenly a relentless, single spectacular starburst—Saadat Hasan Manto.

Yet this luminary has suffered all along from a reading of his stories merely as social documents and commentary, with a discussion of his poetics curiously absent from the Urdu critical discourse. His fiction is held hostage to the most cynical purposes of politics, sociology, psychoanalysis and, lately, even history, by those who deny literature its inherent self-sufficiency, its radical autonomy and consider it to be little more than an offshoot of their respective other-than-literary disciplines. (Imagine someone applying the rules of *gilli-danda* to astrophysics!)

In a humorous self-portrait, Manto describes himself as a “know-nothing” who never studied Marx or ever set his eyes on any of the works of Freud. He knows Hegel and Havelock only by name. The amazing thing, though, is that critics are absolutely convinced that all of these thinkers have nevertheless influenced him. As far as he knows, he is never influenced by anyone. He considers interpreters of the world stupid. One cannot explain the world to others; one has to understand it for oneself.

One understands the world through the prism of one’s own imagination. For critics, the writer and the world are the only two terms of the equation—the substantial agency of human imagination is routinely thrown overboard.

Strangely, though, Manto’s stories do easily lend themselves to such distortion because of their deceptive proximity to workaday life (and yet the external reality of the surface is subverted in the subterranean landscape of his stories so subtly

that it provokes doubt and ambiguity in what was taken as a straightforward matter). No one asks, not even the critic, why write stories if all you want is to substantiate reality as it is. Is that what stories are meant to do? Or are they supposed to mount an exploration into the existential situation of the character (and discover, in Milan Kundera's words, what the novel—read fiction—alone can discover). Are fictions not expected to create parallel worlds? Or, at the very least, scramble the elements of existing reality and conjure them back to life in dizzying combinations whose entire geometry is drawn from a playful imagination not bound by the rules of conventional values and modes of thinking?

It is easy to interpret a story through reference to something outside of itself (say, a political or social event), far more difficult to analyze it through an exploration of its particular mode of being, its possibility and promise. Literary critics are a sad lot; not only is their work necessarily derivative and posterior to creation, it must also formulate its criteria of success and failure from within the innards of the fictional work under consideration. Few Urdu critics have tried to delve deeper into the elusive poetics of Manto's stories. Instead, they have attempted to analyze them by recourse to criteria that are organically unrelated to his work. Political events are not the measure of the success or failure of a work of fiction, but rather, whether the work has lived up to its own promise.

Manto may well have written "Toba Tek Singh" following his brief stint in the loony bin. Though doubtful, he may even have intended it to be read as "a scathing indictment" of Partition. (I rather think Manto was quite taken with the image of the character he had created and wanted to follow along with him on his existential odyssey, ready to be surprised by his every reality-defying move.) But should we read it as such? After all, paraphrasing Kundera, it is not the business of fiction to write the history of a society; it is very much its business to write the history of the individual. And judgment ("indictment") has no place in his calling. At day's end, what remains looming on the horizon is the larger-than-life image of the protagonist, Partition having shrunk back into the distance. In a paradoxical way, it is Bishan Singh who retroactively makes history inevitable, and not the other way around. History merely provides the opportunity to discover some truth about the character. That is, precisely, what fiction does.

As for explaining away the work of a writer by relating it back to his biography, characters are seldom the mirror-image of the writer's persona. Even when they appear to bear strong resemblance to certain individuals around us, they remain entirely composite—something Manto has expressed himself:

Literature isn't a portrayal of an individual's own life. When a person sets out to write, he doesn't jot down the daily account of his domestic affairs, nor does he

mention his personal joys and sorrows, or his illness and health. It's entirely likely that the tears in his pen-portraits belong to his afflicted sister, the smiles come from you, and the laughter from some down-and-out laborer. To weigh them against one's own tears, smiles, and laughter is a grievous error. Every creative piece seeks to convey a particular mood, a particular effect, and a specific purpose. If that mood, effect, and purpose remain unappreciated, the piece will be nothing more than a lifeless object.¹

If Saha'e, Mozelle, Babu Gopinath, or Saugandhi impinge upon our consciousness with indomitable force, it is precisely because, in the balance of his major works, Manto saw none of them as a typical representative of his/her social or religious group or as one shaped by its determinants. (Was Mozelle a representative of the Jewish minority of Bombay or her character shaped by the values of her community?) More often, he saw each one in deathly opposition to the certainty of inherited values. Which, at any rate, is the business of fiction. If his characters behave contrary to conventional logic, it is because they act in consonance with fictional logic and "a law that is stronger than the laws of reason and the world." Only in the hospitality of fictional space can polarities coexist without one trying to eliminate the other. Manto's genius lay in recognizing these characters as discrete entities, and history, or social and religious determinants, as merely the backdrop against which each of them, in his own eccentric way, stumbled through his or her particular existential trek.

