

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

Marginotions*

A NEW LITERARY MOVEMENT has added some priceless gems to Urdu fiction in the past ten years. However, incontrovertibly, many of these new short stories seem to be inspired not so much by the writer's inner creative passion as by external conditions and events, regardless of whether they had any relevance for the writer personally or for the external milieu. Perhaps it was the result of the then prevalent belief that man's inner life could be changed simply by changing his external conditions. So this is how it has been generally. Whenever our writers have slumped creatively, they have not blamed themselves for it or worried about rekindling their creative fires through internal effort; rather, they have sat back smugly, attributing their lack of creativity to the absence of external events requiring expression in literary creation. Some six or seven years ago I heard an Urdu short story writer who had gained considerable popularity by writing stories about poverty, slavery, and Kashmir say that a spring tide would break over literature were, say, the Japanese to invade India and cause a lot of commotion.

God has an uncanny way of making wishes come true—the Japanese did not attack India, but famine did. One person was made rich by selling rice on the black market, another raked in heaps of popularity churning out story after story about the calamity. Nothing wrong with it: whatever happens in the world happens for the good of man. Famine, in those days, became such a hot and hallowed subject that even students left off writing about their sexual experiences in favor of the starving humanity, arrogantly confident that no editor of a literary periodical would dare turn down their work, and if he did, he would be censured for being stone-hearted and utterly insensitive. In short, our writers had a field day thanks to the Bengal famine. Story after story popped out—events, emotions, everything was there readymade, so why toil over it.

The fury of famine had barely subsided when a seamen's strike broke

* "Ḥāshiyā-ārāʾī," his preface to *Siyāh Ḥashiyē*, in Saʿādat Ḥasan Maṭṭō, *Maṭṭō-numā* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1991), 745–52.

out; elsewhere a riot erupted during victory celebrations. Well, one thing or another kept the business going, and when 1947 rolled around it was like an unbidden windfall from God Almighty. You could write a tragic story, a comic essay, grind your teeth over man's life, or expose the machinations of the colonial powers—anything and everything was game. If you had it up to here with these, well, generate some heat with accounts of the violation of women's bodies, peppering the accounts now and then with a dash of uncommon examples of human kindness and compassion in the midst of this crass brutality, only to wonder at the end with utter naiveté: have Hindus and Muslims abandoned their reason? Brothers unto each other until yesterday, why are they so hell-bent on spilling each other's blood today? As for the danger that you may be taking sides, that's no problem at all. If five Hindus were butchered at the beginning of the story, make sure that you even out the number of the slain on either side—liquidate five Muslims toward the end of the story. The blame for the atrocities should be distributed equally. The crux is this: you should prove your love of humanity, pure heartedness, impartiality, and desire for peace, without rubbing anyone the wrong way.

If someone is a skilled tightrope walker, doesn't he have a claim to our admiration? Shouldn't we praise him? After all, expressing one's noble sentiments and thereby stirring up the noble sentiments of others, too, is a service to the cause of humanity. The trouble with noble sentiments, though, is that they can't create literature. I don't have some imaginary and inoperable criterion before me as I say this. The fact is, the literature about riots (*fasādāt*) has failed to abide by the very conditions it has imposed upon itself, the primary condition being that writers will speak the truth, nothing but the truth. At the same time, they are worried about offending Hindus and Muslims. Impartiality is taken to mean that neither party will be portrayed as more culpable than the other. This literature wants to condemn inequity (*ẓulm*), cruelty and brutality, but shies away from calling inequity squarely for what it is. No, this literature doesn't want to assume that responsibility. We do not demand this kind of truth-falsehood from literature as we do from books on history, sociology or politics. Our demand from a writer is not that he should speak the truth about an ideology or the external world but that he should speak the truth about himself. Writers on riots may have written truthfully about the whole world, they certainly haven't about themselves. They bend over backwards to hide their natural inclinations and partiality, although it is a biological necessity for such feelings to surge up during traumatic upheavals such as Partition. If these writers truly want to make their stories meaningful in human terms, it is imperative that they admit their own human weaknesses before all else.

One can't create true literature by looking away from the truth and falsehood within oneself. Such looking-away can produce only popular literature because the common reader too only wants to assure himself that noble sentiments haven't died within him.

Actually, literature isn't at all concerned with who is oppressing and who is not. Its main concern is to observe the inner and external attitude of the oppressor and the oppressed during the commission of an outrage. The external act of aggression and its equally aggressive complements are entirely meaningless insofar as literature is concerned. Our writers look only at the social aspects of tyranny and turn a blind eye to its effects on the inner lives of the oppressed and the oppressor. Guns and swords abound in their stories, never the living hand behind the trigger or the equally live bosom that receives the bullet or the wound. God forbid, it is not my intention to question their sincerity. Certainly some are truly good hearted and well intentioned. However, ordinary good-heartedness and good intention perform no useful function in literature. Such writers wish to arouse among their readers an abhorrence of aggression by portraying external acts of inequity. However, unless we know the human background of an act, its mere external demonstration is unlikely to produce any long-lasting, palpable and deeply meaningful reaction in us. We can love or hate humans, not the oppressors and the oppressed.

One method used by our writers on riots to excite revulsion against tyranny is to create dread among readers by enacting graphic scenes of horror before them. But the carnage of 1947 is so fresh in our minds, its devastation so vivid in the memory of those who witnessed or heard about it from their close friends that the mere recital of an inventory of atrocious acts leaves them cold. Their nerves are no longer frayed when they read about the rape of a few women or the slaughter of some children. This period is so extraordinary that singular acts of oppression have become commonplace. Exceptional events no longer register with people or even arouse their curiosity, let alone their moral sense. So those riot stories weren't literature, but the pity is they didn't fulfill their social purpose in a fitting manner either: what they offered didn't even amount to news.

