



Manto is Still Alive

By Musharraf Ali

After Manto's death on January 18, 1955, the literary magazine 'Naqoosh,' published from Lahore, released a special 'Manto issue.' The editor, Muhammad Tufail, wrote in its preface about a conversation he had with Manto a year earlier, where Manto had insisted on a special issue being dedicated to him. Manto had told Tufail, "I can't wait to die first and then see the issue published." However, it wasn't possible for his wish to be fulfilled during his lifetime. Although a lot had already been written about him during his life. In that conversation, when Tufail asked what would be included in the issue, Manto replied, "First, all the abuses I've received will be published, and the praises from fools will be at the end." At that time, Tufail had no idea that Manto would die so soon, but Manto knew it because he said, "What's the point of living now? I'm ready to die."

Manto expressed the feeling of his impending death in his essay 'What I Write,' saying, "People ask me why I don't quit drinking. I have already wasted three-quarters of my life in indulgence. Now, I'm either in a mental hospital or in a regular hospital. I believe that life lived with restraint is a prison, and life lived without restraint is also a prison. One way or another, we have to keep pulling the thread of this sock and unravel it..."

It is true that Manto was unraveling the sock of his life himself. But Tufail wrote in the preface of that issue of Naqoosh, "Even though the event happened a year ago, I am publishing this issue as if Manto is still alive... because if Manto is dead in someone else's mind, he is not dead in my mind."

What Muhammad Tufail said at that time is still true today because a true artist does not die; they become immortal through their creations. The proof of this is that we are still writing about him today. Manto is alive in our minds and in our feelings even now.

The political ideology of a writer determines the direction of their writing. Writers who present themselves as apolitical or neutral are deceiving themselves and society because presenting oneself as apolitical is, in itself, a form of politics—standing on the side of injustice and oppression or avoiding the struggle. Until Manto came into contact with 'Abdul Bari Alig,' he was aimlessly wandering without purpose, like uncontrolled floodwaters causing destruction. The contact with Abdul Bari changed the direction of his life. Manto acknowledged this truth in his story collection 'Ganje Farishte' (Bald Angels) in the story titled 'Bari Sahib':

"The late Abdul Bari loved me very much. He was also proud of me. But he never expressed this in front of me. And I do not know if he ever told anyone in such a manner that 'Manto is my creation.' However, it is a fact that he was the one who set me on the path of writing. If I hadn't met him in Amritsar, it is possible that I would have died as an obscure man or been serving a long prison sentence for theft or robbery."

At the age of 21, Manto came into contact with Abdul Bari Alig, who was associated with the leftist movement, in Amritsar. This was in the year 1933. Bari Sahib advised Manto to read and translate French and Russian literature, and it was then that he read authors such as Oscar Wilde, Victor Hugo, Chekhov, Maupassant, and Maxim Gorky. Before this, in 1931, Manto had already written his first story, 'Tamasha,' based on the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. French and Russian literature set his direction and perspective.

Munshi Premchand said that a writer's job is not to peep into the bedrooms of the rich but to observe the turmoil in the huts of the poor. Manto peered into the lives of those who were victims of injustice, inequality, and exploitation. Speaking about prostitutes, he said, "The brothel is that coffin which society carries on its shoulders, and until it buries it, we writers will keep unveiling its shroud and showing its face." In his essay 'What I Write,' he boldly stated: "The woman who grinds flour, works all day, and sleeps peacefully at night cannot be the heroine of my stories. My heroine can be a worn-out prostitute who stays awake at night and sometimes wakes up during the day from a terrifying dream that old age is knocking at her door. Her heavy eyelids, burdened with years of sleeplessness, can be the subject of my stories. Her filth, her diseases, her irritability, her abuses—all of these appeal to me. I write about her and overlook the polite conversation, health, and refinement of domestic women."