To read "Mozelle" as a story about Partition would be to ignore the simultaneous presence of many contradictory forces in her complex personality. Partition did not give birth to Mozelle, it only furnished Manto with the occasion to explore and subsequently reveal a truth about the eponymous character. Any traumatic event would have worked just as easily for such existential exploration and activated the tendency that only surfaces, unexpectedly, toward the end of the story.

Manto knew too well that most humans live and breathe in the obscuring haze of contradictory impulses and that certainties—the arbiter of human behavior so predisposed to doling out reward and punishment—are the prerogative only of ideologues, whether religious or political. Fiction can ill afford certainties, and judgment on their basis even less. Take for instance Saha'e: "A staunch Hindu, who worked the most abominable profession, and yet his soul—it couldn't have been more luminous."² He was a pimp in Bombay who ran a brothel and dreamed of making 30,000 rupees so that he could return to his native Benaras and open a

¹"Kasautī," *Savērā* No. 3 (n.d.), p. 61 (my translation).

²"Saha'e," in Saadat Hasan Manto, *Mantorama* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1990), p. 24.

fabric shop. Religious devoutness here exists in a perfectly symbiotic relationship with the demands of a filthy profession. It is a meeting of opposites, of being Jewish and having the freedom to flaunt a swastika like the pop-icon Madonna, regardless of her intention and motive. In real life, a devout man would not come anywhere close to a whorehouse, much less running it, though in the same life most people display an amazing motley of contradictory impulses. Saha'e will remain forever suspect to conventional morality. We may side with this morality but we cannot deny his behavior as a possibility of being, even if it exists only in the liminal spaces of the imagination, even if we only admit to its nebulous existence grudgingly.

Can one call Esther's transformation toward the end of Sándor Márai's novel *Esther's Inheritance*³ even remotely logical? Robbed and duped by the same swindler, "that piece of garbage," all her life, she is still willing to sign her last possession over to Lajos. She does not believe a word of what he is saying, yet she finds that his statement "there is a law that is stronger than the laws of reason and the world" (143) contains a substantial core of truth. In the real world, even if this ambiguous truth does not change anything, its potential existence cannot be barred from our consciousness. Many of Manto's characters, too, display such logical contradictions.

Life is not the Straight Path leading to Heaven for a writer. It is, rather, a trek riddled with potholes and detours, leading eventually to an infinite, mirror-encrusted maze of giddying, colliding images. The coffin has been lowered into the pit for burial, the mourners stand around the freshly dug grave in a semicircle, the orator is only halfway through intoning his eulogy for the dearly departed when a "neurotic gust of wind" lifts the hat off of Papa Clevis's head and drops it at the edge of the grave. Eventually it will tumble into the grave, but for now a Clevis, hesitating between should he or shouldn't he pick it up, lets his gaze crawl along the erratic course of the bobbing hat. The attention of everyone among the small band of mourners has wavered. No one is listening to the eulogy anymore; instead their eyes are riveted on the comic drama unfolding before them. The funeral loses its meaning and laughter is born.⁴

Such utter disregard for decorum, such hilarity in the most solemn moment of grief and loss—only a writer can think of such contrary situations because he is not beholden to the rules of conventional decorum. He cannot be tamed by the

³Translated from the Hungarian by George Szirtes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

⁴This scene occurs in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 219ff.

tyranny of conventional behavior. Literature, as Manto says, is

an ornament, and just as pretty jewelry isn't always unalloyed gold, neither is a beautiful piece of writing pure reality. To rub it over and over again on the touchstone like a piece of gold is the height of tastelessness. ... [It] is either literature or it is the worst kind of offense ... an outrageous monstrosity.⁵

And to those who censured him for immorality and obscenity, instead of delving into the tortuous bylanes of his art, his unequivocal answer would be: "By all means, call me names. I don't find that offensive—swearing isn't unnatural—but at least do it with finesse so your mouth doesn't begin to stink and my sense of decency isn't injured."⁶

Why, then, has the fashioner of such memorable characters, the writer who gave his preferred fictional medium the burning intensity of a light refracted as through a magnifying lens, remained relatively unknown outside South Asia? Why could he and his writings not—I am asked—register as a global literary phenomenon both during his life and after his death?