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Manto, too, has written about communal riots (*fasādāt*): comic vignettes and short fictional pieces. It's a gross error on my part to say "about communal riots." His stories are not about communal riots; they are about human beings, who appear in different forms in his stories: as prostitutes, as spectators, and so on. But they are basically humans, the only difference

being that they have been portrayed as oppressors or oppressed in the particular circumstances of communal riots. Manto hasn't bothered about a social purpose at all. If man could be reformed by exhortation alone, Mr. Gandhi wouldn't have lost his life. Manto nurtures no grandiose notions about the efficacy of short stories for reform, nor has he saddled himself with such a responsibility. Yes, sure, he narrates some incidents, but is careful to steer away from judging them as good or bad. He doesn't curse the oppressor nor does he shed tears over his victim, or label the oppressor as necessarily evil and the oppressed as good. The communal riots of the Indian subcontinent are an exceedingly complex phenomenon, not just enmeshed, as they inextricably are, in a history that goes back quite a few centuries, but also in a future that might stretch out equally long. The nearness of the events doesn't allow one to make any decision on their goodness or evil so easily. At least a sensible writer cannot stoop to the level of politicians and pronounce judgments about such harrowing incidents. Manto has done what any honest—honest not in its political meaning—writer ought to who is writing in the immediate aftermath of such conditions and events. Manto has flung the question of good and evil out of the discussion entirely. His perspective is neither political, nor sociological, nor moral. If anything, it is literary and creative. He has only tried to view an act of oppression in relation to the different demands of the personality of the oppressor and his victim. What other impulses besides the desire to traumatize impels an oppressor? How much space does inequity claim for itself in the oppressor's cerebrum? Does he lose interest in other activities of life or participate in them? Manto excites neither compassion nor anger or hate. He only invites the reader to reflect, in a literary and creative manner, on man's psyche, his character, and his personality. If Manto does wish to excite an emotion, it is one that behooves a true artist, namely, a feeling of infinite wonder and curiosity about life. In the entire corpus on the communal riots, the only thing that merits being called a human document are these stories.

And yet, inasmuch as Manto's stories are genuine literary creations, they also do not fail to affect us morally, though this was not Manto's primary purpose. Creation was all he was after. What surprises us during unusual circumstances is not the extraordinary character of events and acts, but, rather, the very ordinary and everyday things. Perhaps it is neither surprising nor unexpected that after killing two hundred women and children a killer would string their skulls and wear them as a trophy around his neck. When killing becomes commonplace it fails to terrify, but when we see that killer's anxiety over dirtying the train compartment with the blood and gore of his victims, we feel a disquieting chill run down our

spines. The murderers' uninterrupted killing does not create horror, what creates horror is that such sticklers for cleanliness could kill with impunity. Ultimately, it is the juxtaposition of opposites, of paradoxes, of contradictions that confers upon a piece its ultimate meaning. The most extraordinary acts during extraordinary conditions can tell us only that those conditions can reduce man to the state of an animal. But his preoccupation with very ordinary things as he commits an extraordinary act gives us a deeper, more fundamental insight about him: he is both human and animal at the same time, all the time. The frightening aspect here is how he could bear being an animal in spite of his humanity, which is not without its comforting aspect: with all his bestiality man can never entirely rid himself of his humanity.

Both aspects—the frightening and comfort-giving—exist side by side in Manto. Man in these jocular vignettes appears in all his helplessness, folly, refinement, and purity. Manto's laughter is dipped in vitriol; nonetheless it also consoles us. It is no small achievement to say out loud that, even during extraordinary conditions, man's interest in very ordinary things and his equally ordinary inclinations simply could not be suppressed. Manto portrays man neither as oppressor nor as oppressed. He only points out that man is a strange creature, a compound of discordant elements, and then he keeps quiet.

This, in a manner of speaking, does create quite a poignant feeling of despair. However, if you look at man's contradictory nature closely, it will not fail to also inspire a feeling of true optimism. Were he only entirely good or entirely bad, he would be extremely dangerous. What gives us hope is that one can't be sure about man, he can be good, but then again, he can be bad. Additionally, he is caught within the limits of his humanity; he can't become an angel, any more than Satan. However much he may strive to become exceptional, the demands of ordinary life will drag him back to his limits. The power of ordinary quotidian life is such that, if he cannot become an exceedingly good man, neither can he become an extraordinarily bad one. This ordinary life will always straighten out his crookedness and knock him back into shape.

The most prominent merit of these stories is the acknowledgment of precisely this power and greatness of quotidian existence. Other writers endeavor to shepherd Hindus and Muslims back to the Straight Path by shaming them. However, after we're done reading their stories, we are never sure whether their exhortation will bear fruit or not. On the other hand, Manto wishes to shame no one, nor drag him to the Straight Path. He tells humans, with a highly ironical smile, try as hard as you might to wander off the Straight Path, you're unlikely to go very far. In that sense, Manto

displays an unfailing confidence in the nature of man, while others insist on seeing man in a particular light. Before accepting him, they foist some conditions on him. Manto accepts him in his true color, regardless of what it may be. He has seen that man's humanity is so strong that his barbarity simply cannot extinguish it. It was this humanity in which he placed his trust.

These tiny droll vignettes of Manto are the most harrowing and the most optimistic piece of writing to emerge in the entire corpus on the communal riots. His horror and optimism have nothing to do with the horror and optimism of politicians or the pure-hearted servants of humanity. It is the horror and optimism of a writer. Disputation and reflection play no part in them. If anything does, it is a solid creative experience. Which is Manto's singular distinction. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*