After focusing on prostitutes, Manto's stories centered on communal riots. He blamed the leaders who played the politics of religion for these riots. In his essay that he wrote many years ago, he stated, 'Save India from the Leaders,' he wrote: "These people, commonly referred to as leaders, perceive politics and religion as a crippled and wounded man whose exhibition our beggars often use to beg. These so-called leaders carry the corpse of politics and religion on their shoulders and tell the simple-minded people, who are accustomed to believing everything said in loud voices, that they are reviving this corpse... Save India from those leaders who are spoiling the country's atmosphere and misleading the public. You may not know it, but it is a fact that these so-called leaders of India carry a small chest under their arms in which they collect money by pickpocketing people... They shout about religion, but have they ever followed the commandments of religion themselves? These leaders are like bedbugs hidden in the crevices of the country's cot, and they should be expelled with the boiling water of hatred."

When Manto moved from the communal riots in Amritsar to Bombay, he believed that Bombay would be free from communal tensions. However, he soon found out he was wrong. In his essay 'A Tearful Appeal,' he wrote: "Escaping from the narrow alleys and filthy markets of Amritsar, when I arrived in Bombay, I thought that the atmosphere of this beautiful and vast city would be free from communal conflicts. But this thought proved to be wrong. A few months later, Hindu-Muslim riots started in Bombay and continued for a long time. The subject of the riot was a temple-mosque issue. Many people lost their lives in this riot. I witnessed these sorrowful scenes with my own eyes and felt a deep anguish. Then I picked up my pen and published this appeal to the residents of Bombay. As a result, two proud Muslims came to kill me. How I survived their attack is another story."

Manto pondered who these people were who found joy in spilling human blood. He wrote:

"In this world, just as there are compassionate and humane people, there are also those who spend most of their time sharpening the edges of swords and knives, always looking for an opportunity to hand their sharpened weapons to others to watch bloodshed and then quench their thirst for greed and self-interest from this pool of blood. These are the people who wish to revive the barbarity of savage people anew in the atmosphere of India. These are the people who want shops selling human flesh and bones to exist in the markets just like any other goods. These are the people who want to see every limb of India paralyzed... who do not wish to see their motherland free, who are deceitful traitors with blood of evil running through their veins, whose every breath is tied to their hypocrisy, treachery, deceit, and enmity towards humanity. Their breaths are filled with the flames of hell, the stench of evil. For them, three pence is their god, and they worship this god day and night."

Manto regarded the partition as the madness of such leaders, which is why he portrayed Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who demanded Pakistan, and Master Tara Singh, who demanded Khalistan, through the characters of lunatics in his story 'Toba Tek Singh.' His stories 'Thanda Gosht' and 'Khol Do' are unparalleled depictions of the brutality and savagery of communal riots.

His stories reflect the influence of French and Russian literature, particularly Maupassant, Chekhov, and Gorky. Although he was not a member of the Communist Party, he was a supporter of the communist system. This is evident in his essay 'Sukhr Inquilab' where he writes: "Collectivism has liberated Russian women from centuries of slavery. Now there are communal kitchens in Russia. There are arrangements for child care in the fields. Now, the foundation of marriage is neither religion nor a court agreement, and people with collectivist thoughts are generally non-religious. The community of knowledge and literature is engrossed in creative work."

Manto's literary contributions vividly illustrate the horrors and human cost of communal violence and the complex social dynamics of his time. His writings offer a poignant critique of the political and social issues of his era, influenced by the progressive ideas of the literature he admired. Manto wrote his radio drama on Karl Marx and, while writing about Maxim Gorky, provided a detailed introduction to the Russian socialist system. His perspective on imperialism, especially American imperialism, was clear and farsighted. In his eight letters addressed to Uncle Sam, he depicted the imperialistic character of America. Manto predicted in the 1950s what America would do in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1980s. Manto's prediction about America has proven to be quite accurate today. We see this in the form of the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and other such terrorist organizations in Pakistan, and as ISIS in the Middle East.