Several reasons might be suggested. Let's leave aside "global" for the moment and begin with the local. There is no dearth of appreciation for Manto's work in the South Asian subcontinent. He has remained front and center in the consciousness of Urdu and Hindi readers. Equally, reams of critical work of debatable quality have been produced on him in Urdu, but, in my estimation, except for a few pieces by Muhammad Hasan Askari, Manto has still not even received the critical attention he deserves locally. And by critical I mean in-depth studies of his work on its own terms.

One the other hand, there has not been a total absence of Manto from the global scene, though admittedly it has not been as wide and profuse as implied in the question. Hamid Jalal and later Khalid Hassan translated his work into English. Jalal's *Black Milk* had scarcely been released when it was withdrawn from circulation. Hasan's *Kingdom's End* was put out by the reputable British publisher Verso. There have been a number of other translations since, notably by M. Asaduddin. Even Ralph Russell, to the best of my knowledge, translated at least one Manto story, "The Black Shalwar." In 1997, a German collection of five

⁵"Kasauti," p. 60.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 62.

Manto stories, with multiple translators, was published under the title *Blinder Wahn*. In 2008, Alain Désoulières brought out his French translations, by far the most exhaustive, and just this year Rocío Moriones Alonso published her Spanish translations. Most recently there is Tariq Ali's short column in *Counterpunch* (issue 13-15, 2012). And to all of these may be added the now nearly forty-year-old research monograph of Leslie Flemming, *Another Lonely Voice*. However, to truly register as a global literary phenomenon obviously requires more than this paltry capital.

All the same, more of an attempt could have been made to *bring* Manto to global attention. Unfortunately, Pakistani society is divided along linguistic lines. Few among the Urdu writers control English well enough to render Urdu works in contemporary English idiom. On the opposite side, English-wallahs, even if some of them may be assumed to command Urdu well enough, are at best indifferent to Urdu and its literary culture. Had the latter group made the effort to translate and explain, exhaustively, the narrative architecture and the underlying poetics of Manto's fictional world, quite possibly he would be better known across the world.

Then again, even in the West there is less appetite for the short story and the novel is considered the preferred fictional genre. Whether out of cultural hubris or not, indigenous literatures of South Asia do not, almost as a rule, engage the general public, and publishers are loath to gamble on financially risky ventures. Whatever interest there may be in such literatures scarcely goes beyond the university campus, where, too, they are yoked into the service of non-literary identities such as "Third World," "Colonial," "Post-Colonial," you name it, or where there are federally funded centers of South Asian studies.

That said, let's be realistic. Manto, certainly, stands head-and-shoulders above any other Urdu short-story writer. But he was writing in a borrowed form still in its infancy. He accomplished a lot for his times, indeed he went farther than any other of his contemporaries, and even today one would scarcely find anyone with his masterly control over the short story form. What we need above all is a concerted effort to situate him properly in the context of Urdu fiction.

Quite aside from his place in that context, Manto at least made sure of one thing: that he would not be turned into a "*rahmatullah alaihi*" after he was gone. So, like Bashir (in Anour Benmalek's short story "The Penalty"⁷), just before

⁷This story, translated from the French by Edward Gauvin, appeared in the July 2010 issue of *Words Without Borders* (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/>). It has now been removed from the site. On inquiry the editor advised that "our lease on the Benmalek piece actually ran out, and the publisher asked us to remove it from the site."

blowing up his suicide vest in the neighborhood mosque instead of in the soccer stadium where he was supposed to, Manto tried to “score one goal against infinity...” — a fate which Iqbal did not suffer and, if the present hullabaloo is any indication, Faiz will not suffer either, though this is the tragic but enviable fate of a writer true to his calling, the one with a wriggly tapeworm in his guts.