Manto wrote against all forms of injustice and exploitation, even in his own profession. Today, while writers and journalists fearlessly raise their voices against the exploitation of others, they often remain silent about injustices done to themselves. However, Manto was not afraid to write about this issue as well. In his essay 'Mujhe Shikayat Hai' (I Have a Complaint), he wrote: "I have a complaint against those capitalists who publish a newspaper to make money and only pay the editor twenty-five or thirty rupees a month. These capitalists live a life of luxury while the editors, who work tirelessly to increase their wealth, are kept far from a comfortable life. I have a complaint against those publishers who buy literary works for a pittance and collect

hundreds of rupees for their own pockets, who cunningly trap simple writers and permanently seize their works." Manto did not just only limit himself to writing about these issues; but also called for action: "I urge all my fellow writers, who possess self-respect and confidence, to sever their ties with all those publications that do not pay them for their hard work. Today, we should reject all those magazines, journals, and newspapers that are parasitic. There is no difference between those journals and graveyards where caretakers constantly beg for offerings. We do not need such graveyards or such journals and newspapers from which we gain no benefit." He further writes: "Let us form our front and gather together. If we all put our pens together, a mountain could be formed. Why not raise our voices together against this malice that is a stain on our dignity? We want a place for ourselves in society and all we ask is that our hard work be considered worthy of compensation and that we be provided with all the facilities we deserve. Our demand is just, so why not start asking for our rights today... I say rise, shake your sleeping brothers, deliver my message to their ears. Gather under one banner. Form your own front and start the struggle. Stop your pens from writing for a while, and then the world of paper will bow at your feet."

Manto's call to action reflects his belief in solidarity and collective action among writers to fight against the exploitation and injustice within their own profession. Manto depicted the poverty and pitiable economic conditions of writers in his satirical pieces 'Bari Sahab' and the radio play 'Journalist'. In 'Journalist', the central character Abdul Bari initially agrees to become an editor at the insistence of a newspaper owner. However, when he doesn't receive adequate compensation despite working day and night, he becomes frustrated. Eventually, on another writer's suggestion, he starts a machine to cut grass for income. One day, he speaks to himself, "I earn one and a half rupees daily. I spend the whole day at the shop, go to the tavern in the evening, gossip, wander around, and then return here... I don't have to translate news or join copies. No telephone chatter or continuous manuscript work. Not a scribe or a writer's service. By God, my friend has told me such a good life... It's my wish to tell all the editors who are ruining their lives in the newspapers... Let them install such machines in their own cities and pray for me."

Manto delivers an impactful speech at Jogeshwari College in Bombay, addressing students. He says, "If you are not familiar with the era we are passing through today, then read my stories. If you cannot tolerate them, understand that we are living in an era that is intolerable." Addressing his critics, he remarks, "I suggest that literature changes its course along with the changes in time. Today, writing against newspapers or vomiting poison in gatherings is utterly useless." He advocates for ending conditions that stifle progressive literature, regardless of whether it is modern, progressive, or any other form. Manto asserts, "It is said that today's writers are influenced by women. The truth is that since the existence of Adam, every man's emotions have been influenced by a woman, so why should elephants and horses not be ridden by men's emotions?"

Remembering Manto has become even more crucial today because the intolerance he began writing against in India has only intensified since the 1990s. Manto vividly portrayed the terrifying consequences of religious intolerance and societal intolerance towards women through his works. He used his writings to raise questions about the decreasing tolerance in society. Whenever the state's power has aligned with intolerance, it has inevitably led to some form of destruction. In Uttar Pradesh, the state's power led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. In Gujarat, it resulted in the devastation after 2002. In 2014, it caused the loss of lives of Dabholkar, Pansare, and Kalburgi when the state's power was exercised. In the 1950s,

Pakistan's military agreements with the United States resulted in the emergence of religious terrorism there, transforming Pakistan into a failed state. Uncle Sam had predicted this danger in his letter. Today, India is also going through such a situation. If it is not changed, the situation will be worse than the partition. It is a good thing that the people who have advanced in society have also faced this danger like Manto and they have stood up. How are riots caused, who does them, what is their purpose and how humans die because of them—are burning issues relevant even today.

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